

WOLF WARRIOR 2: IMAGINING THE CHINESE CENTURY

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Pundits have been whipping up expectations about “the Chinese century” in recent years with a never-ending flow of books with titles like *When China Rules the World* and *China Goes Global*.¹ In 2013, President Xi Jinping of China articulated his vision for a global trade network under the odd name “Belt and Road Initiative,” a shorthand for the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road that harks back to past glories.² Global trading interests require a global military presence, and thus in 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa.³

How has Chinese cinema responded to these developments? Chinese filmmakers have few local precedents on which to draw. For most of its history, China has been busy trying to stop other people from coming in. After all, that is why the Great Wall of China was built. For anyone (including this author) writing about Chinese cinematic encounters with foreigners in the movies a dozen years ago, the only examples from the People’s Republic were about foreigners who came to China.⁴ Even when the “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) policy was launched in the late 1970s, the anticipation was all about foreign things coming into China. Deng Xiaoping allegedly tried to mollify worries about what might come along with investment by saying, “When you open the window, a few flies are bound to get in.”

Now, the direction of travel has changed outward. For narratives moving in this direction, the only major Chinese precedent is the Monkey King legend of going to India to get the Buddhist sutras. Unsurprisingly, numerous Monkey King films have been made in recent years. But what about stories set in the present?

For contemporary Chinese movies, setting at least one scene overseas has now become de rigueur. Consider the phenomenally successfully but critically reviled *Xiao shidai* (*Tiny Times*, Guo Jingming, 2013) franchise as an example.⁵ Sometimes characterized as “*Sex and the City* without the sex,”

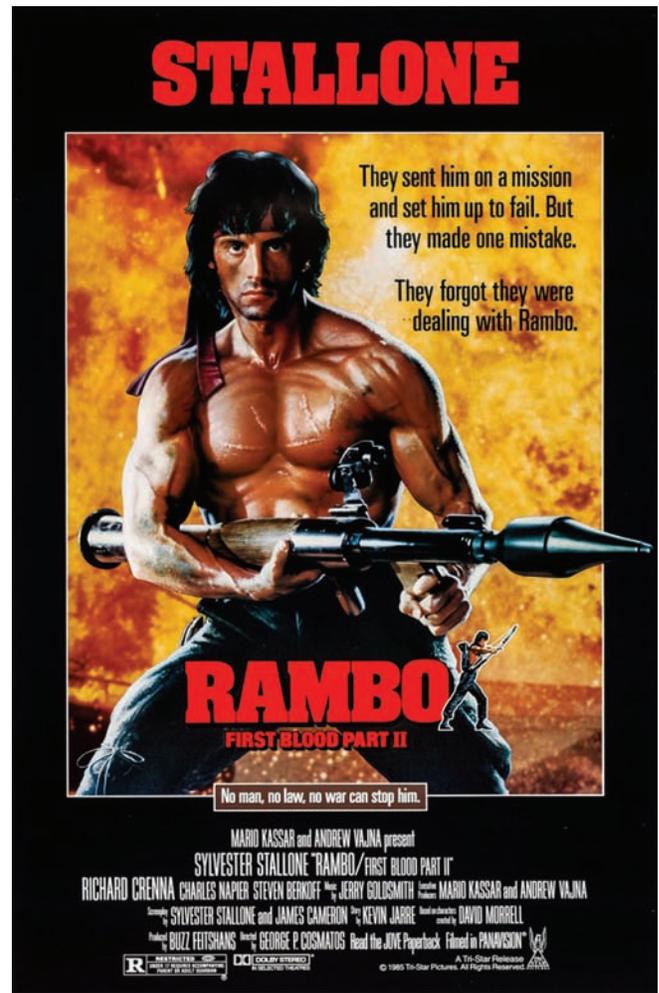
it confined its chic protagonists’ big spending to Shanghai in the first couple of installments. But the third, which arrived at the box office in 2014, opened with a shopping trip to Rome—not for any narrative reason, but just because the protagonists could. Having whole stories set overseas is rare in Chinese cinema, with the exception of travel romances. But even these films use exotic locations only as backdrops, avoiding narratives about actual Chinese encounters with foreigners and, somewhat implausibly, confining the romance to Chinese men and Chinese women. Why travel all the way from Beijing to Paris if you are just going to get together with a guy from Shanghai?

