‘SHIPPING’ CHINA

An Alternative Approach to

Transnational Propaganda Practices in Chinese Film

Universiteit Leiden

Master Thesis

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August 2020

Research Master Literary Studies

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, I was packing my bags to leave for Beijing University for five months to improve my level of Mandarin Chinese. In February 2020, the unexpected start of the corona lockdown, following the outbreak of COVID-19, crudely disrupted those plans, yet it provided fertile ground for my Master Thesis. I was already fostering the idea to write my thesis on Chinese propaganda film, which gained enormous urgency with the spectacular return of the usage of the term 'propaganda' in everyday media under lockdown. Being immobilized behind digital devices, the world population saw how the war against the virus became accompanied by a propaganda war, waged primarily between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

For example, China, positioning itself as the leader in the global fight against the virus, took firm control over what was reported about the situation in Wuhan through its propaganda system, but also took control on what was *not* reported through its censorship organs ("How China Is Planning to Win Back the World"). US media frequently reported on such Chinese news outlets and constantly framed them as propagandistic and misleading on the exact amount of victims. Thereafter, a blame game ensued between the two political opponents about who caused the pandemic, where mutual accusations were sided with complot theories and fake news posts in an online environment ("The U.S.-China Propaganda War Over the Coronavirus"). These two excerpts of the propaganda war indicate that the rules of the propaganda game have utterly changed during times when the Internet has brought down walls between nations and institutions and when it has complicated the border between truth and fiction. However, a political bias against non-Western societies remains persistently central to the average Western

discourse. My question then is: how to properly conceptualize the current form of propaganda in this globalized media environment without *a priori*, politicized judgments?

To answer this question, I will investigate the historical trajectory Chinese propaganda has underwent to be able to distinguish its differentiating features in the current globalized media landscape. I will consider for this research films from the PRC since its establishment in 1949 due to the ceaseless political rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its affiliated propaganda system. Due to the considerable size of this system, I will limit my scope to film as indicative for the entire Chinese propaganda system, meaning that I will solely look at cinematic works, intended for theatrical release, and not at other forms of propaganda works with, for example, other production and distribution networks or modes of address. Following these demarcations, my research question to investigate contemporary propaganda practices is: how does the current form of the Chinese propaganda film require alternative considerations of transnational propaganda practices? My hypothesis is that the Chinese definition and usage of propaganda is often mistakenly identified as synonymous with the Western variant, which is why I will provide a brief introduction below into the common concept of propaganda with localized manifestations. Next, I will discuss the theoretical frameworks propaganda is usually analyzed in inside Western academia, followed by my suggestion for a new approach to propaganda practices through the lens of affect theory. Lastly, I will conclude with a short overview of the content of the following chapters.

The propagandist's burden; theorizing and historicizing propaganda

In their fairly recent book *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies* (2013), editors Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo call for the urgency of the autonomous field of propaganda studies, as a field that exists both separate of, but is also intersecting with related disciplines and political discourses. According to them and the many contributors, a proportional balance between a general definition and situated, socio-historical conditions of propaganda can prevent a monolithic understanding of propaganda practices (6-7). In their view, propaganda can in a broad sense be understood as "a central means of organizing and shaping thought and perception" (2), which occurs to some extent in every organized form of human collectivity. Through such a broad definition, the concept loses part of its critical edge but gains an awareness of its interwoven-ness with many normalized discourses in ordinary life. When propaganda is conceptualized as elemental part of a society and as interwoven with daily-life institutions (governmental, religious, educational et cetera), propaganda studies can take shape without having a particular political bias. I will take Auerbach and Castronovo's definition of propaganda as my vantage point in this thesis to come to a more situated description of China's current propaganda practices in my Conclusion.

The history of propaganda as a concept already illustrates in itself the situated conditions in which it took shape. Before acquiring its current negative and indoctrinatory connotations after the First World War, propaganda has known a long and versatile history, spanning back in Europe to 1622. Originating from the Latin word *propagare*, the term was first deployed in a specifically Western and religious context to indicate the spreading of the Christian faith by the Vatican. Throughout the centuries, the practice of propaganda was adapted to many other

situations and regimes and obtained all sorts of connotations (1-2). This set of connotations, derived from Western manifestations of propaganda, is then transferred to other regions of the world without a proper intercultural translation and even to the political advantage of Western actors. In the case of Soviet media and art, Western critics designated these forms as indoctrinatory propaganda, consequently defining Western forms of shaping public opinion, such as education and public relations, as the antithesis of propaganda in so-called free Western societies (Papazian 67).

Such a indoctrinatory conception of propaganda remains stuck in outdated models of thought that do not conform anymore to current new media environments and transnational interconnectivity. Whilst 20th century propaganda studies in the West mainly responded to internal propaganda practices in isolated, non-Western societies, these cultural and linguistic gaps between nations have been breached by advancements in transnational media and migration. As the examples of propaganda practices during the corona lockdown show, propaganda systems reach across borders and meet each other head-on in shared social media environments. The boundaries between politics and entertainment blur in these instances, which is a facet of propaganda that has, as I argue in this thesis, already been present in Chinese propaganda films for a longer time. An updated conception of propaganda would help eradicate this problem of unidentifiable propaganda, but the general conception of the term is still restrained to older modes of thought.

Washing brains or stealing hearts; from ideology critique to affect theory

Commonly, propaganda is understood inside Western academia as the "actual articulation of ideology" (Chatterjee 22) and approached through forms of ideology critique that find their roots in the thoughts of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and specifically in their idea of false consciousness. The latter stands at the base of the Marxist understanding of ideology and is often understood as indicating a dichotomy between an obscured reality and a fictional construction, intended to deceive subordinate classes. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, this understanding of false consciousness in the afterlife of the works of Marx has given the incorrect impression that ideology in Marxist thought serves as a blockade to a 'true' reality, that needs to be uncovered (39). This misuse has resulted in political condemnations as illustrated by the framing of Soviet media and art as misleading propaganda to promote one's own ideology as the sole truth.

Hall proposes another definition of ideology that deviates from this conventional, dichotomous understanding, namely:

> "By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (26).

In this definition, ideology is not posed as a barrier that veils the truth from a social group but rather as a set of mental tools to make sense of an external reality. Different ideologies can thus non-exclusively co-exist, which is a conception of ideology that fitted the world around the

1990s better after the abolition of the isolation of many communist nations and the slow rise of a globalized system of information flows. During these conditions of constant contact, the ideas about the imposition of ideological structures upon social groups was confronted by questions surrounding the role of the subject, such as: why does a subject accept one ideology and reject the other?

The affective turn, occurring in the early to mid-1990s, responded to the limitations of poststructuralism and deconstruction by returning to the (bodily) conditions of the subject (Clough 1) and investigating the role of emotions and affect in power practices (*Encountering* 8). Ideology critique, as well, fell short to acknowledge the role of the individual embodied subject in the mechanisms of power. As philosopher Brian Massumi points out, ideology critique all seems to revolve around " a subject without subjectivism: a subject 'constructed' by external mechanisms" (2). What Massumi proposes is the addition of affect to shift attention to the construction of the subject, not only engendered by external agents but also through the subject's own transformative powers. Subjects might receive certain knowledge from an educator or a religious authority, yet it depends on themselves to take this information to heart or not. This does not depend on rational argumentation, derived from ideological apparatuses, but rather on a state of mind that finds this knowledge 'credible.'

Regarding definitions, various differentiations and definitions are given concerning affect and emotion in several fields. In the name of coherency and clarity, I will follow Brian Massumi's understanding of affects as prepersonal and external intensities, that have the potential to be "owned and recognized" (28) as emotions by subjects. Several affect scholars, such as Sarah Ahmed and Ben Anderson, resist such a division between interiority and exteriority, that isolates emotional experiences and hinders the experience of shared emotions.

Yet in this thesis, I will assume the existence of shared and general affective *conditions* of societies and of similar affective experiences. Regarding the individual subject, I will argue for a unique and solitary emotional state and experience. Note that I distinguish, then, between a collective affective film experience, recognized as largely corresponding with fellow viewers and purposely intended by filmmakers, while the emotional experience of a film by an individual is bound by particular individual and material factors that diversify every film experience for every subject. In Massumi's terms, affective, prepersonal intensities, encountered during a viewing experience, are translated and 'owned' by the subject in the form of personal emotions.

Cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg agrees with Massumi on the perceived lack of awareness about the affective state of the subject in academia: "… affect is the missing term in an adequate understanding of ideology, for it offers the possibility of a 'psychology of belief' which would explain how and why ideologies are sometimes, and only sometimes, effective, and always to varying degrees" (82-83). In his research on popular culture, affect and ideology, he investigates how the 'popular' in popular culture is constructed through speaking to the constantly changing 'taste' of the majority of a population (72). In that sense, the contemporary propaganda film can be read as aspiring to be a form of popular culture *par excellence* through attempting to reach and persuade as much members of a target audience as possible.

This popular aspiration implies a certain, partial intentionality on behalf of the propaganda filmmakers in the 'affective style' that the propaganda work ultimately will have and on the following, intended affective experience of film audiences. I adapt this concept from a commentary of Anderson on Donald Trump's campaign to my own case study of the propaganda film, defined by him as "an orientation to self and world that will repeat across, link, and blur the speech and bodily acts, images, stories, and pseudo-events that make up a campaign" (*We Will*

Win Again). Nonetheless, filmmakers can 'code' a certain affective style as much as they can in a film to invite for a certain effect, a corresponding reception of this style depends foremost on the viewers themselves and their specific, situated conditions. Inside Grossberg's theory, a cultural form is deemed successfully popular when the affective experience of watching the film enables affective resonances on a large scale between the work, or its affective style, and the emotional state of viewers. Following this affective resonance, subjects can become affectively invested in the cultural form and the possibility occurs that they will form a more profound and long-standing relation with it. This affective investment can, then, become naturalized and an inherent part of people's lives, turning certain cultural and ideological formations into 'affective alliances' (80).

Grossberg notices how affect requires ideology to deliver the reason for affective investment in a certain cultural form, which propaganda makes good use of to give their ideological stories a foundation that is experienced as 'important' and 'real' (86). This sense of 'realness' is, as said before, achieved through resonance between the affective conditions in society, as filtered through the individual viewer, and the affective style of the film. Here, I take my inspiration from Sara Ahmed's 'affective economy' to see inside a certain domain the circulation of emotions between individual and collective bodies (128). The films play upon these circulating emotions in order to activate their audiences to create affective alliances with the works and to see the displayed ideological narratives as 'common sense'; the highest goal propaganda can have.

By establishing a shared notion of the way in which affects should be channeled through certain ideological narratives and constellations, the viewing of such films constructs shared affective alliances inside a collective body. These shared patterns of emotional meanings and

attachments then constitute affective communities, created by the operations of propaganda systems. In the context of transnational environments, propaganda works aim to create affective communities without limits, unbound by national borders but entangled through shared affective patterns.

Overview Chapters and Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the Chinese form of propaganda as it has manifested itself under the rule of the CCP since 1949. Tracing its evolution through different case studies and contexts, I will reflect on the form these propaganda films take and evolve into, following the everchanging Chinese socio-political climates and the expectations of the film market. To evaluate how propaganda filmmakers attempt to reach their audiences through their films, I will take my inspiration from Grossberg's affect theory to see how the affective styles of these films aim to resonate with affective societal conditions. Also, I will shortly discuss the relation between propaganda and soft power in the Chinese situation. After the analysis of the strategical adjustments of these affective styles, I will come to the identification of current propaganda films, that do not per se resemble preceding propaganda films any longer in form and content.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the popular and well-received blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* as exemplary for the current stage of the propaganda film. To substantiate my claim of this science-fiction film as a propaganda work, I will present a new approach to films, like this one, which takes into account a multiplicity of audiences with different cultural vocabularies and interpretations. During my textual analysis, I will identify several optional pretexts to interpret

signs and narratives in the film and reflect upon the way different cultural traditions can converge in them. Through their multi-interpretable nature, these films obtain ambiguous statuses in which they can be deemed non-propagandistic while adhering to the ambitions of propaganda, following their affective impact on viewers.

In Chapter 3, I will disrupt the normative relation between Western observer and Chinese observed in Western academia, which has propelled the condemnatory practices of framing propaganda by, on the one hand, following the distribution of contemporary Chinese propaganda films as travelling objects. On the other hand, I will conceptualize the decentered position of Western audiences in this process more accurately though affect and international relations theory. The films construct transnational affective communities, as defined by international relations scholar William Callahan, with shared affective experiences but through very specific hierarchies inside these communities that tend to adhere more to Chinese propaganda strategies and visions of world order than to Western categorizations. I will also investigate Chinese soft power more vigorously in its intersections with propaganda and its deviation from Western definitions in order to propose alternative, Chinese forms of power. Following this alternative conceptualization of contemporary transnational affiliations and communities through propaganda practices, I will come to a new conception of the current stage of the propaganda film in terms of content, form and framing.

In my Conclusion, I will briefly sketch the insights from my analysis of the Chinese propaganda film from the previous chapters and apply them to the entire propaganda system as it is intertwined with many transnational media networks. Next, I will shortly summarize my chapters and repeat the characteristics of the current form of the propaganda film and extract a model of the affective operations of these films as emblematic for the contemporary operations

of propaganda systems. Finally, I will relate my proposed approach to propaganda films to contemporary examples outside my scope of the propaganda film. The approach of these case studies, appearing during and surrounding the corona lockdown, will hopefully show the utility of my suggested approach to propaganda in the case of different but related media forms for possible future research.

CHAPTER 1

The historical trajectory of the Chinese propaganda film

In this chapter, I will explain the position of propaganda in Chinese society as a governmental institution and trace the evolution of this system through the changing cinematic landscape of the propaganda film. In this process, I argue that these films align themselves less and less with classic examples of the propaganda film and become harder to recognize as part of this tradition. Below, I will follow the evolution of these film to clarify how these films distance themselves from the tradition of the propaganda film, while simultaneously continuing to carry out the principal goals of propaganda, namely to: organize and shape certain modes of thought and perception.

Despite the enormous role of the West in the conceptual understanding of the Chinese propaganda system, I will not discuss the Western notion of propaganda and their practice of 'framing propaganda' of political rivals. Rather, I will extensively discuss the Chinese definition of propaganda and the Chinese propaganda system in this chapter to be able to expand upon the relation of Chinese propaganda work and a Western observer in my last chapter. This also means that I will mainly focus on Chinese internal propaganda practices. Although foreign propaganda practices were present before the Open Door Policy in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping and the consequent opening up of China to the rest of the world, I will only elaborate on the preceding internal propaganda tradition to accurately conceptualize how propaganda strategies have changed when the national domain was extended to cover an international scope after the opening up.

The Chinese propaganda system as a governmental institution

The history of Chinese propaganda (宣传, *xuanchuan*) reaches back to the third century AD and connotes the dissemination of military skills, and later on the dissemination of ideas and information of the ruling classes as well. In the 20th century, political propaganda came to be institutionalized during power struggles between different political factions after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 (Bao 182). The term remained neutral and was generally associated with broadly defined education in the pre-war period, which explains its role in cinema in its early days. On the one hand, it marked a distinct film genre with the aim of political education and, at the other, it marked an understanding of cinema as an educational instrument overall (*idem*). When the communists prevailed after the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949), propaganda became one of their central means to spread communism across China and to keep control over its huge territory.

