

## ***Wolf Warrior II* (战狼2) and the Manipulation of Chinese Nationalism**



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### **Introduction**

Due to Xi Jinping's increased censorship and propagandization of media outlets throughout the People's Republic of China, many films produced and aimed for a primarily Chinese audience have to be firmly aware and diligent of certain nationalistic requirements they must pursue to be approved by the Chinese Propaganda Department and released in China. *Wolf Warrior II*, released in 2017 with box office sales accruing to US\$874 million, was no exception to these harsh protocols and used this as an opportunity to promote a film that was not only nationalistic, but one that also used China's many developmental projects and aspirations abroad as a platform to create the

film. The film, to become popular among its Chinese viewers, not only praised China's development efforts abroad – by taking a potent nationalistic interpretation of Xi's current Belt Road Initiative – but also drew a dichotomy between the Chinese and the American presence in Africa, illustrating the capacity of the Chinese state to perform where the Americans have habitually failed. It simultaneously alludes to the current geopolitical climate around the world with the seemingly apparent digression of the United States from superpower to becoming an isolated nation on the international stage with China preparing to potentially gain full power of the world order.

Following the 2015 blockbuster hit, *Wolf Warrior* – an action-packed film following one of China's masterful, chiseled, and hyper-masculine special forces soldier, Leng Feng, who is the target of foreign mercenaries comprised mainly of former American Marines – *Wolf Warrior II* depicts Feng traveling to a fictitious African country, becoming embroiled in a deadly civil war between government forces and militants who are once more backed by white mercenaries. Though a thinly defined Feng achieves the extraordinary when he heroically rescues innocent African and Chinese civilians with the help of the Chinese Navy, and commandingly trounces his mercenary enemy's and batters the American boss mockingly named "Big Daddy." The film attempts to imitate all the good qualities of a cliché action film in

which the protagonist achieves the impossible, extending the image of heroism, triumphant spirit, and pride to his parent nation. The film is brimming with the celebration of China's impressive technological achievements, and military power, innovation, and skill, as well as national fortitude.

The viewer is immediately subjected to and relates to the harsh reality of what many Chinese citizens see and experience today: the destruction of their homes to develop and make room for the growing generations of Chinese people. But what contrasts the negative façade painted throughout the film is the ultra-nationalistic belief exerted thereafter, displayed through Feng's discharge from the Special Operations Brigade in the People's Liberation Army. This nationalistic belief is only reiterated when he was told that "the reason a soldier is respected is not because of the uniform he wears but because of the sense of duty he carries. With or without the uniform his duty remains. He continues to be respected" (Wolf Warrior II 2017). Even early in the film, viewers are already subjected to the integral concept of "duty" to your home country, which is continuously influential even throughout China currently which most Chinese viewers not only can relate to, but which is also positively promoted by the Chinese propagandists themselves. Thus, the film emphasizes the significance of pride as a central component of Chinese nationalism.

Feng continually demonstrates his devotion to the Chinese populace and to his country through his lack of regard for his personal well-being when enlisting to save all 47 Chinese civilians stranded behind the border even though he had no personal connection to most of those who needed to be saved. In what is intended to be a dramatic scene, a Chinese-American volunteer attempts to contact the Americans for help, prompting Feng to ask, "Why are you calling the Americans? Where are they? It is a waste of time." Many Chinese are then able to connect with Feng's quest as they also have been taught to love and respect their home country and to put the collective needs of the state above their own individual desires, which many Chinese

propagandists also approve of. The film thus encapsulates both the Chinese propagandists' and the Chinese government's desired image of the "model citizen" because it acts as a symbol that the state can have success if that population is able and willing to put the needs of the collective before themselves and work to better the lives of each other (see Zeng 2018).