Films that represent the country’s global military presence have been few and far between and not particularly successful at the box office. But all that changed last year with *Zhanlang 2* (*Wolf Warrior 2*, 2017), a phenomenally successful *Rambo*-style action adventure. It is set in a failing state that, although anonymous, nevertheless appears—by no coincidence, I suspect—to be located somewhere around the Horn of Africa. Given the setting and China’s own anxieties about its Central Asian province of Xinjiang, it is not surprising to discover that the main villains are Islamic extremist insurgents. Less predictably, the insurgents are also employing American and European mercenaries.

Commentators have been struck by *Wolf Warrior 2*’s borrowings from Hollywood. Given the lack of a local tradition of military adventure or even stories about military adventures, it makes sense for Chinese filmmakers to turn to Hollywood for ideas in this genre. Indeed, as I will explain, a lot of the criticism of the film has focused on how it adopts what detractors feel is the worst of Western culture. Understandable though that objection may be, the film has clearly struck some chords with local audiences.

Wolf Warrior 2 stars and is directed by Wu Jing. That is the first of many ways in which it resembles Sylvester Stallone’s *Rambo*. *Rambo* is a highly skilled but “troubled” former U.S. Special Forces soldier. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, Wu Jing’s character, Leng Feng (“Cold Front”), is also a “troubled” former special-ops soldier. This is a sequel: the original *Wolf Warrior* (Wu Jing, 2015) traced Leng Feng’s inability to follow orders

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Posters for *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Rambo 2* showcase their similarities.

or restrain himself in the face of the injustice that got him thrown out—traits that are also not unlike Rambo’s. Now Leng is a trader in Africa, with an adopted local son/sidekick, Tundu. As the unnamed country spirals out of control, the Chinese navy turns up to save Chinese citizens. When they are constrained by orders not to intervene on foreign soil, Leng sets off by himself for the interior. First, he rescues the associates of a murdered Chinese doctor who was developing a vaccine for an Ebola-like illness. Then he saves the Chinese and African workers, including Tundu’s mother, in a Chinese-run factory. The film ends with his ushering everyone to safety aboard a Chinese warship.

The first *Wolf Warrior* film was a modest success, but it was completely eclipsed by its successor. *Wolf Warrior 2* is the only Chinese film in Box Office Mojo’s global all-time top 100, ranked at number 61.⁶ Not only does that mean it tops the Chinese all-time box office with a take of 5.679 billion yuan (approximately US\$830 million at the time of writing). It also places it far ahead of its nearest rival, Dante Lam’s *Operation*

Red Sea (Honghai xingdong, 2018), an adventure film in the vein of *Wolf Warrior 2* that pulled in “only” 3.65 billion yuan (US\$533 million), a third less than *Wolf Warrior 2*’s total.⁷ Given its “patriotic” content and the tagline “Whoever offends the Chinese will be wiped out, no matter how far away,” it is not surprising to learn that nearly all those earnings were made inside China. The film was barely exported at all.

The frequent criticisms leveled at the film might suggest that its success is largely due to its translation of some of the worst elements of Hollywood formulas into a Chinese context. These criticisms have been made both inside China and outside, with two factors dominating the outrage. First, Leng Feng’s psychotic behavior has been noted as an example of “toxic masculinity” that resolves problems through out-of-control violence. Second, Africa appears yet again as chaotic and violent, with the local women and children in need of protection from foreign men: indeed, Leng Feng appears to have taken on the classic Orientalist “white man’s burden.”⁸



Big Daddy (Frank Grillo, left) and Leng Feng (Wu Jing, right) face off in *Wolf Warrior 2*.

Nevertheless, *Wolf Warrior 2* does show signs of being shaped by Chinese concerns and conditions as much as by Hollywood. The target of Leng's anger is not coincidental. Just as Bruce Lee works his way through villains of various ethnicities before taking on a white guy in the final showdown of his films, so Leng Feng does much the same in *Wolf Warrior 2*. In the end, he faces off with the evil American mercenary, Big Daddy, and beats him to death in an episode in which his Rambo-like inability to control his righteous anger is displayed to full effect. I am told many audiences go wild for this scene; to others, it seems disturbingly psychotic.