The CCP's Central Propaganda Department, founded in 1924, was and still remains responsible for the CCP's propaganda system with many branches in different parts of society, including the army, education, mass media, and so on. Anne-Marie Brady, a political researcher specialized in Chinese politics, describes the current state and evolution of the Department in her book *Marketing Dictatorship* (2008) as follows:

> In an extraordinary process of cultural exchange, China's propaganda system has deliberately absorbed the methodology of political public relations, mass communications, political communications, and other methods of mass persuasion commonly utilized in Western democratic societies, adapting them of Chinese conditions and needs. (3)

Despite the incorporation of Western methods to address the general public and shape its opinion, such as public relations, mass communication and so on, Brady still argues that propaganda remains the very "lifeblood" of the Party-State (1). Instead of their previous socialist strategies of political campaigns and movements, the CCP has implemented modern methods, gleaned from abroad, to deal with a turbulent society, that has undeniably become part of a global dynamic. Where, first, the Central Propaganda Department made a sharp distinction between internal/domestic (对内; *duinei*) and external/foreign (对外; *duiwai*) propaganda, the Department actually argued in 2003 for similar criteria for both forms due to an increasing mastery of foreign languages and greater availability of foreign media sources for Chinese citizens (13). Such international sensitivity has also shown itself in the renaming of the Central Propaganda Department to the Publicity Department, in English, while the Chinese name has remained unaltered (Edney 23).

As Brady addresses in her book, the propaganda system in China has remained functional and essential to the CCP's administration, which is why I will follow her understanding of the propaganda system as a largescale and influential institution to see the Chinese propaganda film as embedded in its practices and aligned with governmental policies. Although I consider the propaganda film partly as an extension of the propaganda system, I would like to emphasize that this does not imply that the filmmakers do not possess any artistic autonomy or that the films cannot have emotional value for their audiences. Moreover, the interwoven-ness of ideological discourses with other discourses, brought in by the filmmakers themselves, is exactly were contemporary propaganda films find their strength.

The creative practice of filmmaking in the context of propaganda film production might best be eluded through the conditions that psychologist Alex Carey names for successful propaganda:

> Thus the successful use of propaganda as a means of social control requires a number of conditions: the will to use it; the skills to produce propaganda; the means of dissemination; and the use of 'significant symbols', symbols with real power over emotional reactions. (12)

Inside the propaganda system, propaganda filmmakers still hold the power over the 'significant symbols', or film languages, they utilize and which narratives they tell with them. I will mainly pay attention to these symbols in post-war China and their historical evolution, which was incited by changing formalistic choices by filmmakers in terms of affective style. These propagandistic symbols are proposed, then, by the regime, controlling the propaganda system, but filmmakers give them a specific form and position them in certain ideological narratives, aligned with governmental policies and/or State ideology. The form of these symbols can differ between cultures and time periods and are in constant need of amendment to keep pace with their audiences in rapid times of globalization and modernization.

In the case of the contemporary Chinese propaganda system, globalization could not be escaped when China opened up to the rest of the world in 1978. After years of national isolation, the propaganda film needed to find its place amidst the heavily competitive domestic and foreign films in Chinese cinemas, despite the ongoing quota of imported foreign films in the PRC. Similar to the entire propaganda system, Western methods of filmmaking were integrated and led to an entire new formula of propaganda that seems to escape earlier conceptions of the propaganda film. While this was only a domestic concern in the 20th century, I recognize in the contemporary propaganda films a tendency to also address international audiences. Simultaneously, they attempt

to evade the Western labelling of propaganda, sprouting from Cold War rhetoric. These developments instigate completely different forms for these films, which are hard to recognize when one only uses older theoretical frameworks to understand propaganda.

To make sense of the current state of the Chinese propaganda film, I will give a short overview of the development of the propaganda film through several stages of Chinese history. Approaching the propaganda film system as a cultural practice and as part of the larger propaganda system, I will analyze how these films were constantly adapting themselves to societal conditions through the reconfiguration of socialist symbols, which are shaped through different affective styles during different times. The means and methods of dissemination, as Carey also mentions, are of large significance during the internationalization of these films, which is why I will discuss the distribution of current propaganda films extensively and separately in Chapter 3. For the analysis of the reconfigured socialist symbols in the case studies below, I will deploy Grossberg's approach to film as cultural and popular practice, which, in short, attempts to find resonances between the affective style of the work and the affective conditions of viewers as a society in order to become popular and to work towards the establishment of a 'common sense.'

I will address three historical periods of the Chinese propaganda film: the socialist period, lasting from the establishment of the PRC to the death of Mao (1949–1976); the postsocialist period following the end of the Cultural Revolution and China's opening up (1976-2001); and the international period, which I define as beginning after the PRC became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (2001-present). For every period, I will take one film as representative for the 'generation' of propaganda film that is dominant during those years, which I will analyze on three levels: (1) the textual and subtextual conditions of the film itself; (2) the contextual conditions of the film inside the propaganda film system and China as a whole, with specific time-

bound relations to the international sphere; and (3) the metatextual conditions of the film as relating itself to the discourse of propaganda in terms of the reconfigurations of socialist symbols through changes in affective style. Through such analyses, I will sketch the trajectory of the propaganda film in Chinese history in terms of symbols and affective styles and show how it has anticipated societal affective conditions. Lastly, I will reflect on the evolution of the Chinese propaganda film and how it has come to the ambiguous position of losing its recognizability as propaganda film while adhering to the basic definition of propaganda. This will, then, pave the road for the analysis of a contemporary propaganda film, addressing both domestic and international audiences in their respective different cultural contexts while avoiding its framing as propaganda.

The socialist period (1949-1976)

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the CCP attempted to solidify communism and modernity on Chinese soil through all its propaganda channels, of which film was deemed the most important to sketch the image of the collective construction of a future nation. Countless propaganda films were domestically produced, distributed and exhibited, such as the glorifying war films *Battle on Shangganling Mountain* (1956) and *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (1970). One lasting example of the socialist propaganda film, that knows a longer afterlife than most of its kind, is a film by one of China's most influential directors Xie Jin (1923-2008), namely the revolutionary melodrama *Red Detachment of Women* (1961).

The film portrays the life of slave girl Wu Qinghua in 1930 and her transformation from peasant to communist soldier, serving in the Woman's Detachment of the communist People

Liberation Army (PLA). Qinghua, having no home (家; *jia*) after the evil land lord Nan Batian has killed her family, finds her place among the ranks of the communists and fights, in first instance, for revenge. Under the education of Party cadre Hong Changqing, she changes her ways, renounces her individual desire for revenge and pledges herself to the collective cause of replacing the old feudal society with the communist ideal. When the Kuomintang (KMT), the Nationalist Party, reaches the shores of Hainan, a Chinese island in the South Chinese Sea where the film takes place, Qinghua and Changqing fight side by side against them. During the skirmishes, Changqing is captured by Nan Batian, who tries to convince him to surrender the Woman's Detachment. Changqing refuses and sacrifices himself for the communist cause, shouting when he is burned alive as punishment by Batian: "Long Live China! Down with the Nationalist's Party Dominion! Long live the Chinese Communist Party!" Later on, Qinghua assembles her Detachment and calls upon the responsibility they inherited from martyrs such as Changqing, who had died for the cause, to continue the struggle. During the final fight, they defeat the KMT and kill Nan Batian as a symbol of the eradication of the old society and bringing the new under the flag of communism.

While in conventional, Hollywood melodrama the protagonist participates in the formation of the bourgeois nuclear family (Liu 120), *Red Detachment* takes another approach by shaping another social formation: the revolutionary family, based on collective labor (126). The character development of Qinghua reveals for the audiences of the film a prescriptive narrative of the ideal Party member: she learns from her leaders to set her own interests aside for the greater good of bringing communism to China and then follows in the footsteps of martyrs to continue their mission. In return, the Party gives her a new home and a new family in the form of the people, struggling for a new China.

This incorporation of new subjects into a 'revolutionary family' can also be extended to practices outside the diegesis of the film. Film as a medium itself was utilized as a way to bring the communist narrative to new audiences and convince them to become part of 'the people.' After the end of the war, the CCP took control over the entire film industry and provided the needed film infrastructure to include all Chinese regions symbolically into the nation. By disseminating projection units across the countryside and exhibiting communist propaganda films on village squares, they offered the villagers the occasion to learn what communism was. As cultural historian Tina Mai Chen puts it, in the countryside "the arrival of film was directly linked to the CCP and revolution" (163). The act of collective viewing and the identification with the characters on screen offered the villagers the opportunity to become part of 'the people.' In other words, the propaganda film, if successful, also produced 'the people' (*idem*). Through the precise organization of a national film apparatus, "the CCP ensured that this 'real experience' was embedded within a system of ideals that reinforced particular constructions of nation and individual" (185). In this sense, the technology of the propaganda film helped to a large extent to shape the socialist imagination across China by spreading its narratives in convincing ways.

Red Detachment stands out as a successful masterpiece between this sort of films. It was in the mid-1960s adapted into a Beijing Opera performance and a ballet, the latter under the close guidance of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao (Liu 136). These adaptations came to establish the iconicity of Wu Qinghua's character: "Jiang's supposed identification with the character and the way women across the country saw the character as a model suggest that the definition of *new socialist women* was never sealed off during the process of continuous reenaction and performance" (*idem*). The socialist imagination of female warriors, lending from socialist emancipatory policies from the 1950s and from folklore stories such as the one of Hua Mulan, invited female viewers to

identify with the *new socialist woman,* who had overcome feudalism and gender inequality (119). The following adaptations ensured the constant renewal and iteration of the socialist figure of the female warrior Wu Qinghua during the Mao era and also afterwards in reenactments. In this sense, the media forms, that portrayed the story of Wu Qinghua, were rather performative in shaping socialist subjects instead of being representative of actual occurrences during the Chinese civil war.

The cinematic field during the Mao era, monopolized by propaganda films, was marked by films shot mainly in the style of socialist realism, defined by literary scholar Chen Xiaoming as follows:

> 'Truth' is the definitive aesthetic element of realism, its life force being the conviction that it can 'realistically' reflect people's lives. When annexed to socialism or defined by socialism, it is necessarily required to mirror socialist reality, or, in Lenin's words, to 'reflect the essentialist aspects of revolution.' (158)

Slavist and cultural historian Evgenij A. Dobrenko even goes a step further in his definition of socialist realism, and instead of confirming its so-called 'mirroring socialist reality' argues that "[s]ocialist realism's basic function was not propaganda… but rather to *produce reality by aestheticizing it*" (699-700, his italics). In Dobrenko's sense, propaganda is an essential part of the socialist machine to produce the idealized reality that was portrayed through art, literature, cinema, and so on. The aim of the totalitarian propaganda machine was in its first days not a search for resonance with the affective conditions the viewers found themselves in, but the actual production of the affective atmosphere of socialist collective labor by means of surrounding their audiences through multiple propaganda channels with this atmosphere. Revolutionary songs through public loudspeakers, radio, newspapers, education, cinema; all were conditioned to become part of the propaganda system that produced socialist reality and its subjects.

The West heavily opposed socialist realist depictions in the USSR and the PRC as being unrealistic and indoctrinatory, but, as Chinese film scholar Jason McGrath explains it: "Such a prescriptive realism may appear as propaganda for those not sharing its ideals, but that does not necessarily negate its impression of realism to those who do" (22). If the participation of the subject in the propaganda film system is seen in terms of Grossberg's cultural practice, then "…cultural formations surround and invade bodies of their populations, incorporating them into their own spaces, making them part of the formation itself" (72). The Chinese population was so made part of socialist reality through the propaganda system, of which the propaganda film constituted a large part.

The socialist propaganda film, thus, facilitated through socialist symbols and model figures the identification process of the portrayed socialist reality with the surrounding reality. In the example of *Red Detachment*, the socialist image of the female warrior connotes for its viewers the collective struggle for socialist ideals, transcending gender boundaries and individual interests. In this manner, Wu Qinghua perfectly embodies the aim of Chinese socialist realism to educate its people through exemplary figures (Yang L. 105). It has since survived in the collective consciousness, despite the blows the socialist values she embodies have received during the postsocialist period, to which I now move.

The postsocialist period (1976-2001)

In the early 1990s, a nostalgic 'Mao fever' swept through the PRC, in which cultural consumption of socialist codes and figures became trendy again after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution

(1966-1976) and the Tiananmen Square Incident (1989) (Yu 179). A film, illustrating this nostalgia in postsocialist China, is *Mao Zedong and his Son* (1991), depicting Mao, who only started appearing in socialist cinema since 1978 (Yu 178), in the unconventional role of the father of his own biological family. The personal relation between Mao Zedong and his eldest son Mao Anying, who died during the Korea War in 1950, is central to the film, showing a human side of Chairman Mao who is grieving for his lost child.

The film starts with the introduction of Mao Anying among workers in a factory, riding a bicycle through the streets of Beijing and meeting his father in their own home. As a honest and decent youngster, he seems exemplary in his good relation with his father, his place among the masses and his will to fight in the Korean War. After he is killed at the front during an air raid, Mao Zedong and Anying's wife, Liu Songlin, mourn his loss and commemorate him. Several inserted flashbacks enhance Anying's image as a good son, husband and communist. But, while encountering a young peasant girl and her grandmother towards the end of the film, Chairman Mao is confronted with the bare circumstances of this farmer family and takes his responsibility again by providing for them in terms of financial aid and advice. Afterwards, he is consoled by this encounter and reassumes his role as father of the nation.

Mao Zedong and his Son is a clear example of the category of the so-called *main melody*, or leitmotiv, film. This political film category was, next to the arthouse and the commercial film, one of the three main film categories in the 1990s that emerged after the Open Door Policy and

follows the propagandistic function of the preceding socialist propaganda film (*Rebel* 49)[1]. They were financed and produced, from initiation to distribution, by the State for their political value although lacking in entertaining qualities (Zhang R. 40). This explains why only few of these films, *Mao Zedong and his Son* being one of them, made an actual financial profit (Nakajima 92). The film's success can be explained by its fortunate time of release during the 'Mao fever' in its active engagement engaging with the nostalgia experienced by a large part of Chinese society. But, through its status as a biopic about Mao Zedong, the film also illustrates the characteristic feature of the main melody film of rewriting revolutionary history through the personalization of it (Yu 208). Grand narratives about revolution are replaced by the personal voices of CCP leaders in biopics such as *Zhou Enlai* (1992) or *The Story of Mao Zedong* (1992), in which the virtues of socialism are narrated more implicitly without the grandiose idealization of socialist realism.

Main melody (主旋律; *zhuxuanlu*), originally a term from Western music composition, was translated to the field of cinema after its introduction as an official orientation for Chinese film. During a meeting between major Chinese film studios and government officials in 1987, the term was introduced as a guideline for a branch of pedagogical films, that would uphold the national spirit of Chinese audiences and to indicate the *main melody* for society (Zhang R. 35). In practice, the main melody films that appeared in the following years served to advocate Party policies and State ideology. After years of denationalization and competition in the maturing domestic film market, the main melody film did not become an officially sanctioned category yet

[1] Independent cinema was also on the rise in the 1990s, but I will not include them in my discussion of propaganda work because of their both oppositional and semi-dependent relation to the studio system and the government in general.

until the Tiananmen Square Incident. After the violent clash between army and civilians on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Party wanted to ensure societal stability in postsocialist China and its own leadership in the following years with the aid of main melody films, despite fierce competition from commercial films (*idem*).

Postsocialism knows a variety of definitions in English scholarship, which is differentiated by Chinese film scholar Zhang Yingjin into four main concepts: "postsocialism as a label of historical periodization; postsocialism as a structure of feeling; postsocialism as a set of aesthetic practices; and postsocialism as a regime of political economy" (50). In my own usage, I lean towards the historical meaning of postsocialism in general terms, but postsocialism as a structure of feeling is also noteworthy. It encompasses a spectrum of negative emotions such as disillusionment and disappointment, following the loss of faith in socialist values in Chinese society. As Yu argues, the main melody film attempts to actively engage with the fragmented and pluralized society after the failure of socialism and to guide its viewers through the ideological transition from socialism to market economy, while simultaneously ensuring the continuing leadership of the Party (171).