*Wolf Warrior II* not only is easily relatable for the Chinese populace and promotes a strong message of collectivism that the Chinese government and propagandists support, but it also exudes a desirable portrayal of China abroad, particularly in Africa. Currently, China has been expanding its development projects to not only bring increased "prosperity" to people around the world, but to also grow China's connectivity and other nation's dependence upon China to ensure a growing Chinese economy and thus national strength and power. China's key policy initiative abroad to promote these desires is its BRI program, which was unveiled by Chairman Xi in 2013 and showcased through his speech at the opening ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 (Xi 2017). China, in recent years, has spoken about the BRI and sung its praises, but many Chinese civilians have been unable to see the true changes that their country is making abroad. With *Wolf Warrior II* being set in an unnamed African state, Chinese civilians can finally grasp what their leader has been promoting abroad and achieved for the Chinese national and its people for years to come. Throughout the film, China's presence is felt everywhere, whether in a Chinese sponsored medical center with Chinese doctors and medical assistants, a Chinese factory, or a Chinese embassy that is fully operational even while a revolution is occurring in the capital city. China is seen as being integral to this country's livelihood and thus is greatly respected for its efforts abroad, which helps explain the Belt Road Initiative's (BRI)'s success to its Chinese viewers.

Continually in the film, viewers witness situations that demonstrate China's supposed strength within Africa, such as when there is concern over "killing the Chinese" as it is "big trouble" because

“China and Africa are friends,” but moreover, “China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council,” states Wu Jing, and possesses a great deal of power abroad in the international system (Wu 2017). Chinese civilians are both seen and treated with a higher regard in the film in comparison to non-Chinese civilians due to the Africans’ understanding that without China, their country cannot fully develop because of Xi’s infusion of capital and goods in the region. The film is meant to portray not only the strength of China’s developmental projects abroad and the immense impact that they have been making, but moreover, the pure strength and power that China has around the world because of the BRI and the connections that China has now been able to make. This is all due, of course, to the dauntless Chinese leader, Xi. Chinese citizens, by the end of the film, are told explicitly “don’t give up if you run into danger abroad. Please remember, a strong motherland will always have your back,” proving China’s belief that it is now one of the most powerful nations in the world and that, by being Chinese, you are safe and should be proud of what your country has done abroad in order to protect you (Wu 2017).

Due to China’s strong influence abroad, particularly in Africa, China has begun to pose significant challenges to American economic interests as it is beginning to “carve out a space for its security commensurate with its rising capabilities,” writes Elizabeth C. Economy (2018: 234) in *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*, which directly poses a threat to the United States. Thus, with rising concerns over Chinese and American relations, China has been looking for new ways to re-exert itself on the international stage and to portray itself as a force for good, with humanitarian intentions, placing its own interests alongside those of other nations. This attempt is explicitly seen throughout the film with China constantly pushing to be viewed as superior in comparison to the United States by becoming involved in development projects in Africa and attempting to get their viewers to also see China in this positive light (see Sun 2014). During the beginning of the revolution in *Wolf Warrior II*,

the Chinese navy, according to Wu, is instructed that “all foreign vessels are leaving the war zone” because it is unsafe (Wu 2017). This includes the mighty American fleet seen sailing away with the star-spangled banner flying high, acting not as a symbol for independence, freedom, and liberation, but instead, a symbol for a weak and cowardly nation.

Thus, the Chinese navy decides to move forward and enter the war zone in order to prove themselves as superior to the United States. Even Rachel, the American doctor working at a Chinese medical center, questions the Chinese military’s strength as she points to the fact that the American marines are the best in the world and that she will only be safe at the American consulate; only to be later let down when she finds out that the American consulate is closed. The use of the statement “Welcome to the American Consulate. Unfortunately, we are now closed” adds a satirical element to the film as the producer attempts to showcase how China, in comparison to the United States, is both a stronger and a more dependable nation, again showcasing the idea that China constantly feels the need to compare and prove itself to the United States. This feeling is mainly due to many constant assertions about the “West’s” dominance over China, exemplified when the antagonist of the film tells Feng that “people like you will always be inferior to people like me,” which Feng then says is just “history” (Wu 2017). China is now attempting to re-write the history books and put itself above the Americans who have for so long subjugated the country and made it feel inferior in comparison.

Although the film was produced in 2017 before the onset of the trade war with the United States, it encapsulates the current political atmosphere between the United States and China. Rosemary Foot (2018: 7) asserts in her article, “Chinese Power and the Idea of a Responsible State in a Changing World Order,” that recently the United States has been implementing protectionist policies that are causing it to step away from the international stage and its “position of global leader.” The United States is almost nowhere to be found in the film, with its ships leaving port, its

marines gone, the Consulate closed, and American aid not sent. Yet, China is there willing to fight and help, even though the lack of a United Nations sanction forces them to wait idly by. The film thus foreshadows the upcoming political aggression that Xi Jinping is going to be submitted to and lays out a detailed plan as to how China should overcome these obstacles, which is explicitly through programs such as the BRI that will help create new alliances with China and a greater dependence upon them in comparison to the United States.

*Wolf Warrior II*, although a blockbuster film with no purported political association, showcases Chinese superiority abroad while alluding to its many development successes that exert a strong nationalistic sentiment that is appealing to many Chinese citizens. It reinforces the message that China is not only a great power, but a responsible superpower with impressive influence around the world. We contend that the film represents the PRC's commitment to the reformulation of the Chinese state's national identity as well as its character relative to the asymmetric and sundry geopolitical threats that permeate the contemporary international realm and in relation to America's ostensible superpower image and status. We further argue that the film serves as strategic and passionate instrumentality of the "Chinese Dream" – the significance of which is explored in Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai's 2013 article, "The Meaning of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream" – intended foremost for viewers at home in China but also for viewers in distant global corridors. While attempting to remedy the past and realign the foreign perceptions of the Chinese state and power relations between China, the Chinese, and everyone else, the film endeavors, in our assessment, to authenticate China's status as a normative, technologically advanced, and militarily dexterous subject.

The title of the film, with its use of the wolf as symbolism, carries significance. The wolf portrays the image of the Chinese people, the Chinese state, its leadership. For some, the wolf represents loyalty, strong communication, intelligence, and

understanding, while for others, the wolf is a symbol of guardianship and fierce protectiveness, and belongs to a community of allegiance with a clearly defined social structure. It is almost universally regarded with respect and reverence despite the wolf having been a symbolic villain as in "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" in one of Aesop's Fables and the European fairy tale, "Little Red Riding Hood." Hunter, protector, and defender, the symbol parallels and can be interpreted as an entity that challenges America's predator symbol, the eagle. Traditional Chinese culture portrayed the wolf as a merciless – a quality that Feng embodies especially when confronting his enemies – and natural enemy of people, which is seen in Wuzhang Xie's children's fable, "The Zhongshan Wolf" ("中山狼传"), the general perception of the wolf changed several decades ago with the transformation of Chinese society through Deng Xiaoping's reforms. Thus, the film illustrates that China is not only one of the wolves that can coexist with the other wolves but one that can compete and out-performs its Western counterparts. Moreover, the wolf exemplifies a positive reckoning with a historical relationship and a reconstruction of hierarchical ordering with the once-dominant West.

## Conclusion

The film's ability to have its viewers relate to it, while still projecting many pro-Chinese sentiments has made the film not only successful in the eyes of the viewer, but moreover in the eyes of the Chinese propagandists and the Chinese regime. At numerous points in the film, the language is odd and difficult to interpret, and strikes more so as grimly sardonic, such as when an African says, "Don't kill Chinese. Their government is the only permanent U.N. Security Council-member presence here," the film remains steadfast in its overall attempt to construct China as the only state that will save the day. The film portrayed the many positive aspects of Chinese involvements abroad as well as the expectation that in the future, China will fully assert its

dominance over the United States due to its recent retrieval from global affairs, which will aid in China's ascent to becoming a global leader and dominant world power.

### Cross-References

- ▶ “War on Drugs”
- ▶ Conflict and Conflict Resolution
- ▶ Counter-Terrorism
- ▶ Drug Cartels
- ▶ Drug Smuggling
- ▶ Emerging Powers
- ▶ Geopolitics
- ▶ Global Governance
- ▶ Insurgents and Insurgency
- ▶ Military Security
- ▶ Nationalism and Ethno-Nationalism
- ▶ Protection of Civilians (POC)
- ▶ Security and Citizenship
- ▶ Security Concept
- ▶ Security State
- ▶ Soft Power
- ▶ Terrorism
- ▶ United Nations Security Council (UNSC)
- ▶ Women, Peace, and Security

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