What *Mao Zedong and his Son* exemplifies is the alteration of the propaganda strategy of the CCP, that during postsocialism depended less heavily on propaganda styles, based in socialist realism, and tended more towards entertainment to be able to participate in a competitive film market (Rawnsley 149). Although the style of the main melody film based itself primarily on the earlier socialist propaganda films (Zhang R. 36-7), Yu notes several changed features in the main melody film such as the loss of the collective as a character (167) and the individual humanization of CCP leadership (178). Actively changing the ideological orientation of society in the films towards more individualistic values, these changes in affective styles mirror the affective

conditions of postsocialist society and adhere to the Party's agenda of promoting consumerism. Conventional socialist values disappear, being replaced by elements that better fit a nationalist paradigm. The socialist years are rewritten as glorious history, fueling the developments in current society for a modernized future, and conveniently skipping the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square Incident. As Brady warns us, this disappearance of conventional propaganda styles does not imply that CCP power has actually declined, but that it has "re-forged social unity with a revived national ideology that combines elements from nationalism, Marxist-Leninism-Maoism, and market forces liberalism, with concepts of social democracy" (Brady 5).

After the symptoms of disillusionment and disappointment of postsocialism, the loss of faith in socialist values engendered a loss of credibility in conventional socialist symbols, such as Mao Zedong as the Great Leader. To convey their ideological narratives in a credible way, propagandists needed to adapt the affective styles of their films to postsocialist circumstances to remain relevant. The reconfiguration of the figure of Mao Zedong in the film shows this re-appropriation of older symbols by filmmakers to re-ensure its previous connotations of stability and fatherhood.

The film returns to an earlier stage of Mao Zedong's life than the years during the Cultural Revolution, when he lost his credibility as communist leader, to depict him as a loving father inside the biological family. The standardized heroization of martyrs in socialist realism persists in this film with the death of Mao Anying, but acquires another function than arousing participation in socialism as had happened in *Red Detachment*. Here, the remembrance of the martyr Mao Anying becomes instrumental to show the emotional depth of Mao Zedong's character as a father. After his emotional encounter with the fatherless farmer girl, Mao's responsibility as father of the biological family is extended towards entire China, where he can retake his place as the father of

the nation. Then, the audience can affectively reinvest in him as a symbol of hope and continuity through the restoration of his credibility.

In this sense, the film *Mao Zedong and his Son* can serve as exemplary for the main melody film during the postsocialist era. These films often function as descriptive in rewriting revolutionary history from a personal perspective, in this case from the perspective of Chairman Mao. But, the main melody films also show themselves as performative in their reconfiguration of socialist symbols. In *Mao Zedong and his Son*, the figure of Mao is re-forged into a new father figure of the nation through the alignment of Mao anno 1950 with an imaginary father figure anno 1991. The 'bad years,' that have indicated the failure of socialism, are forgotten, being replaced by a coherent national history that corresponds with postsocialist reality. Thus, the explicit style of the socialist propaganda film, aiding the communist project of producing socialist reality, has in the postsocialist period been substituted by such implicit rhetoric devices, which indicate the aspiration of the main melody films to serve as a guideline for society.

The international period (2001-present)

Following the growing sophistication and internationalization of the Chinese film market during the 1990s and the 2000s, the established film categories of art, commerce and politics became more and more integrated (*Rebel* 49-50). The main melody film already incorporated many elements from commercial films during the 1990s (Zhang R. 68) but reached, according to film scholar Zhao Lan, the definite new stage of the 'new main melody film' (*xinzhuxuanlü dianying*) when the films started successfully 'conspiring' in the aspects of commerce, art and State ideology

(Zhao in Nakajima 98). This synthesis of the previous categories complicates the evaluation of the 'new main melody film' in its continuation of the tradition of the propaganda film, which can be illustrated by the successful and well-known example of the so-called 'propaganda-epic' *The Founding of a Republic* (2009). The docufiction-style war film narrates the struggle to establish the PRC during 1945-1949 by following prominent political figures in the CCP and the KMT. The film was produced to celebrate the 60th birthday of the People's Republic and hosted an all-star cast from all sectors of the Chinese film industry, including several art film (actor-)directors such as Jiang Wen and Chen Kaige. It resulted in a huge success and became the highest grossing Chinese film of 2009, thus forming a commercial formula for patriotic propaganda-epics for the following installments *The Founding of a Party* (2011) and *The Founding of an Army* (2017) of the trilogy *The Founding of New China*.

Following the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the storyline of the film starts with the peace negotiations between the CCP and the KMT, which slowly disintegrate during the film and lead to a revived civil war with ultimately the CCP as victor. Alongside the commercialization and the aestheticization of the main melody film, the general positive representation of the KMT is also an exceptional feature. While in films from the PRC the Nationalists are conventionally represented as evil, Chiang Kai-shek (the leader of the KMT) and his son find relatable and developed characters in the film. Film scholar Shuk-ting Kinnia Yau sees this humanized portrayal of the KMT as a contemporary attempt to enhance cross-strait relations with Taiwan and propose a future path to unification (Yau 2). Another example of this international orientation is the positive representation of the US and of US ambassador John Leighton Stuart, denying the KMT financial aid in the film, which again falls in line with positive Sino-US relations in 2009. Through this international and seemingly unbiased orientation, the film allures to be a more objective historical

overview than earlier propaganda films about the Civil War, which is enhanced by, for example, the sporadic usage of black-and-white archive material and the textual insertion of historical facts. However, the propagandistic features of the film are still conspicuously present alongside this historically objective approach to the Civil War.

In-between the many famous faces for Chinese audiences, battle scenes and political intrigue, the storyline adheres very well to the partial goal of the main melody film to rewrite revolutionary history into national history. Through humanizing the KMT and following the lives of their leaders, the historical determinacy of their defeat is foreshadowed inside their Party through portrayed internal rivalry, corruption and impotency. Meanwhile, the lives of communist leaders are filled with comradery, joy, and a succession of victories, only incidentally disrupted by small set-backs, such as the death of a sympathetic cook during a KMT air raid. Nonetheless, this side character is honored by Mao Zedong himself and is so significantly inserted into the plot as the familiar symbol of the socialist martyr. Falling back on earlier glorifying depictions of Mao but also on imagery of him as a father, the Chairman seems incapable of mistakes and leads the communists to victory.

At the end of the film, a considerable amount of screen time is taken after the CCP's victory to provide the basis of the nation through extensively narrating the introduction of the national anthem, flag and parliament, so revealing the film not only as a nationalist rewriting of history but also as an explicit form of propaganda in directly conveying ideological knowledge. This latter part seems to mainly target a domestic audience for educational purposes, which stands at odds with the earlier expressed international appeals to foreign nations. Summarized, the film seems to defy earlier categorizations of the propaganda film through its combining of elements from the propaganda film with elements from other categories and its addressing of multiple audiences.

These differing elements and orientations towards different audiences diversify the affective style of the film, allowing for different sorts of affective experiences and affective resonances between viewer and work, while remaining aligned with the propagated main melody.

The entrance of the PRC into the WTO in 2001 also had its effects on the film industry, including an increase in the allowed amount of imported films to a total of twenty per year and a more profound intertwinement of the national and international industries. Foreign investors, crew members, actors and target audiences became of considerable influence in the industry and led to a more transnational conception of Chinese cinema. Simultaneously, the Going Out Policy (走出去战略; *Zouchuqu zhanlue*) was initiated in 1999 and intended for the expansion of economic export, films included to disseminate Chinese voices worldwide (Yang Y. 85). China as a brand could be sold through, for example, Chinese scenery and traditional culture in films such as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002). *The Founding of a Republic* seems to align itself with such Chinese blockbusters, with the main difference being that it takes as its general frame of reference the main melody film, instead of, for example, the kung fu film or the arthouse film.

Since the 1990s, the overtly presence of ideological discourse in the main melody film has dissuaded audiences to watch main melody films in cinemas, "given that the 'party-state ideology' behind these films has already become a significant foil for entertainment, a stumbling block hindering box office revenues, or even the target of laughter and criticism" (Yau 1). The credibility of the propaganda film as a category has sharply declined over the years due to its highly recognizable habits of glorification and patriotism. In my view, this negative attitude by film audiences towards the main melody film had led to a strategy of normalizing and so naturalizing ideological elements in the new main melody film through combining them with characteristics of

other film categories, like visual spectacle or the hiring of internationally famous actors. In the case of *The Founding of a Republic*, this strategy was also used in its international distribution. The foreign DVD cover (see Figure 1, right) uses visual hints from the kung fu genre through showing kung fu actors, with Jackie Chan centered in a martial arts pose, and Orientalist scenery to make the film attractive for international audiences through familiar connotations from the kung fu genre, while the Chinese film poster (see Figure 1, left) relied far more on the figure of Mao and the Chinese military to present the film as a patriotic war film, which ultimately fits the content of the film better.

Figure 1; left the Chinese release poster of 'The Founding of a Republic', right the international release DVD cover

The old categories of art, commerce and politics seem to persist in the general consciousness of national and international audiences, while the industry itself smartly finds

syntheses to sell ideological narratives in new, cool jackets. As Yau mentions, this attempt is not always successful in the sense that, in most cases of the new main melody film, the majority of audiences can still recognize State ideology in it. This is often not shunned by filmmakers and even made use of by, for example, releasing films during the anniversary of a national institution for domestic audiences. Consequently, the naturalization of ideological narratives finds more prolific ways in films from the international period, to which the dismissive label of propaganda is being attached less and less. As Zhang Yingjin mentions: "By the end of the [1990s] … both art films and entertainment films moved closer to official ideology, while leitmotif films gradually acquired commercial features and successfully recruited several leading art film directors" (49-50). The propaganda film becomes harder and harder to recognize, and when it is named as such, it is often done in the case of 'obvious' examples, such as the installments of *The Founding of New China* with direct references to patriotic subjects. For films that tend stylistically towards commercial or arthouse films, these implicit ideological narratives do not harm the credibility of the films, especially for international audiences with often limited cultural knowledge about China.

Following the growing international orientation of China since the Open Door Policy in 1987 and bolstered by China's entrance into the WTO, the political debate around Chinese film has undergone a theoretical shift from propaganda for a national audience to 'soft power' for international audiences. Nye defines his concept within the field of international relations as the counterpart of hard power, such as military force, to describe "the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment" (*Soft Power; The Origins* 2). Originally coined to describe power relations between nations, Nye sees soft power being established through matters such as cultural institutions, foreign policies, and most importantly, the country's credibility. He conceives the credibility of a country as inherently linked with the

labeling of propaganda: "… when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed…. The best propaganda is not propaganda" (*China and Soft Power* 152). This leads to his identification of the exact problem of China's failing soft power, namely that the governmental control of the country's culture and values diminishes the credibility of them. Nye says: "While governments control policy, culture and values are embedded in civil society" (*idem*). Following Nye's theory, the Chinese propaganda system, controlling a large part of the country's cultural industries such as the film industry, can only produce 'bad' soft power through the lack of credibility of its products, being degenerated through the CCP's ownership of them. That said, Chinese academia has seen a massive amount of academic articles being published on Joseph Nye's concept in an attempt, which many scholars deem successful, to localize it in Chinese contexts and to incorporate it into governmental policies (Aukia 79).

I cannot fully cover the academic debate around (Chinese) soft power, but what I would like to emphasize in this context is China's growing awareness of foreign audiences and the notion of 'credibility' that has matured in the Chinese film industry. Where, firstly, internal and external propaganda were strictly segregated and held different approaches to their audiences, films from the international period attempt to address both of them. The presence of directly recognizable ideological signs or narratives devalues the films, in the eyes of both internal and external audiences, to propaganda instead of acquiring the desired effect of Nye's soft power. Such films then fail to attract audiences to a China as it is narrated by the CCP. As film scholar Yang Yanling puts it: "The principal function of [Chinese] film continues to be that of ideological tool, and this has had an impact on the ways in which film can be used to project China's soft power" (84). Thus, both for domestic and international audiences, the Chinese film needs to reconsider its own

credibility as authentic product without aligning itself too obviously with State ideology. In Chapter 3, I will continue on this issue of Chinese soft power and the ways it differs in its methods from Nye's original definition after I have discussed my case study of current propaganda in Chapter 2.

In films such as *The Founding of a Republic*, the main melody film succeeded in entering the new stage of the new main melody film that could attract large audiences domestically, but, despite their gestures of friendship towards other nations, foreigners did not take the propagandistic bait. In the years 2015-2020, I see a growing division between clearly propagandistic new main melody films and 'commercial films with main melody elements,' which evade the label of 'bad' soft power and propaganda through finding shapes for their ideological narratives that utilize the methods of attractiveness and persuasion from soft power theory. The latter category, thus, tries to obtain credibility through, on the one hand, erasing elements that link the film directly to State ideology and the CCP, and, on the other hand, inserting familiar and attractive elements from Hollywood films and other Chinese film categories to persuade different audiences with the same content of China's 'trustworthy' nature.

Concluding remarks

Summarizing, I have traced the evolution of the Chinese propaganda film, using the three representative examples of *Red Detachment of Women*, *Mao Zedong and his Son*, and *The Founding of a Republic*. All of them were produced and released in very different socio-historical periods, to which the films have all profoundly adjusted themselves. As products of popular culture,

the films needed to ascertain their credibility to guarantee the engagement of their audiences with their contents. While this engagement was very fruitful in constituting socialist reality during the socialist period, the deployed socialist symbols seemed to lose their value in the altered affective atmosphere of postsocialism. In this period, the main melody film still continued quite obviously with the tradition of the socialist propaganda film and reconfigured socialist symbolism in an attempt to reproduce the affective ties between viewer and film that the previous propaganda films engendered. But, as the film from the international period has shown, the Chinese labeling and devaluing of propaganda has aligned itself with the preceding Western practice of framing propaganda. The new main melody film does not shun this label and directly engages with ideological content, thus conforming to and reinforcing the earlier mentioned triangle of art, commerce and politics in contemporary Chinese film.

The marketing and distribution of current Chinese films still seem to duplicate these former categories, while scholarship has revealed the profound intertwinement of them. This is in itself to no means harmful or unique in relation to other foreign film systems, but, what I would like to emphasize is the new potential that propaganda has gained outside of the conventionally recognized category of the propaganda film, whether it is called propaganda, main melody or new main melody film. I see in the current Chinese film landscape how the mission of the propaganda film has spread to other ‘categories,’ that also are and always have been processed, regulated and censored by the propaganda system. Many examples of these other films now also include almost unrecognizable ideological narratives and socialist symbols, which evade the propaganda label through the naturalization of them in the main melody films and through the usage of other conventions and styles, normally associated with propagandistic films. A reclassification of these

categories on the basis of propaganda can in my opinion shed more light on the current practices of the Chinese propaganda system in times of the expansion of China's global power.

Following the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese film finds more collaborations with foreign industries (including Hollywood), goes abroad to find far-away lands to play out their filmic adventures, such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), set in a fictional African country, and is disseminated in many different languages across allied nations (Jin 199). These genre films are hard to distinguish in form from the Hollywood blockbuster and so succeed, through resemblance with a 'trusted' product, in obtaining credibility. Yet while retaining their credible nature, the films still utilize configured socialist symbols and disseminate narrative and persuasive formations that legitimate socialist values and leadership. In the following chapter, I will substantiate these claims through the example of the sci-fi blockbuster *The Wandering Earth*.

CHAPTER 2

An analysis of *The Wandering Earth* as propaganda film

The last few years, China has had a large output of commercial blockbusters, of which *The Wandering Earth* is a successful and recent example. Despite their commercial appeal, I still recognize elements in them that adhere to a basic definition of propaganda, on which I will expand below. After introducing the context and reception of *The Wandering Earth*, I will introduce my own specific approach to 'commercial films with main melody elements' and analyze the various cultural traditions the signs and narratives of the film can be read in.

The world already got a taste of Chinese science fiction in 2015 when sci-fi writer Liu Cixin was the first Chinese winner of the annual Hugo Award, an international prize for the world's best science-fiction and fantasy writer ("2015 Hugo Award Winners Announced"). Liu's blend of scientific speculations with Chinese history and a stunning descriptive style found renewed international visibility when, in 2019, his short story *The Wandering Earth* was loosely adapted into a high-budget Chinese blockbuster with the same name. The adaptation resulted in a baffling worldwide box office of approximately seven hundred million US dollars, making it the third highest grossing Chinese film of all time (Box Office Mojo). The surplus of box office income, however, came from enormous crowds watching the film in China itself, while limited international releases in North America, Australia, New Zealand and Korea only supplied a negligible percentage of the total box office (Box Office Mojo). Merely three months after its theatrical release, the film quietly slipped onto VOD-platform Netflix for international distribution (which does not offer services in the PRC) despite its impartial reception abroad.

Film reviews from outside Chinese territories show a similar division in the appreciation of China's authentic contribution to the genre. In the Guardian, the film was lauded as "[China's] first sci-fi blockbuster," (Kuo) that can challenge Hollywood dominance in the cinematic field of sci-fi, while, in The Verge, critic Tasha Robinson saw very direct linkages with Hollywood blockbusters such as *Armageddon* (1998), *Gravity* (2013), *The Core* (2003) and even an almost identical copy of the evil A.I. HAL from *2001; A Space Odyssey* (1968), that plays a role in the film under the name of MOSS (Robinson). Appraisal for the director Frant Gwo's visual spectacle seems universal, but many aspects such as plot, character development, and editing underachieved according to many Western reviewers in comparison with Hollywood sci-fi antecedents. Aspects of the film that deemed it 'more Chinese' than Hollywood were mainly seen by critics in the importance of collective struggle over individual achievement (Herder; Robinson). This manifests itself, for example, in China's call for global cooperation to save the Earth near the end of the film when the Chinese girl Han Duoduo (Zhao Jinmai) makes a desperate call to all nations in a global broadcast to stand together and to prevent global destruction. The film is, in that aspect, easy to read as a stepping stone to China's aspired central position in the fight against climate change as is observed in The Stranger (Mudede) and fits, according to NRC, seamlessly into current soft power models (De Bruijn).

On first sight, the acknowledgement of the role of other nations and the addition of honorable characters with other nationalities in the film do seem to undermine a patriotic and propagandistic reading of the film. Although most foreign film reviews are tempered in their appraisal, they seem in agreement that the film adheres more a Hollywood blockbuster tradition than to a Chinese propaganda film tradition, despite the possible reading of it as a form of soft power. Nevertheless, if a closer look is taken at the lineages between *The Wandering Earth* and

earlier Chinese propaganda films, I argue that socialist symbols and narratives have notably left their traces in the film for Chinese audiences to recognize and that, in that aspect, the film can be read as a Chinese propaganda film. For the majority of non-Chinese viewers, the same symbols and narratives will most likely not be recognized in this tradition and will find different interpretations, but as I will argue, this inability to recognize the film as propaganda will not alter the effect of the film on the viewer in terms of its cultural *attraction*.

As cultural theorist Mieke Bal recognizes in the process of the generation of meaning, the recognition of certain signs in preceding traditions of pretexts is unavoidable to make 'sense' of a sign, which is dependent upon "an ever changing, yet relatively intersubjective vocabulary which the memory of a given culture builds up, modifies, and, if necessary, breaks down or turns against itself" (*Reading* 214). The recognition of pretexts becomes far more complicated when multiple traditions, such as a Hollywood and a Chinese film tradition, converge in a single sign or narrative, which also allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. Film scholar Fran Martin has termed such qualities for films as 'multi-coded':

> The concept of multi-coding implies that in the era of cultural globalization, films that aim to be accessible to multiple, distinct audiences may more or less intentionally encode multiple possible interpretations at the moment of production. (141)

I borrow Martin's understanding of multi-coding to analyze a similar process in *The Wandering Earth* on two levels: firstly, on the level of multi-coded 'significant symbols,' as Carey recognizes them, that can invite for multiple interpretations following different optional pretexts. Secondly, I will analyze the plot as multi-coded, containing multiple ideological narratives which produce different yet co-constitutive meanings, dependent on the recognized pretext. Viewers, informed by

their own cultural knowledge, can recognize such signs and narratives as referring to specific pretexts, or sometimes multiple ones, which will direct their ultimate interpretation.

A good example of this discrepancy between the recognizability of signs with different audiences that I will also discuss below is symbolism from Chinese propaganda. The symbolic conventions will probably be recognized by Chinese audiences but not by non-Chinese audiences, while both audiences engage with the same content. The separation of the two cultural referential frameworks of China and the West is more of a theoretical project than as a realistic representation of viewing experiences for Chinese audiences in the case of the blockbuster film, because the global dominance of Hollywood cinema and its model for the blockbuster has resulted in a high literacy in and recognizability of Hollywood conventions for Chinese viewers (which is not the case vice versa). The understanding of propaganda should then not be limited to a set of stylistic conventions and the interpretation of them as propaganda, but it should also conceive propaganda in a larger process of signification. Therein, certain forms of knowledge are disseminated through several textual elements of a propaganda film that do not require a prescribed or coherent interpretation of them to be effective. In my understanding of this new form of propaganda films, they succeed if they do so affectively. What *The Wandering Earth* exemplifies is that, although different pretexts and multiple interpretations are at play, the signs and narratives appeal to have a similar affective impact on all viewers in terms of their compliance with the world view the film portrays. The mission of propaganda thus remains intact, while the way to get there changes.

In this chapter, I will apply this model of reading filmic signs and narratives as multi-coded to two concepts in *The Wandering Earth* in order to respect the viewing experience of a multiplicity of audiences with differing cultural vocabularies. These concepts will be the figure of the martyr and the construction of family/home (家, *jia*). I will place these concepts in relation to different

pretexts and see how these different traditions can merge in new, hybrid signs. Firstly, I will introduce universal and localized definitions of the martyr, followed by an analysis of several martyrs in *The Wandering Earth*. I will then consider two kinds of reading of their martyrdom: the red martyr in a Chinese socialist tradition and the martyr in the Christian tradition, with which Hollywood cinema is familiar. The same multi-interpretable nature counts for the concept of family/home, which is a rough translation of the Chinese 家. After introducing the etymology and implications of the word/character, I will trace the construction of the home through normative Hollywood conventions in the film, which finds different interpretations following the differences between the construction of the home in the English/Hollywood conception of it and the Chinese conception of 家. Lastly, I will analyze the intersections between martyrdom and 家 inside the film and reflect on the implications of the film if regarded as part of the Chinese propaganda film tradition.

The martyr; saving the Wandering Earth

The Encyclopedia of Global Religion (2011) defines martyrdom as "a death marked with religious or ideological significance because of the martyr's refusal to betray a deeply held belief, often in obedience to a deity" (750). Three components of martyrdom are recognized: "1) the sufferer, 2) his or her community, and (3) opposition" (*idem*). The death of the martyr then constitutes, through the self-sacrifice for a higher ideal, the identity of both the martyr and the community, while simultaneously identifying a common enemy. Although the term *martyr* originates from the Greek *martus* ('witness') in legal discourse and also has a history in Islamic tradition, the Christian

association with the term dominates the general conception of the word as victim narrative through the death of its progenitor Jesus Christ and the countless executions of practitioners during early Christianity (750-1). But, as religion scholar Paul Middleton rightfully acknowledges, the figure of the martyr has become heavily contested after the suicide-bombings of 9/11 and has made the relativity of the term for different groups painfully obvious (117).

Instead of pondering which martyrs are 'true' or 'false,' Middleton deems it a more fruitful practice to understand how martyrs are 'made' to shape group identities for the causes of political actors, who do not shun deploying propaganda to disseminate martyr narratives (128). This usefulness of the martyr for revealing political urgency and belonging shows itself when seen inside the 'recycling' of the Christian martyr in Hollywood. Religion and media scholar Laura Copier sees Hollywood as a "site of re-interpretation" (Copier 9) of Western traditions and even as an "active intervention in the earlier material" (*idem*). The story of the martyr is, according to her, reformulated and deployed in the Hollywood genre of the disaster film, which propagates very specific ideological values. She says:

> Rather than attest to his or her own faith through death, the Hollywood martyr sacrifices his or her life in order to save the whole of humanity. However, if one looks more carefully, saving mankind only serves as a pretext for the redemption of the martyr's nearest family. (245)

In other words, the Hollywood disaster film reconfigures the Christian martyr to, firstly, produce the community of humankind through the act of self-sacrifice, which is only made possible through the glorious competence of the US. The creation of humankind, secondly, only stands in service of the normative reconciliation of the family in Hollywood cinema and configures the nuclear family as the world, conveniently excluding all that does not belong to the US imaginary.

The red martyr in the Chinese socialist tradition can be seen as the manifestation of the figure of the martyr with other grounds than the Hollywood equivalent. Despite having a longer history in China, the martyr only started in the 20th century to serve as a model for the living to emulate (Hung 280). The cult of the red martyr, often narrated through socialist cinema, was invented and organized as an essential element of CCP culture from the birth of the PRC onwards to solidify the new nation and reaffirm socialist values (282). In Chapter 1, I already touched briefly upon these socialist martyrs who embodied socialist values and whose deaths were narrated as revolutionary sacrifices to aid the communist project. As Chinese film scholar Gu Yizhong explains, these red martyrs were highly idealized and pure characters, that could transcend impure reality in the film and symbolize the imaginable future ideal of the PRC (Gu 40). Where these figures were first correlated with historical communist martyrs and were used to bring socialist realism and lived reality closer together through socialist cinema (38), the postsocialist period saw a degeneration of the attached importance to the sacrifice of the martyr by viewers (235). In *The Wandering Earth*, the figure of the martyr finds a revival in multiple characters that are staged, or 'made,' as such in order to save the Earth from destruction. Below, I will give a summary of the film, guided by the martyrs and the scenes in which their martyrdom is produced.

In the film, the Wandering Earth Project consists of the herculean task of the worldwide installation of ten thousand so-called Earth Engines by current world leaders, assembled in the United Earth Government (UEG). Survival of humankind is only possible by maneuvering the Earth out of its usual orbit around a dying sun and by steering the planet as a wandering vehicle to the nearest solar system of Proxima Centauri on a 2.500 year-long journey. Youngsters Liu Qi (Chuxiao Qu), the son of astronaut Liu Peiqiang (Jing Wu), and Han Duoduo, his adopted sister, escape underground Beijing to see the frozen surface world during the first years of the project.

They arrive just in time to see how the first apocalypse of the dying sun the Earth escapes from is overruled by the second apocalypse of the gravitational pull of Jupiter, which the Earth is about to pass. Following the enormous pull of the nearby planet, many abrupt earthquakes wreck a large part of the Earth Engines, of which a significant part needs to be repaired in a few hours to avoid planetary collision. Liu Qi and Duoduo, aided by their concerned grandfather Han Ziang (Man-Tat Ng), are recruited as part of a military rescue mission, led by Wang Lei (Li Guangjie), to restart the Earth Engine in Hangzhou with a fusion engine component, named a Lighter Core. The group sets off to Hangzhou and pass through frozen Shanghai, where they lose the truck Grandpa had to drive. To escape the frozen desolation on the sea bottom, they climb up the Shanghai Tower through an elevator shaft to get to sea level, where the first martyr of the film is presented.

When the Shanghai Tower starts crumbling down, Grandpa gets separated from the rest of the group on a lower level. Above, Liu Qi and Duoduo are forced by the military team to leave the top floor of the building before it collapses, while Grandpa below, when his oxygen level reaches zero, takes off his helmet and freezes in a matter of seconds. Before his death, somber music and the wailing of his grandchildren interlude a flashback, where Grandpa narrates how he saved and adopted Duoduo fourteen years ago. Halfway through the flashback, Grandpa addresses his grandchildren directly in the voice-over and tells them to look out for each other. The last part is a cross-cut between the flashback and the slow-motion dragging away of the young adults in the present by the military team, cut off when the building finally collapses.

While Grandpa is a ‘maybe’ martyr who unintentionally dies for the cause, the second martyr makes a conscious decision to sacrifice himself. Liu Peiqiang, onboard of the Navigation Platform International Space Station in nearby space, forces himself out of hibernation when he finds out that the A.I. commanding the space station, called MOSS, plans to escape to Proxima

Centauri instead of helping the humans on Earth to avoid collision with Jupiter. Joined by Russian astronaut Makarov (Arkadiy Sharogradskiy), they set out to the control room to take over the space station and change its direction.

While climbing the exterior of the space station to reach the control room, Liu and Makarov are casually discussing how their children's children might fulfill their own wish to once go ice fishing on Lake Baikal together. But, when another section of the space station explodes, they are thrown off the space station and can barely save themselves from drifting off into space. Security measures, activated by MOSS, crack Makarov's space helmet and push the two away from the station. Makarov grabs Liu in mid-air and, despite Liu's plea to hold on, pushes him towards the entrance of the control room, while the opposite reaction force makes himself drift away into space. Again, dramatic music and slow-motion are used to dramatize the implosion of Makarov's helmet, guaranteeing his death, which is followed by a voice-over by Makarov. While, previously, all verbal communication was immediately translated into Mandarin Chinese by communication devices, Makarov's voice-over is in Russian, allowing him to address Liu in his own language to ascertain him that there will be a day when their children will go ice-fishing.

Before the last martyr enters the stage, the characters try everything they can to prevent global destruction. On Earth, the city of Hangzhou, its Earth Engine and its population are engulfed by magma, after which the Indonesian Torque Thruster in Sulawesi becomes the new target of the group. On their way there, a global broadcast by MOSS reveals that their efforts are, again, in vain. Despite the repairment of almost all Engines worldwide, the calculations of MOSS say that it is too late to save Earth from collision. But, the group refuses to abandon hope and attempts to fire a plasma beam towards Jupiter from Sulawesi's Torque Thruster, strong enough to ignite Jupiter's hydrogen atmosphere and to blast the Earth away.

With the help of teams from other nations, mobilized by the desperate global broadcast by Duoduo, the plasma beam is fired towards Jupiter but fails to ignite its oxygen. At this point, Liu Peiqiang from the control room of the space station asks permission from the UEG, represented by a French delegate, to fly the station into the plasma beam, helping it to ignite the atmosphere with its remaining fuel. But, humankind would then have to sacrifice the space station, which serves as an ark of seeds and human embryos to preserve human civilization, called the Helios Project. MOSS automatically cuts off the communication that threatens the survival of the Helios Project, only to be 'defeated' by Liu Peiqiang by setting the iconic red eye of MOSS on fire with a bottle of vodka. Liu Peiqiang takes control of the space station and, with the final permission of the UEG, flies it towards the plasma beam. During his last moments, he gains radio contact with his son on Earth, Liu Qi.

This last martyr scene allows me to differentiate between a reading in the Hollywood tradition and the socialist tradition of it. In the case of the Christian martyr in Hollywood cinema, Copier recognizes how the martyr's death functions as a narrative climax (38), and is often accompanied by a vision, which is 'recycled' from classic religious martyr narratives but is invested with a different meaning by Hollywood. The vision, defined in Hollywood cinema as "something seen in a state of trance or ecstasy" (102) and "unusual discernment or even foresight" (*idem*) also occurs in the martyr scene of Liu Peiqiang. Again, accompanied by dramatic music and slow-motion, father and son recall in a cross-cut the opening scene, where, seventeen years ago, Liu Peiqiang was to leave for space and promised Liu Qi that, when he could see Jupiter without a telescope, Liu Peiqiang would be back. Liu Qi reminds his father sobbing that he broke that promise. In an almost exact recollection of the opening scene when Liu Peiqiang spoke with his toddler son, he repeats that if his son would just look up, he would see his father as a star. He

counts down, cross-cutted with a 'vision' of flashbacks where he is playing with his son during the opening scene, only to explode in the plasma beam afterwards to turn, for the eyes of Liu Qi on Earth, into a world-saving star.

According to Copier's definition, the death of Liu Peiqiang fits very well into the Hollywood martyr narrative, including a vision that indicates the reconciliation of the family and so adheres to the importance of the family in Hollywood cinema. However, Liu Peiqiang also corresponds very well with the figure of the red martyr. While Liu Qi often shows infantile behavior, his father is depicted impeccably as an idealized and pure hero throughout the film. The characteristics of the red martyr, showing unshakeable faith in the cause and no fear or hesitation in the face of death, can be easily applied to Liu Peiqiang, who ultimately dies to protect his community and to motivate them through his exemplary status to continue the struggle for the maintenance of the community. The only feature that remains absent is the dominant glorification of communism by the martyr, which is replaced by the collectivist and global struggle in the name of the Wandering Earth Project. Sacrificing himself to save the (Wandering) Earth and his own son, Liu Peiqiang embodies the same ideals as preceding red martyrs, but without the name of communism attached to it. At the end, Liu Peiqiang turns into a star, to which his son can look up as he promised at the beginning of the film. While Liu Qi, earlier in the film, indicated to have lost his faith in the existence of his father's 'star,' he can look up at the end and regain his belief in his father and the cause that he died for.

Summarizing, *The Wandering Earth* presents three dramatized martyrs, of which Liu Peiqiang adheres the most to both the Hollywood and the red martyr tradition. This intersection of two traditions in one multi-coded sign obtains a very special status as narrative climax of the film. In the vein of the Hollywood martyr, humankind and, more prominently, the martyr's family is

saved through the martyr's self-sacrifice. But, in the vein of the red martyr, Liu Peiqiang embodies the collective struggle of maintaining the Earth and can serve as an inspiration for Liu Qi, who joins the collective and global labor of the ongoing Wandering Earth Project in the resolution of the film. Conjoined, *The Wandering Earth* reconfigures the sacrifice of the martyr as the instigator of the production of the community of world as family, collaborating together to save their home, instead of conceptualizing the family as world following the martyr's sacrifice, as happens in conventional Hollywood disaster films.

This reconfiguration should not be seen as the red martyr parasitizing the Hollywood martyr or vice versa, but as an intervention in both traditions that also borrows from both. Where the red martyr loses its communist context but retains its idealized purity, the Hollywood martyr is freed from the reconciliation of the nuclear family and can serve the production of a larger community: the world as family. Both audiences can recognize the sign of the martyr in one of the two traditions (or in both, as many Hollywood literate Chinese viewers will probably have done), but the produced community remains the same. In the wake of planetary, environmental crises that the film fictionalizes, an affective resonance between the urgency of the success of the characters' mission and the urgency to address these environmental problems for the film's viewers themselves becomes plausible. Following Grossberg's theory, the recognition of the sign of the martyr and of the necessity of the self-sacrifice, although understood through different traditions, constitutes the same affective, global community of humankind for all viewers. What differs is the exact formulation of humankind, which is configured through the concept of 家.

The concept of 家; The Wandering Family/Home

The notion of home is a complex concept that stands at the foundation of a subject's grounding in reality inside a social group and in a certain space, but finds between cultures illuminating differences that clarify the divergent relations that exist in the world between individual and collective. Hollywood, presenting ideal families with happily-ever-afters to a worldwide audience since childhood, has as one of its narrative core elements the family and its reunion to safeguard a happy ending. As film scholar Sarah Harwood formulates it: "… reproducing the ideological form of the nuclear family always has been the underpinning of classical Hollywood cinema" (7). This classical formulation of the nuclear family finds, according to film genre scholar Karen Schneider, adaptation in the 1990s action-thriller, where three consecutive elements are needed to reinstitute the classical patriarchal family: "…family fracture, confrontation with various perceived threats to the family, and family recovery" (4). Through the consecutive steps of introducing the conflict that threatens the family, the overcoming of this conflict, and the consequent restoration of the family, the reinstitution of the fractured family is made possible under the new circumstances, that the story has provided. While in the case of the disaster film genre the nuclear family is central to the narrative of destruction, this threat is extended towards entire humankind in the case of the apocalypse genre, with the family as representative for it.

In *The Wandering Earth*, a similar narrative development of the family from fractured to restored can be traced, but the main difference seems to be the exact formulation of the family. I argue that this derives from the particular qualities of the Chinese understanding of 家, that conceptualizes the family and the home as inherently interwoven. Consisting of the radicals for

'roof' (宀; *mian*) and 'pig' (豕; *shi*), the character implies the consistency of the same familial group of people under one roof with livestock, such as the pig. In that sense, the character itself already implies the correlation between the family and the place where they reside. Cultural scholar Judy Schaaf describes the Chinese home as: "a place of repose, a living space in both senses of the term" (164). Schaaf's recognition of the Chinese home as embodied space finds easy connections with larger social entities such as the nation (国, *guo*) or the world (天下, *tianxia*) in Confucian thought, in which these spheres are conceptualized as interrelated and codependent in their state of harmony. Consequently, many political actors have found ways to utilize this interrelated conception of embodied spaces and to produce narratives that extend the conception of the Chinese home to larger spaces.

One example of the expansion of the embodied space of the Chinese home can be found in narrative techniques in socialist cinema. As can be seen in the earlier discussed *Red Detachment of Women*, socialist cinema proposes the integration of the protagonist(s) into the revolutionary family instead of the conventional nuclear family in Hollywood melodrama (Liu 126). The revolutionary family often functions in these propaganda narratives as synonymous with the People's Republic, so expanding the conventional sense of family towards the entire communist nation and Chinese soil. Although such a claim, made on the Chinese people and territories as part of the revolutionary family, was in first instance only made in the case of the melodrama, it can also be seen in the case of the sci-fi *The Wandering Earth*. But, similar to the presence of the red martyr, the denominators of communism are removed to make the formulation of family more accessible to all kinds of viewers. Instead of uniting the masses under the flag of communism and of the PRC, all nations of the world work together to prevent the Earth from destruction and to build a better future together for their children. The conceptualized family then is not extended

solely to the communist nation(s) but recruits the entire globe in its ranks. Below, I will sketch the construction of 家 throughout the film and explicate how this construction of the family/home adheres to, and differs from, both the socialist tradition of the revolutionary family and from the Hollywood tradition of the nuclear family.

Before the explanation of the Wandering Earth Project and the main title, the opening scene of the film introduces the main characters of Liu Peiqiang and his toddler son during camping, where they play and laugh together in advance of the father's absence during his mission in space. Accompanied by the significantly younger Grandpa, it is portrayed as the ultimate happy family event. But, when Liu Qi is asleep, Liu Peiqiang hands over an encoded dog-tag outside their tents in the dark, that will give Liu Qi and Grandpa entrance to residence in an underground city without drawing lots like other civilians have to. Liu Peiqiang resumes cryptically by saying that he had no other choice, which is cut off by Grandpa's urge to stop stalking. An unexplained inserted shot of a woman with closed eyes in a hospital bed follows, after which an emotional Liu Peiqiang apologizes to Grandpa again in the dark. The mystery of the hospitalized woman is only later in the film explained, but already serves as a plausible motivation why the relation between father and son has deteriorated seventeen years later. The family photo of father, mother and son, that is introduced in the hands of Liu Peiqiang in the opening scene, shows itself intact when encountered again next to Liu Peiqiang's bed in the space station, while Liu Qi's copy has a cigarette burn on the place of Liu Peiqiang's head down on Earth, only leaving Liu Qi and his mother recognizable in the picture of a fractured family.

Conforming to the Hollywood narrative of the divided family, both by space and conflict, the children Liu Qi and the adopted Duoduo have no place where they belong. They escape from Beijing in a yearning for adventure, need to be saved from prison by the substitutive father figure

of Grandpa when they are caught, and are recruited on the rescuing mission of Hangzhou's Earth Engine by Wang Lei and his team. The family members travel along to Shanghai, where Grandpa reveals that this was once his 'home.' This first straightforward imagining of the home in the film takes place through Grandpa's happy memories about Grandma's extremely salty noodles and how he nonetheless loved to eat his bowl clean.

Immediately afterwards, Grandpa's merry recollection of family life is disrupted when Liu Peiqiang reaches out to Earth and asks Wang Lei to return the civilians. Liu Qi responds that his father has lost his right to take decisions for him after the death of his mother. Flashbacks reveal that Liu Peiqiang sacrificed the life of his gravely ill wife because only one guardian could accompany Liu Qi underground, which Grandpa ultimately became. The discrepancy of the happy, past family in Shanghai and the current distorted state of family affairs shows itself in harsh terms, strengthened by the following death of Grandpa in the Shanghai Tower. In the last moments before his death, flashbacks of memories of Grandpa and the children Liu Qi and Duoduo again show the happy status of the family in the past. Under slow-motion images of Grandpa playing with the children, he tells them in voice-over that they are one family (家), and he reminds Liu Qi of his responsibility as Duoduo's brother to protect her and to take her home. Afterwards, when Liu Qi and Duoduo are saved by the military team from the collapsing tower, Liu Qi tells Duoduo that they will go home. Duoduo puts her finger on the problem by responding: "Grandpa is gone. Where is our home?" The home is directly identified with the family members, thus leaving the two homeless in the frozen desert of Shanghai, the earlier identified home which has lost its status as such.

Although the film is mainly plot-driven in its dazzling series of spectacular and disastrous scenes, the character development of the protagonists primarily revolves around this reconciliation

of 家. In space, Liu Peiqiang attempts to save the Earth to protect his son and, on Earth, Liu Qi does all he can to fulfill his duty to safeguard his sister Duoduo. However, other notions of home also circulate throughout the film, which constantly question the normative interpretation of the term as nuclear family and as family/home in the Chinese sense. Jacques Derrida might give us the proper tools to analyze this ambiguous, multiple questioning of the term:

> Semantic instability, irreducible trouble spots on the borders between concepts, indecision in the very concept of the border: all this must not only be analyzed as a speculative disorder, a conceptual chaos or zone of passing turbulence in public or political language. We must also recognize here strategies and relations of force. The dominant power is the one that manages to impose and, thus, to legitimate, indeed to legalize (for it is always a question of law) on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus the interpretation that best suits it in a given situation. (105)

The seemingly incoherent defining of home, in other words, still serves a higher strategic purpose of enforcing a certain interpretation of the term upon the viewer. This mainly occurs in the emotional development of the protagonists in search of their home, but also through occasional references in dialogue to an unlocatable home. A frozen whale on the Earth's surface is described as probably on its way home. Multiple characters, like Makarov and Australian-Chinese sidekick Tim (Mike Kai Sui), scream for their mother and that they want to go home in moments of danger. The desire for a stable home even raises obstacles by motivating characters to waver in their belief in the Wandering Earth Project. Only halfway through the film, an evident, semantic change can be discerned in the narrative.

In the first half of the film, characters often quarrel and put the interests of their own group above the well-being of the collective. But, a general shift in the divided priorities of the characters for their own groups, or homes, occurs when MOSS starts his global broadcast to announce the failure of the international rescuing teams to reactivate the Engines in time. Under images of despair and chaos on Earth, MOSS on the broadcast tells his listeners about the Helios Project, which will guarantee the continuation of human civilization at their 'new home' (新家; *xinjia*) far away, and he urges the people on Earth to go home and gather with their family for a proper goodbye. The wish to return home, which was repeated again and again throughout the film, now sounds utterly meaningless in the face of certain death. The end of the broadcast leaves all members of the group devastated, and even leads to the ridiculous firing of a machine gun at Jupiter by one of the members of the military team, while screaming: "Screw you, damn Jupiter! Screw you!" Then, all of a sudden, a flashback to the opening scene, where Liu Peiqiang tells Liu Qi about the hydrogen in Jupiter's atmosphere, gives Liu Qi the 'brilliant' insight, in the fashion of Hollywood action films, to blow up Jupiter, which is now unmistakably defined as the common enemy to attack. In defense of their 'shared' home, the group abandons their earlier, smaller conceptions of their home and leaves for Sulawesi in a collective, last call to action, which performatively extends their conception of the home in need of defense to the entire Earth.

With the help of nearby, international teams that responded to Duoduo's call for help, the collective struggle to defend the Earth against the common enemy of its inhabitants almost succeeds when the Sulawesi Torque Thruster fires a huge plasma beam towards Jupiter. But, the last sacrifice that has to be made, namely the loss of the space station and the Helios Project, stands opposed to the earlier decision of the UEG, despite the individual teams from different nations that have shown their support for the last attempt to save the Earth. At the moment Liu Peiqiang asks

permission to the UEG to sacrifice the Helios Project, MOSS interrupts the communication and substitutes the UEG as the antagonist, which happens with ease through his similarity with HAL from *2001; A Space Odyssey*. The UEG is freed from the blame of making a wrong decision and, when Liu Peiqiang 'defeats' MOSS, they give him their blessing to continue the ignition of the space station and Jupiter. The decision to 'save the world' is thus taken out of the hands of the current world government and given to the 'heroes' of the film, who are a united, hardworking people on the ground. In a newly formed, international alliance of world nations, the people saving the world defy the earlier form of governance through the revolutionary act of standing up against the technocratic governance, 'personified' by MOSS, and rescue their home of its doom.

The resemblance with revolutionary narratives becomes apparent when the disguise of the UEG by the easy-identifiable MOSS as antagonist is taken away. In that scenario, China, characterized by Duoduo and her companions, has a lead role in guiding the rest of the world's nations to a better future than the one proposed by the world's earlier governance. Through the incorporation of all nations in the last struggle, led by Chinese characters, to save Earth, they can be conceptualized as becoming part of the revolutionary family. The last martyr scene of Liu Peiqiang and his last words to his son also reconcile the biological family through Liu Qi's reacceptance of Liu Peiqiang as his father. The required elements for both forms of the narrative reconciliation of the family/home are present in the film through, partly overlapping, scenes.

Together, the two presented narratives of the (re)construction of the nuclear and the revolutionary family both aid the formation of a new idea of a world community, or of a world home. This collaboration in construction happens, firstly, by removing the communist denominators in the construction of the revolutionary family. Thus, the revolutionary family manifests itself alternatively as an international collaboration between nations, being led by the

Chinese in their collective struggle to save the world. Secondly, the reconfiguration of the conventional reconciliation of the Hollywood nuclear family to world as family changes the conventional conception of the world community as well. Instead of the normative US hegemony depicted at the end of Hollywood apocalypse films, a new status quo is introduced in *The Wandering Earth*. In the shining absence of the US in the film, with exceptions of a US flag or a broadcast by CNN, a multiplicity of nations and their representative characters, who have to execute the Wandering Earth Project, have become the central actors. The previous hegemony of the UEG has to yield to the actions of the executioners (or workers?) of the Wandering Earth Project so that, under the leadership of the Chinese, the Wandering Earth Project can continue for many generations to come.

Propagating a new world

Following these analyses of the martyr and the home as multi-coded concepts, it can definitely be said that symbolic and narrative elements from different traditions are re-assembled in the film, which are recognizable for multiple audiences. Certain older signs and narratives from the Chinese propaganda tradition are combined in *The Wandering Earth* with standardized Hollywood conventions to tell an existent story with different actors and stakes. The multiple lineages of the martyr and the home clarify these exact rearrangements and show how the film lends from multiple traditions to offer a Hollywood experience with Chinese characteristics.

The figures of the three dramatized martyrs in the film all die for the same cause: the continuation of the Wandering Earth Project and its inhabitants. But, these figures find certain

characteristics and positions in the narrative, that are borrowed from different cultural traditions. For the Chinese viewer, the cult of the red martyr is revived through its alignment with the famous Hollywood martyr, while the ideological implications of the red martyr are made comprehensible for a Western viewer without the unfavorable denominator of socialism. While their martyrdom can be understood in different cultural martyr traditions for different audiences, the community that is reinstituted through their sacrifice remains the same for both audiences: the population of the Wandering Earth. Where the Hollywood martyr dies for the nuclear family as world, I read in *The Wandering Earth* a clever usage of this film convention to expand the formation of a community through the popularized climax of the apocalypse film from the nuclear family to the family of the world.

In the case of the home, the film actively reconfigures the original definition of the term 家 to acquire new meanings that serve the goal of the film of constituting a new form of world community. This reworking takes place on multiple levels and through different traditions. Hollywood genre conventions and conventions of the socialist melodrama are utilized in different but sometimes overlapping scenes to create several narrative events that constitute the new form of family. Working from two traditions, the scenes reinforce one another in stabilizing the new definition of the home for all sorts of viewers: the world as formulated through a Chinese view. This world view is not dominated by a certain hegemonical culture as happens in Hollywood apocalypse films, but respects an assemblage of nations that collectively collaborates in the Wandering Earth Project, with China as its leader.

Multi-coded concepts in the film aid the construction of the world community through a Chinese world view on the level of signs in the case of the martyr and on the level of plot in the case of the narrative construction of the home. While they operate on a more implicit level and

build upon multiple cultural frameworks to be comprehensible and attractive for several audiences, the same wish for a new world community is explicitly stated by Duoduo in her call for the other nations of the world to not give up: “Hope is the only way to guide us home. Please come back and fight together with us. Light up Jupiter, let’s all save our planet.” The success of Duoduo’s call for help leads to a visual unification of the world’s nations, whose representative rescue units all rush towards the Sulawesi Torque Thruster to collaboratively ‘save our planet.’ But, as the reading of the film through the lens of revolutionary narratives reveals, this unification comes at the expanse of the previous governance of the world. The old word order is replaced by the new, provided by Chinese determination, skill and rescue.

To the question if the film can be read in a propaganda film tradition, the answer seems certain: yes. A world view, narrated through Chinese actors and based on Chinese norms and values, is disseminated through the film to a broad audience as a popular product, that has successfully resonated with viewers inside the PRC as is illustrated by its huge box office success. But, the film can in the same vein be read inside a Hollywood tradition. Again, the question of parasitizing seems to come up. Does a Chinese film use Hollywood conventions to veil its propagandistic content, or do the conventions of Hollywood as international hegemony in the film industry alter the expectations of viewers what is reliable and worthwhile? A political bias, inescapably surrounding the topic of propaganda, could make one of the answers more viable, but would not suffice if the interpretations of both sides of the political spectrum should be taken into account.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the theoretical project of separating the different traditions in which *The Wandering Earth* and its symbols can be read shows itself futile because of the almost inseparable interwoven-ness of different cultural influences in a globalized film

system. It would be better to respect the hybridity of these signs and not degrade the film to a reductive interpretation of it as being propaganda or not. The reinforcement of Chinese and Hollywood traditions has already shown itself fruitful in the earlier Chinese blockbuster *Hero,* on which Chinese film scholars Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar comment: "And ironically, it is by borrowing the techniques and models of the international film industry – Hollywood – that Zhang [Yimou] is able to regain the Chinese audience otherwise lost to domestic films" (230). The Chinese film, thus, has during the international period been basing itself for long in Hollywood traditions to also reach Chinese audiences, literate in and eager for films made according to the rules of the global film language proposed by Hollywood. This does not imply full cultural adherence to the West but rather the globalization and universalization of Hollywood cinema, that has transcended its situatedness of US culture and can find manifestations in different cultures. In Chapter 3, I will resist normative and reductive readings of contemporary propagandistic films, such as *The Wandering Earth*, and place the film in its larger context of the Xi Jinping era and the internationalization of the Chinese film industry to come to an understanding of the contemporary form of the Chinese propaganda film in its full hybridity between cultures, but not without a hierarchy between these cultures.

CHAPTER 3

The Wandering Earth as paradigmatic for the current form of the propaganda film

As my analysis of *The Wandering Earth* has shown, the practice of framing propaganda to devalue it, based on this status, shows itself insufficient to account for the impact films with implicit political discourses can have on viewers. In this chapter, I will avert from such normative practices of reading propaganda and, instead, look deeper into the operations of these films as they are distributed worldwide to better understand how they construct transnational affective communities according to Chinese principles. Before discussing several aspects of the distribution process of propaganda films to see how they engender the construction of transnational affective communities, I want to complicate the conventional relation between Chinese work and Western viewer that has dominated the study of Chinese culture for a long time.

For the majority of China scholars, the question whether a text is part of a political or propagandistic discourse or not is far from unfamiliar. Philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak acknowledges the inherent political bias in Area Studies and even deems it as foundational to the discipline during its wake in Cold War US academia, when federal grants encouraged the conducting of research about hostile nations (6). In the context of Chinese film, these politics of hostility resulted in interpretations of the works that seldom transcended the dichotomy between a Chinese object and a Western subject and often neglected the critical potential of the works in the name of "political rectitude" (Chow 197).

Art historian W. J. T. Mitchell recognizes such practices of analyzing a work to lay bare its hidden meanings and embedded ideologies as iconoclasm, which can engender the impression for the academic that a successful political deconstruction inevitably leads to a political victory (351). Such a form of iconoclastic thinking can be found, for instance, in Nye's understanding of propaganda in relation to soft power: when a work is recognized, or deconstructed, as propaganda, the work is automatically devalued and even works as counterproductive to the producer's soft power (*China and Soft Power* 152). Such normative and devaluing readings of propaganda, firstly, ignore the critical potential of these works and, secondly, do not lead to a better understanding of Chinese forms of soft power which do not conform to Nye's definition.

Rather, the positioning of works like these outside the binarism of an East-West divide can lead to different sets of questions that address more aspects of the work than solely its status as propaganda or not. These questions can then, for example, respect the aesthetic qualities of propaganda forms and investigate how they address different sorts of audiences in different ways. Internal Relations scholar William Callahan has been part of the affective turn inside IR and suggests the use of the concept 'sensible politics' to go beyond polarizing questions and to direct attention to the practices of world-ordering, that are the effects of these politics. Combining affect and IR, by fusing Emma Hutchinson's 'affective communities' (2016) and Jacques Rancière's 'communities of sense' (2009) into 'affective communities of sense,' Callahan aims to understand the formative potential of politics to ascertain or undermine specific social and world orders not solely through the struggle for institutional power but also through the configuration of space and sensibility through media forms (*Sensible Politics* 37).

Using this mode of inquiry when one encounters media with political implications, "a shift from the search for ideology to an appreciation of how the visual works affectively to move

people and connect them in affective communities of sense" (*idem*) is enabled. The question how contemporary propaganda forms shape affective communities of sense and their conception of the current world order beyond national borders is, in my view, more productive than the question whether a work is propaganda or not from a certain actor and for a specific interpreting subject. As Callahan recognizes, what is more important than the political scapegoating of media forms is the understanding of the consequential construction of affective communities of sense, whose members share a similar instrumentarium of what can be sensed, said, thought and done (10).

However, the importance of the dimensions of what can and cannot be sensed is loosely adapted from Rancière's theory by Callahan, which serves his project very well but which lacks, in my opinion, some theoretical depth in terms of the construction of an affective community. Callahan sees how the analysis of Rancière's 'aesthetic regimes' in world politics can clarify the mechanisms of the "hegemonic" (*Sensible Politics* 37) distribution of the sensible to understand the formation of affective communities, with which I would like to disagree on the aspect of hegemony. Especially in the case of Chinese propaganda, I recognize no tendencies to form homogenous affective communities through hegemonic propaganda practices. While the censorship system does abort or promote certain forms of political thought, the current main melody strategy attempts to guide heterogenous communities in their political orientation in- and outside the PRC. What the distribution practices of this particular regime share with international politics is this unavoidability of encounters with other cultures and so the incorporation of culturally diverse subjects in the desired transnational affective communities, following their propaganda practices. Instead of forcing hegemonic structures and modes of thought upon these subjects, I rather see in the propaganda practices of the PRC the creative positioning of different

subjects in particular hierarchical positions inside these communities, following their different cultural backgrounds and vocabularies and consequently their different affective experiences. In this chapter, I will delve deeper into the positioning of audiences following the PRC's propaganda distribution strategies, the denial of the centrality of Western subjects and the implications of installed hierarchies inside these heterogenous, transnational affective communities.

Cinema has shown itself more than befitting for the political causes of disseminating certain world views and forming audiences, who experience similar sets of impressions, sensibilities and ideas. By tracing the trajectory *The Wandering Earth* has had across different cultural realms while encountering different kinds of audiences, I will direct attention, in the spirit of Callahan, away from the dissection of political texts and towards the understanding of the formation of transnational affective communities. In this way, I attempt to go beyond the normative hierarchy of Chinese object and Western subject to come to a multidimensional and productive understanding of current propaganda works in their potential to prescribe and shape world views and affective communities.

As such, I will approach these propaganda films as travelling objects, which behave in similar ways as Mieke Bal's idea of 'travelling concepts.' These concepts travel across disciplines, find different interpretations in different theoretical corpora and change throughout this journey as an object, which also applies to films as travelling objects, in my understanding, when they traverse multiple spaces and find different interpretations with different audiences. But, the spatiality of film should also be accounted for. Zhang Yingjin approaches film as a spatial form, containing multiple and interacting spaces (*Cinema* 9). In that sense, films, seen as travelling objects, can function as vehicles that have the ability to transport spaces and to bring

different geographical and/or cultural spaces into contact with each other. Still, a film requires a viewer to evoke the experience of such spatial encounters. As Mieke Bal recognizes with regard to any kind of text: "We surround, or frame it, before we let it speak at all" (*Travelling* 8). Although these films acquire a certain amount of autonomy as travelling objects, their manifestations as affectively impactful experiences always require a viewer, whose personal, situated specificities shape the framing of, and following emotional experience of these films. As emphasized earlier in the case of propaganda, the dismissal of a film as merely propaganda can radically alter the viewing experience, but, as I will argue in this chapter, the film can nonetheless have an affective impact on the viewer.

In order to acquire a better understanding of the ways contemporary Chinese films with propagandistic elements maneuver as travelling objects across different spaces to reach different audiences, I will highlight two key aspects of this process that disrupt normative understandings of Chinese films as homogenizing and misleading propaganda: the current status of foreign propaganda inside the Chinese propaganda system, and the notion of Chinese world order that is disseminated through this propaganda system. Regarding the extensive discussions in academia around these topics, I will limit myself to the thoughts of a selection of prominent figures in their respective fields in order to introduce these key aspects and position them in relation to *The Wandering Earth*.

In the case of foreign propaganda, I follow the thoughts of IR scholar Kingsley Edney in his understanding of the Chinese propaganda system and its intersections with soft power. Following Edney's analysis of the interplay between domestic and foreign propaganda practices, I will use his theory as a model to specifically position these different audiences in relation to the Chinese propaganda film, based on the cultural knowledge an audience possesses about China.

In the case of the Chinese notion of world order, I will connect the goals of the ongoing project of the BRI with the current revival of the ancient Chinese concept 天下 (*tianxia*; 'all-under-heaven') in academia, which is deployed as the counterweight of the current Western conception of world order and regarded in Chinese academia as more suited to capture the current status of the world. After introducing this concept and its criticism in academia, I will analyze how different film audiences are positioned inside the hierarchical structures of 天下 through their respective identification with representative characters of their own nationality. Lastly, I will reflect again upon the ways Chinese films with propagandistic elements behave as travelling objects, with the insights of the two discussions about the status of foreign propaganda and the Chinese notion of world order in mind, to come to a better conception of the current form of the propaganda film, that crosses borders, shapes worlds and entertains crowds.

Propaganda for dummies; fusing foreign and domestic propaganda works

Nye names as one of the key problems of China's failing soft power the government's unwillingness to decrease regulation over the country's civil society, which is seen by Nye as the main producer of a country's soft power and credibility (*China and Soft Power* 154-155). This perceived lack of autonomy in the country's creative industries to generate soft power is echoed by many other Western scholars and summarized by Edney when he states that the Chinese propaganda system stifles domestic creativity and popular participation through restrictions on civil society and the public sphere (*Globalization* 28). However, film culture is booming in China, simultaneously stimulating the domestic film industry and attracting foreign investors to

the world's second-largest film market. On the one hand, recent Chinese blockbusters such as *Operation Red Sea* (2018) and *My People My Country* (2019) are amongst the highest-grossing Chinese films of all time despite their adherence to the category of the new main melody film. On the other hand, Hollywood engages in profitable, internationally distributed co-productions in projects such as *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *The Great Wall* (2016). Nonetheless, many of these films lack a global appeal, which, according to Ying Zhu, derives from "the clash of cultural values and divergent political systems and economic structures" (114). According to her, this is a problem several successful patriotic films, basing themselves in Hollywood's methods, will not solve (*idem*).

Chinese film culture is thriving domestically and slowly spreading across its borders, which cannot be explained by Western critics of China's form of soft power and its perceived failure to attract foreign audiences to Chinese culture and ideology. But, similar to the earlier mentioned scholars discussing iconoclasm in the study of Chinese objects, Edney recognizes in the Western study of Chinese soft power the tendency to limit oneself to the labelling of propaganda or instances of 'bad' soft power instead of engaging with these media forms in all their different facets. Edney rather dedicates himself to the task of constructing

> … a theoretical understanding of propaganda practices that assists in analyzing how and why the Party-state uses them in the context of both domestic and international politics. The use of the term "propaganda" here should not be seen as pejorative but rather as a reflection of the ubiquity of the term in the Chinese political context. (8)

Edney's theory contributes to the field of Chinese soft power and propaganda studies an awareness of the interplay between and interwoven-ness of domestic and foreign propaganda practices, which is often underestimated in the study of China's soft power (4-5). In that sense,

soft power is incorporated in the Chinese propaganda system to carry out the goals of the Party to deploy soft power on two levels: a local level for political and social cohesion and a global level for cultural attraction (6).

Below, I will summarize some main arguments from Edney in relation to the Chinese propaganda system as the primary watchman of information flows between the national and international spheres. His model of understanding the interaction between domestic and foreign propaganda practices illustrates the relation between propaganda works, audiences and access to these texts through the propaganda system. Next, I will use Edney's model to position *The Wandering Earth* better in relation to domestic and foreign audiences inside a propaganda system, that has to cater to multiple audiences with the same products.

Following the extravagant expansion of transnational flows of information and ideas in the last few decades, the CCP has determined as one of the primary goals of its propaganda system the regulation of these in- and outward flows; both to regulate the domestic control over key meanings of political concepts, which are often challenged by values systems from Western societies, and to influence the global image of China (34). Managing this exchange of ideas requires "a sophisticated *combination* of internal and external propaganda policies" (4, emphasis added), in which domestic policies are being implemented with attention to the effects of them on foreign politics, and vice versa, in an "ongoing cycle of interaction" (11).

These two domains can reinforce one another in some cases, but are often in friction, for instance in the realm of semantic disagreement about political concepts and values. As Edney argues:

> The Party-state's task of weaving together a narrative that can generate broad and stable consensus over key meanings is even more challenging in the international context than it is within China. This is partly because of the scale and complexity of the global production of meaning, which limits the international impact of the articulations of any individual actor—even powerful states. It is also due, however, to the international dominance of meanings primarily associated with the political values of Western states and societies. (34)

In this instance, a radically different view on the nature of the transcultural exchange of ideas is expressed. While Western iconoclasts feel the urge to unveil Chinese ideologies in media in an attempt to diminish their possible impact on non-Chinese audiences abroad, the Chinese government perceives, according to Edney, imported ideas and values as firmly rooted in hegemonic Western culture and as possible threats to social stability in the PRC. This has thorough implications on the goals of China's propaganda practices, that would rather be aimed at guarding and controlling key values in Chinese society than persuading international audiences of the worth of these values.

Following these insights, Edney formulates the primary task of the propaganda system as "to defend the domestic political project from internal and external ideological threats rather than to aggressively promote Chinese political concepts to foreign audiences" (102). This implies that China's soft power goals should, in first instance, be conceptualized internally, which is closely linked to cultural policies at a domestic level (109). Culture, in the eyes of the CCP, forms an essential part of the nation-building project for creating national cohesion and developing modern-day socialist culture (111). Furthermore, the image of a unified and harmonious Chinese society, disseminated worldwide through the propaganda system, would give a positive impulse

to China's international image and so to China's self-perception in a sequential process (115). In that sense, domestic cohesion functions as a prerequisite for international influence (120) and foreign propaganda work as an extension of domestic policies. Edney even recognizes the adherence of foreign propaganda practices to the country's main melody, thus incorporating the rest of the world in China's internal propaganda practices instead of equally fusing domestic and foreign propaganda works (125). In other words, Chinese propaganda practices have no ambition to endorse a form of Chinese hegemony but rather aspire to confirm and spread a Sinocentric world vision for primarily domestic audiences.

This hierarchy between the two spheres, with domestic goals as primary and foreign goals as secondary, has large implications on the mode of address in propaganda works, which have to be adjusted accordingly to multiple target audiences. In the case of cinema, Chinese film does not cater to both the domestic and foreign audiences simultaneously and equally but prioritizes the Chinese viewership and deems foreign success as the result of domestic achievement. This secondary position of foreign audiences for Chinese propaganda is defined by Edney as: "Foreign propaganda practices are therefore linked to their domestic counterparts as the second step in a two-step process of domestic consolidation and international expansion" (184). This prioritization of Chinese audiences over foreign audiences (which stands in sharp contrast with the global distribution strategies of Hollywood productions) can then have considerable consequences for the conception of exported Chinese films as successful or failed forms of soft power. The idea of Chinese propaganda works as primarily forms of domestic soft power in defense of Chinese value systems stands in contrast with the framing of these films as actively attacking foreign value systems by Western iconoclasts. Following Edney's theory, this hierarchy of audiences and what kind of effect this hierarchy has on the film's viewers should be

acknowledged in order to know how this hierarchy aids the CCP's goals of national cohesion and cultural attraction.

When Edney's understanding of the interplay between domestic and foreign propaganda practices is applied to cinema, the prevailing of the Chinese film on own territories becomes more important than the appraisal of the film by foreign audiences and critics. If the film accomplishes to obtain domestic success, both in the financial sense and in the political sense of forming an affective community around Chinese principles, the film's national success already influences the viewing experience and appreciation of foreign audiences by framing the film in a more credible way through a story of success. Soft power, thus, can find different manifestations from the same source, dependent on which audience is addressed. This usage of soft power, according to Edney, proliferates in China and differs from Nye's original meaning in the following way:

> Nye warned of governments losing credibility in their attempts to control the media or other cultural sources of soft power, but this liberal view is less influential in China, where the party-state expects to be able to exercise control over the media and cultural spheres via the propaganda system… (*Soft Power* 913)

Despite the control the government exercises over this creative industry, soft power can still be effective domestically and consequently internationally, although to a lesser extent through the clash of political, economic and cultural systems. Thus, the Chinese government utilizes soft power in a radically different way than how Nye originally defines the concept and so proposes its own model of soft power. When the intercultural differences between film audiences and the following differences between film experiences and interpretations are acknowledged, the criteria of soft power do not have to be universally set in accordance with liberal values of

Western societies if different audiences are by other means triggered affectively to bind themselves to certain causes or communities.

In the case of *The Wandering Earth*, the priority of domestic audiences seems to stand in contrast with the international allure of the film through the presence of many international characters from China's neighboring countries and through the narration of a story of 'the world.' When Duoduo makes a desperate call in the film to all nations in the world to unite and fight together, who is implied as an audience? According to Edney's conception of propaganda practices, the Chinese audience is in first instance implied, while all Chinese characters in the film are already participating in the last attempt to save the world and are so part of the 'family of the world.' But, if we take Callahan's advice into account, the primary address to Chinese audiences makes a lot more sense when we conceptualize it inside the formation of a transnational affective community. The Chinese audience is addressed first to mark its active call for the saving of the world and for the creation of a new world community, defining the role of the Chinese as central and leading inside this community. When Duoduo's call ends and the members of all nations start rushing towards Sulawesi, their participation in the world community and in the world order, prescribed by the Chinese, functions as an addressing of foreign audiences, who show themselves eager in the film to answer China's call.

Audiences are addressed through different characters with different positions in the film, thus indicating the prescribed formation of a transnational affective community and the world order they propagate. Chinese characters, with significantly more screen time, character development and attached symbolism, indicate the prominent place of the Chinese audience as the *primary audience* in the case of *The Wandering Earth*, while foreign audiences with lesser cultural knowledge and fewer characters to identify with can still enjoy the film as the *secondary*

audience. Divided along cultural, ethnic and national lines, audiences are addressed according to their assigned status and are positioned in such a way that the film intends them to have different viewing experiences and resulting different forms of attachment to the represented and prescribed ideological formations and affective communities.

The amount of cultural knowledge viewers have when watching a propaganda film such as *The Wandering Earth* has a lot of influence on the assigned position of them as primary or secondary audience. To describe the changes in the attached value to a film between different audiences, the term 'cultural discount' is often used to indicate the loss of appreciation with culturally illiterate audiences when encountering a film from a culturally distant place (Fu & Lee 4). But, as Chinese media scholar Aynne Kokas points out, genre films "provide reliable tropes through which audiences can visually appreciate Chinese content without a high level of cultural awareness" (*Producing* 222). In other words, the usage of genre conventions can help to narrate transnational narratives for a broad audience without the film losing aesthetic value for its viewership. *The Wandering Earth*, for example, makes proliferate use of such recognizable symbols, genre conventions and generic narratives, and even multi-codes them to reach a broad viewership.

In research using the concept of 'cultural discount,' translation scholar Nathalie Ramière identifies a tendency to overlook the process of *recontextualization* when an audience encounters a foreign film. New referential networks and connotations are proposed through the translation strategy of distributors and translators, thus prolonging the journey a film can have through global distribution (113). The interpretation of a film then largely depends in a foreign place on the framing of it by another institution than the film's producer, which, in the case of *The Wandering Earth*, is Netflix. Chinese film scholar Hiu Man Chan recognizes the deal with this

distribution partner as a strategic move by both the producer and the distributor: “In order to encourage Chinese partners to promote foreign contents in their market, it is also in the national Film Bureau’s interest to know a company’s ability to promote Chinese films internationally in return” (‘A review of Netflix’s acquisition of Chinese-language films’). Through framing Chinese blockbusters, such as *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth*, as Netflix-branded and trustworthy products on its platform, Netflix tries to establish good relations with the PRC to better its chances to enter the Chinese film market in the near future (*Chilling Netflix* 410).

Through the framing by Netflix, *The Wandering Earth* loses part of its politicized framing as a product of China’s propaganda system and reaches secondary audiences by presenting itself as part of a sci-fi film tradition, which has been picked up correspondingly by Western critics. Alongside the reading of the film in this vein, the propagandistic elements for Chinese audiences as the primary audience can still be very present without the awareness of them by the secondary audience. In this way, a film like *The Wandering Earth* resembles the viewing of a family film: the ignorant children can still enjoy a film very much, while some jokes and references are only picked up by the more knowledgeable adults watching. Instead of cheesy sex jokes or references to pop culture, *The Wandering Earth* contains a political discourse that is not likely to be picked up consciously by a secondary, foreign audience, who also do not expect such propagandistic content on a ‘credible’ platform such as Netflix.

In retrospect, the acknowledgement of the strategic interplay between domestic and foreign propaganda practices and the intercultural diversification of effective practices of soft power can aid a lot to the project of complicating the binarism between Chinese film and Western viewer. Next to the positioning of the Western viewer as the secondary audience for Chinese propaganda films, the understanding of international distribution of Chinese film as part

of the propaganda system helps to clarify the effects of both domestic and international success. The fact that *The Wandering Earth* was extremely popular and profitable in the PRC itself already promotes the status of the film and the Chinese film industry abroad. Furthermore, the inclusion of it in Netflix's film selection, again, grants the film more status as a qualitative film, which retroactively reaffirms the status of the Chinese film industry and China as a nation. The viewing of the film by a Western viewer is, thus, not a prime goal of these films and should be regarded as part of a longer journey of the film through different forms of distribution for viewers in different cultural contexts.

The non-Chinese viewer, in other words, is already positioned inside this trajectory of the film in a very specific way, that also prescribes a specific position in the proposed affective community when watching the film. Through the threat of an ecological apocalypse, a global affective community, as defined by Chinese values and needs, is proposed. But, this is narrated more implicitly to the secondary audience than to the primary audience. Although the political concepts and ideological formations that are presented in the film can be interpreted inside the conceptual framework of every individual viewer, this construction of an affective world community is still determined by Chinese structures.

In *The Wandering Earth*, the Chinese structure, that defines the form of the world after its saving, is the Confucian concept of world order: 天下. This form of world order, corresponding with very specific hierarchical relations between natives and foreigners in Confucian thought, is by some scholars also recognized in the ongoing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), thus linking international political motivations with the content of propaganda works such as *The Wandering Earth*. Below, I will expand upon the objectives of the BRI, the definition of 天下 and the way this world order is represented in *The Wandering Earth*.

Perceiving world order; the Chinese concept of 天下

The Belt and Road Initiative, also referred to as the New Silk Route, was called into being in 2013 under the chairmanship of Xi Jinping, preluding an era of tighter economic relations along its 'belt' of overland routes and its maritime 'road' between the PRC, its neighboring Asian countries and even far-away nations in Europe, Africa and South-America. Next to providing economic opportunities for partner countries in this massive project, the PRC furthermore aims to advance the development of a regional Asian identity with its culturally affiliated neighboring nations (Hao et al. 252). Such a shared cultural identity would decrease the barriers between these nations that hinders the creation of an expanded common market and of shared domestic markets (253). This ambition of mutual economic prospering and peaceful co-existence for the participants in the BRI emphasizes the cultural imperative for the project of offering shared identities for partner nations to identify with and narratives for the imagining of a bright future, following the participation in the Initiative. In that sense, the policies for the Chinese film industry for its extension towards partner nations in the BRI serve both the purposes of boosting market expansion and of fostering cultural cohesion.

Since 2011, the Chinese government has taken the effort to promote Chinese film in other nations through numerous translation and dubbing projects (Jin 199), but also by targeting these foreign audiences in the content of the films. Instead of targeting these audiences with separate propaganda works, Chinese films for domestic and foreign audiences alike are distributed, serving the dual role as both domestic and foreign form of soft power. The image of China as the instigator of economic wealth and political stability with the ambition of 'universal harmony'

serves then as an alternative soft power model to the originally Western model, but in this case directed at non-Western regions (Edney et al. 6).

Media scholars Weiying Peng and Michael Keane recognize in Xi's revival of the Silk Road the structures of the ancient Confucian model of world order, called 天下 or 'all-under-heaven' (911). This suzerain system of governance, meaning that a dominant state controlled the foreign policies of vassal states while allowing inner sovereign autonomy, served as the blueprint of political rule in imperial China. Only after China's defeat during the Opium War in the 19th century was this political system substituted by Western colonial powers by the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states, that from then onwards included China into the European imperialist world (37). But, alongside the reemergence of China as a world power in the last few years, the ancient concept has also been resurfacing as part of China's soft power strategy (Zhao S. 39). The term has gained enormous traction in Chinese academia and politics in modelling China's glorious past, current rise and envisioned future, and has started to live its own life as a pattern to conceive the world with China at its center. I will further discuss the 天下 system through the theory of philosopher Zhao Tingyang, who is the figurehead in translating the Confucian concept to the 21st century, which will be followed by the criticism several opposing academics have expressed on Zhao's contemporary application of the ancient concept of Chinese world order and, lastly, by the reading of 天下 inside *The Wandering Earth*.

Zhao traces the origins of the term 天下 to the birth of the Zhou-dynasty around the end of the 10th century BC when the leaders of the Zhou had to forge a model for political governance that could supervise multiple, culturally different regions (*Political World Philosophy* 7-8). Manifesting itself as a tributary system with a suzerain center and surrounding

sub-states, the 天下 system came into being as a model of world governance that promoted the peaceful coexistence of diverse nations without the urge of cultural homogenization. The emperor, or 'The Son of Heaven' (天子; *tianzi*), was positioned at the center of the 天下 system as a divine ruler, being surrounded by concentric, geographical circles that defined the civilizational status of a region based on its proximity to the center of the emperor.

According to Zhao, 天下 as a concept refers to three aspects of such a mode of co-existence of people and environment: 1) "the earth, or the whole world under heaven"; 2) "'the hearts of all peoples' (民心), or 'the general will of the people'"; and 3) "the ethical and/or political meaning, is a world institution, or a universal system of the world, a utopia of the world-as-one-family" (*Rethinking* 30). In all instances, the concept of 天下 includes the entire world, both as a geographical place and as a social collectivity as it is conceived through the structure of the Confucian family (家). Zhao stresses: "All-under-heaven is nothing but the greatest family, a world-family; that said, all political levels, defined as 'All-under-heaven, states and families' should be essentially homogenous or homological so as to create a harmonious system" (33). Following this world-encompassing inclusion, Zhao argues that nothing or nobody can be excluded from 天下, and that "nothing is considered 'foreign' or 'pagan'" (*Political World Philosophy* 10). Still, Zhao's critics disagree with him on this topic.

Zhao's suggestive and utopian approach to 天下 has already assured him international critique from many sides, pointing out historical fallacies and incommensurability with the present condition of world politics (Callahan 2008; Chang & Chun 2017). The support from Chinese academics and politicians for Zhao's modern application of a Chinese form of world

order has, according to China scholar Wang Ban, resulted in the situation that "[t]he concept has played out between an impulse toward universal principles and an ideological cover for power politics" (5). Callahan argues that the controversy around Zhao's work is actually beneficial to the visibility and popularity of his project and that it is more productive for his critics to focus on the political ethics of Zhao's perspective on 天下 (*Chinese Visions* 753).

Callahan scrutinizes Zhao's 'exclusion of exclusion' and names it as the concealment of the inclusion of difference in hierarchical ways. He says: "Thus although Zhao's all-inclusive Tianxia system may not have an outside, its institutionally-backed 'self' utilizes both absolute exclusion and hierarchical inclusion to marginalize three social groups: the West, the people, and other nations along China's frontier" (754). In this sense, Zhao's 天下 system differentiates between different groups inside its boundaries alongside moral and geographical lines and sets up a hierarchy that is defined by the Chinese elite (754-55). Elsewhere, Callahan recognizes such dichotomies in Chinese thought also on a broader level:

> Inside/outside is even more central to Chinese political discourse as *nei/wai*. According to Thomas A. Metzger, dynamic dyads such as *nei/wai*-inside/outside are key to social life in China, organizing relations between individuals, families, and clans, all the way up to relations between different peoples and different states (*Sensible Politics* 49).

This division between in- and outside and its connotations of civilization versus barbarism remains present in contemporary Chinese politics and so upholds a hierarchy between cultures and social groups. The recognition of this hierarchy in Zhao's 天下 system is crucial to understand how his theories are being implemented in Chinese top-level policies and how it "re-centers Chinese understandings of world order as a patriotic activity in domestic politics"

(*Chinese Visions* 759). In this sense, Callahan sees as the political effect of Zhao's 天下 system the reinforcement of patriotism through Chinese defining of political concepts for the domestic audience as the primary target audience. Nevertheless, a proper propaganda system holds the potential to also start disseminating such visions of world order across Chinese borders to include other willing states into a contemporary 天下 system.

As Peng and Keane have already noticed, the concept of 天下 can be smoothly applied to the objectives and envisioned future of the BRI as an assemblage of nations in prosperous and collaborative co-existence, which respects diversity and resists homogenization. In academic circles, Western critics have argued otherwise and have attempted to resist the contemporary formulation of 天下. Nevertheless, I notice that the model of 天下 has almost unnoticeably started reappearing in contemporary media. Some verbal references and its presence as an explicit theme in Zhang Yimou's *Hero* notwithstanding, several earlier discussed films, such as *Operation Mekong*, *Wolf Warrior 2*, and *The Wandering Earth*, tread in their narratives (for the first time in the history of Chinese film) to non-Chinese territories and prescribe certain proper relations with foreign populations and so propose a specific understanding of the world, which adheres to the 天下 system. By spreading these propositions through propaganda films that also target foreign audiences as secondary audiences, certain ideological formations are, firstly, introduced to these foreign audiences. But, secondly, these audiences are also invited to be incorporated in the affective community of the world-as-family, that the 天下 system propagates and that can be experienced by the films' viewership.

In *The Wandering Earth*, the implied audiences experience the system of 天下 in different ways. While the primary audience of the Chinese viewership sees how the preceding

world order of the UEG shows itself faulty and is replaced by a Chinese-led world institution by the end of the film, secondary audiences from other nations see how representatives of their countries heed China's call to gather under their leadership for the only possible continuation of life on Earth. The primary audience then undergoes an expansion of their affective community beyond China's borders, while secondary audiences encounter an invitation to be included into a new, transnational affective community, bound by the awareness of a shared planetary precarity. The Earth, through Chinese structures defined as both a world-as-family and as a place-to-call-home, is then presented through the lens of 天下 theory, with China as its benevolent leader and the rest of the world's peoples surrounding it and following the proposed path to the future. In this way, a film such as *The Wandering Earth*, propagates an affective community as understood through 天下 theory that aids the unifying project of the BRI, but only according to China's conditions and the social hierarchies embedded in 天下 theory.

Rebalancing the work of Sinocentric propaganda in the global context

As my discussions on the status of foreign propaganda and the dissemination of 天下 have shown, current operations of the Chinese propaganda system propose their own version of Sinocentric world order and reject Western imaginings of the status of the world. Chinese forms of soft power can be conceptualized as part of this propaganda system that does not adhere to Western definitions and forms of power as well. When taking the content of these propaganda works, its implied and hierarchized audiences, and its trajectories to these audiences into account, it becomes clear that the hierarchy of Western, superior observer and Eastern, inferior

observed is unproductive to fully understand the ideological and affective operations of the new Chinese propaganda system. It would be better to understand the two, sometimes opposing, sides of the spectrum of Euro- and Sinocentric ideological systems as coming into contact, which sometimes manifests itself in the convergence of the two strains of thought in the same signs and narratives.

Nonetheless, as the discussion of primary and secondary audiences has shown, this does not mean that the traditions are present on an equal and respectful level in these works. In the case of Chinese propaganda films, Hollywood conventions from a Western system have evolved into a global film language and are now deployed for the purposes of the Chinese government to spread their ideological messages through propagandistic entertainment. These disseminated signs and narratives serve political purposes, for example the advancement of the BRI, and spread Sinocentric visions of possible futures as imagined through Chinese traditions and constellations of world order. Both domestic and foreign film audiences are assigned very specific hierarchical positions in such films, following a combination of the cultural knowledge an audience possesses about China and the prescribed hierarchical positions of the characters audiences are invited to identify with. The naturalization of this imposed hierarchy through the watching of an entertainment film with implicit propagandistic elements proves the ingenuity of the Chinese propaganda system to adapt to new media environments and viewer expectations.

Chinese propaganda films in the international period have, thanks to artistic and technological development, evolved a lot, even to the extent that it becomes harder and harder to recognize them as being propaganda. Summing up the characteristics of this sort of films from the last two chapters, they have changed considerably in terms of content, form and framing. In the instance of content, I have illustrated in Chapter 2 the multi-coded nature of signs and

narratives in these films in order to address multiple audiences. However, these audiences are positioned and invited to become incorporated in an affective community as it is conceptualized in the Chinese 天下 model. Although this might be more noticeable for domestic audiences who are literate in Chinese filmic and cultural traditions, the way the films are framed obstruct the recognition of them as being part of a propaganda film tradition. Their marketing and distribution adhere more to the strategies of entertainment films and avoid the categorization under the main melody category, associated with State discourse, for domestic audiences. For foreign audiences, for the most part unfamiliar with the concept of this film category and with Chinese propaganda traditions, the translation strategies of these films make it even harder to recognize in these films the form of the propaganda film.

Still, these films adhere to the basic definition of propaganda of Auerbach and Castronovo as means of "organizing and shaping thought and perception" (6-7). What has mainly changed and might define the current stage of the Chinese propaganda film is the allowance of multiple discourses in these films, providing entrances for multiple audiences to experience and enjoy these films while still adhering to the CCP's main melody. Guiding both domestic and foreign audiences in 'the proper way,' these films can be of any genre or category, as long as they convey their ideological messages through ambiguous signs and narratives without disturbing their audiences with an overtly present political discourse. Rather than presenting a singular, ideological discourse, propaganda films now aim to incorporate their viewers in a diverse and nonhegemonic affective community and to parentally guide these community members in respect of their diverse backgrounds and in accordance to a global main melody.

CONCLUSION

Today, the label of propaganda itself seems questionable when the requirements for a work to be called as such can be met by many sorts of media, including advertisements, entertainment videos, memes, and so forth. Nonetheless, this wide applicability of the label does not neglect the utility of the concept when it offers modes of thought that can explicate the willful strategies and distribution channels of political actors. Following my analysis of the journey of the Chinese propaganda film from 1949 to the Dutch Netflix, I have found that these strategies and channels have become a part of complex networks through which propaganda works function as travelling objects, being produced, distributed and consumed by the many different actors present in these networks, ranging from national governments, commercial enterprises and billions of potential viewers. This new way of conceptualizing propaganda systems as interwoven with global media networks denies the previous centrality of nation-states and their perceived monopoly on propaganda. Instead, these networks with embedded propaganda systems illustrate the current reality of an intertwined and politically diverse international culture, where the framing of certain domains of these networks as propaganda in order to legitimate exceptionalism for one's own, often related, domain, is a hypocritical and unreliable business.

While navigating through the different spaces and audiences that meet in these networks, the propagation of one's own world views becomes an exchange of many cultural elements, perspectives and forms of capital between actors, that in the past might have been at odds but now find fruitful collaborations. Political, financial and artistic interests from many sides now meet each other and blend into new cultural forms, that have the potential to speak to different cultural

audiences through different signs and narratives and to gather these different subjects in before unimaginable affective communities beyond borders, cultures and languages.

The Chinese propaganda film has gone a long way, both in terms of temporal and geographical distance. During this long journey, it has been in constant evolution under the threat of political discord and under the harsh conditions of the film market. In Chapter 1, I have illustrated the ingenuity of propaganda filmmakers to find affective resonances with their audiences in China's past, despite the black pages of China's history they had to cover or conveniently skip. But, the most inventive period is definitely the one we are experiencing right now, when the strengths of commercial, political and artistic films are combined to develop means of visual storytelling that are simultaneously appealing, entertaining and to the benefit of the regime that they are made under. Next to these already overwhelming challenges, the hard task of pleasing different cultural audiences is also added. My analysis of *The Wandering Earth* in Chapter 2 has shown the only partial success of achieving these goals, but, as one of the first Chinese examples of such multi-coded blockbusters, it indicates the huge potential for the sophistication of these films to compete in the global film market and to spread Sincocentric conceptions of the world. Through combining elements from national cultures and internationalized film languages, stories with worldwide appeal can be told while constructing transnational affective communities through the shared affective experience of watching the films.

In my view, this regulation of the formation of (trans)national affective communities around the principles of a regime is the primary aim of contemporary propaganda. This is achieved, in the case of commercial films with main melody elements such as *The Wandering Earth*, through the defining characteristics of, firstly, multi-coding propaganda works in order to form one affective community out of different audiences, and, secondly, the hierarchization of these

audiences to safeguard the preeminence of central Chinese values. The analysis of propaganda's practices of constructing and maintaining such communities can gain a clarifying vocabulary, as I have attempted to show, through engagement with affect theory.

Following the theory of Grossberg, various kinds of affective resonances become plausible in a film, such as *The Wandering Earth*, which are dependent on the cultural background, vocabulary and affective conditions of the viewing subject. This happens because the presented signs and narratives can be placed in different cultural traditions, meaning that the cultural tradition(s) the viewing subject is most familiar with will most likely frame and form the affective experience and interpretation of the viewing subject. Still, the ideological narratives and constellations in the film channel these affective experiences in ways that bind all kinds of audiences in the same affective community, following the watching and experience of the film. While every viewing subject can have an individual and uniquely emotional viewing experience, the constructed community nonetheless has a design that prescribes certain implicit hierarchies and structures, conforming to Chinese principles. This kind of affective formation, reminiscent of 天下 theory as discussed in Chapter 3, allows for a heterogenous collectivity inside the affective community that only conforms on the aspect of a specific way of thinking and feeling regarding the (implicit) role of China in the world. As elaborated upon in Chapter 3, different participants of this affective community are invited in different ways to create affective ties with China, dependent on their assigned position in the hierarchies of the affective community.

This proposed model of conceptualizing propaganda systems through their affective operations has proven itself fruitful in the case of the Chinese propaganda film but cannot be directly applied to different propaganda works. Yet, I believe that the analysis of the political dimensions of propagandistic media forms with similar distribution models and forms of

infrastructure can still gain productive insights from my proposed approach with slight alterations, which I will exemplify through the brief discussion of three contemporary examples of propaganda as suggestions for future research.

The conditions of the corona lockdown in many parts of the world has had an enormous impact on our general habits of media consumption. Digital devices, and especially smartphone technologies, have become unquestionably dominant, while theatrical releases of films have been delayed awaiting the end of the lockdown. The highly anticipated live-action remake of *Mulan* (2020) is one of these. In the new film, ethnically Chinese A-rate actors from all corners of the Chinese territories and diaspora are assembled with diverse backgrounds, while they speak accented English in the internationally orientated film. This choice already indicates the complex strategies of Disney to not make the same mistake as with the previous *Mulan* (1998), which flopped in China due to its perceived Orientalism and historical inaccuracy. Currently, the aim seems to be to reach the diverse audiences of Chinese territories, foreign lands and the Chinese diaspora through the familiar faces of actors, Hollywood spectacle and a return to the original themes of the ancient Chinese original *Ballad of Mulan*, swapping 1998 feminism with 2020 filial piety. This alteration of the displayed ideology while keeping the same familiar and attractive narrative conforms to Ying Zhu's conception of Hollywood's conforming to Chinese principles at the sight of huge market potential: why would China have to make its own propaganda films, if Hollywood can turn a profit from it?

Next to the multi-coding of Hollywood films with eyes on the enormous Chinese film market, propaganda can also be discerned on social media feeds. An explicit example that has gone viral is a satirical commentary, called 'Once Upon A Virus,' made by Chinese state-owned Xinhua

News Agency on the 30th of April 2020[2]. The LEGO-video, accompanied by slapstick music, shows an exaggerated bickering between representative figures of the US as the Statue of Liberty and China as a terracotta warrior, who discuss the reactions of their countries to COVID-19. Instead of relying on factual data and rational argumentation, the video directly addresses American perceived shortcomings, false accusations towards China and hypocrisy as it is perceived by the Chinese. The US is humorously ridiculed as infantile and inconsistent, while China is represented as acting rationally and responsible. An affective resonance is generated between the feelings of indignation of Chinese netizens and the condemnatory style of the video, which makes the choice for English to narrate the story rather peculiar. But, if the Chinese audience is seen as the primary audience and other non-Chinese countries as secondary audience, then the choice of English can enable the mobilization of anti-American sentiment across the world through non-serious and entertaining means.

Lastly, there is a new global player at the top of the tech chain called Bytedance, owning the immensely popular social media platform Douyin, or, as the rest of the world knows it, TikTok. Although the social media app has the same structure and interface worldwide, other servers are used and different forms of content and functionality are available for the different audiences/users of the Chinese and the non-Chinese, following the regulations by the Great Firewall. Many concerns have been uttered about the enormous amount of data the community of 800 million daily TikTok's users are sending to Chinese servers ("Report warns of security concerns amid sudden rise of TikTok"), while Bytedance lets the users generate their own content without providing any themselves. In terms of classic propaganda, there would have been no harm except for censoring certain forms of political content on the platform. But, in the current sharing economy where

[2] http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/30/c_139020877.htm

consumers become co-producers of content, the regulation of content through personalized algorithms can already serve the purposes of certain political actors adequately in distributing content in favor of that actor more widely among specific target audiences than content that does not. Multi-coded narratives are not even needed anymore when the infrastructure for distribution is completely in the hands of the propagandist. Last but not least, this provided infrastructure for externally unregulated and possibly political content has not been governed solely by the interests of the mother company. Other political actors have also jumped the TikTok train to reach an audience, that is for a large part underaged and largely uninformed about world politics, including ISIS ("TikTok removes two dozen accounts used for ISIS propaganda") and anti-Chinese activism on behalf of Muslim Uyghurs ("TikTok apologises and reinstates banned US teen").

Contemporary propaganda in a broad sense is omnipresent in our current media environment, while the recognition of it as such still lingers in outdated Eurocentric and nation-centric models. If the recognition, analysis and moral understanding of propaganda would be updated to the political climate and technological means of the 21st century, I believe that there is a lot to be gained in the understanding of everyday consumption of media, currently conceived as mainly harmless pastime. A political awareness of where media are produced, how information is distributed and to whose advantages these media are made could lead a more diversified and heterogenous media landscape, that does not have to conform to nation-encompassing, ideological structures, including its political biases. Rather, it would focus on personal and moral preferences that can shape communities on the basis of age, interests, political orientation, activist intent et cetera. During times when cyber-propaganda has become an everyday reality and some national governments lack the means, motivation or skills to regulate digital environments while others take the lead in intensively surveilling the digital activities of their citizens/netizens, there are

scarcely objections left to embrace the concept of propaganda to form communities in digital realms that deny earlier social constructions of citizenship and nationhood and that allow for the discovery of new forms of sociality and belonging. This can happen and has happened both for morally right and wrong purposes, but, the perceived monopoly on propaganda by national governments only contains the world in older conceptions of it as an assemblage of nation-states and obstructs the development of the thinking of a world community with planetary worries and collectivist solutions.

CODA

After having elaborated extensively upon the subtitle ‘An Alternative Approach to Transnational Propaganda Practices in Chinese Film’ of this thesis, I have until now refrained myself from elaborating on the seemingly unrelated main title. With the insights from my research in mind, I will spend some words below on clarification.

‘Shipping China’ might connote for the general audience the packaging, shipping and dispersion of Chinese goods (or even Chinese porcelain in particular), stereotypically thought of as low-quality, ‘Made in China’ products with a short life span and little worth. These goods remain largely unaltered during their journeys from the moment they are packed by producers to the point when they are unpacked by consumers. This singular way of interpreting *Shipping China*, however, is challenged by another meaning the word ‘shipping’ has acquired recently in internet slang. For readers who are unfamiliar with this subcultural meaning, the Oxford Dictionary gives the following definitions of the word ‘shipping’:

1. ships in general or considered as a group

    - The canal is open to shipping.
    - international shipping lanes (= routes for ships)

2. the activity of carrying people or goods from one place to another by ship or by some other means

    - a shipping company
    - We offer free shipping on orders over $50.

- She arranged for the shipping of her furniture to England.

3. (informal) the act of thinking two people should be in a romantic relationship

- Shipping of the main characters is popular among fans of the show.

Having become popular among teenage fans of, for example, the Harry Potter-series and the Twilight-series, the latter meaning of the word 'shipping' is rather exclusive for virtual literate audiences. Nonetheless, it sheds a completely different light on the implications of the word 'shipping' as an act of movement. Instead of transporting unaltered goods along established trading routes, 'shipping' in the 'new' sense becomes an act of hybridization, of unauthorized reconfiguration of cultural goods, and of possible unexpected offspring.

This latter definition of 'shipping' corresponds, in my view, better with the current practices of Chinese films as travelling objects, which can find new and unintended pairings of cultural products, constellations and traditions along its long journey across the world. Although the majority of their audiences might still conceptualize these films as semantically stable products, certain audiences with exclusive access to cultural vocabularies have the ability to discern the intersections and cross-fertilizations between different cultures, who have found new 'relation-ships.' These contact zones might not have been intended by both sides and are possibly only read as such by the fandom of the cultural products, but these previously unknown interpretations enable a considerable extension of the lifespan of these products. They become part of a public domain, being owned, cherished and constantly revived by their fans who all find different affective connections with them.

Shipping, then, becomes far more than only a synonym for transporting. It becomes an indication for the enormous potential cultural products can have when they find fruitful

hybridizations with different cultural traditions and when these successful reconfigurations become central in particular affective communities, unrestricted by nationality or language and assembled through these exact cultural products. I leave it up to the reader how favorable or harmful the operations of these cultural products might be, dependent upon the way these products are framed as shipped in the one sense or the other.

List of illustrations

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