To understand the reasons for this focus on beating the white guy, it is important to understand China's history. In the final showdown in *Wolf Warrior 2*, Big Daddy presses the Chinese audience's buttons by telling Leng Feng, "People like you will always be inferior to people like me," to which Leng Feng answers, "That's fucking history."⁹ Then, triggered, he launches into his frenzied attack. This exchange resonates with the idea of China's humiliation and the need to overcome it. Mao famously dated the beginnings of modern Chinese history to the nineteenth-century Opium Wars,

when British gunboats forced the country to open its borders.¹⁰ Officially, the "century of humiliation" ended when Japan was defeated, followed soon after by the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. Today, however, President Xi Jinping invokes it often as part of his effort to whip up patriotic fervor.¹¹

The ending of the film has also captured attention. A picture of a Chinese passport appears on-screen, accompanied by the message: "Citizens of the People's Republic of China, when you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland." Why the need for such a statement? Until relatively recently, very few citizens of the People's Republic ever went overseas. Over the last decade, though, students and businessmen from China have begun traveling all over the world. Chinese outbound tourism has undergone "explosive growth," making it the most important outbound tourism market, spending more than twice its nearest rival, the United States.¹²

The final title speaks to a general anxiety about going overseas as a new experience, as well as a more specific anxiety about the capacity of the Chinese government to come to



Leng Feng (Wu Jing) leads his godson Tundu to safety following an attack by insurgents in *Wolf Warrior 2*.

the assistance of its citizens in times of trouble. During the Arab Spring of 2011, the Chinese government scrambled to evacuate nearly thirty-five thousand overseas workers and expatriates from Libya on chartered boats and planes, and the Chinese military arrived too late to offer substantial help.¹³ In contrast, the Chinese navy was ready when trouble broke out in Yemen in 2015, and proudly rescued not only its own but also foreign nationals for the first time, making big headlines in China.¹⁴ Again, this recent history indicates that the setting of *Wolf Warrior 2* is no coincidence.

Another scene that has caught attention and provoked discussion on the Chinese Internet occurs in the factory-rescue episode. The factory owner's initial response is to separate the Chinese citizens, who are to be rescued, from the local workers, who include Tundu's mother. As Lisa Rofel points out, not only Leng but all the characters with People's Liberation Army training reject this division and insist that everyone associated with the Chinese-owned plant will be saved.¹⁵ This moment resonates with class tensions inside

China, where an ever-growing wealth gap has been undermining the acceptability of Deng Xiaoping's 1985 idea of "letting some people get rich first."¹⁶ While this might seem like a subversive moment, it is fully in line with the policies of Xi Jinping's regime, which has used both nationalism and an anti-corruption campaign drawing on resentment of the rich to bolster its legitimacy.¹⁷ The rescue also reinforces the idea of China as the friend of the African people and not new colonialists—a stance that traces its lineage back to the aid China gave to countries like Ghana, Zambia, and Tanzania during the Mao era.¹⁸

The rebellious, even individualistic, character of Leng is nevertheless striking. One can only speculate about why *Wolf Warrior 2* did so much better than *Operation Red Sea*. Both films are assertions of Chinese martial might, but the latter is about a major naval operation, whereas the former focuses on a lone wolf. For all of *Wolf Warrior 2*'s patriotism, it is noteworthy that it adds to the formula a certain autonomy from the state, especially striking for how that autonomy is combined

with immense patriotism. Its success suggests that, while the issue of individualistic masculinity remains a hot-button issue in China, the display of unbridled masculinity still holds a particular appeal for many audiences, making its appearance here worthy of more study.

I can remember when *Rambo—First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), the original film, was released in the People's Republic of China in 1985, and I was living in Beijing. As reported at the time, long-term foreign residents in China, most of whom were committed to the ideals of Maoist socialism, were appalled that a film they saw as promoting American violence and imperialism was being shown in China.¹⁹ However, I also recall a short letter published in the local press from a young man who responded by explaining that, for him, Rambo was an appealingly different kind of hero, because he did what he thought was right and did not simply follow orders. Chinese friends resisted my own rejection of the film with similar claims.

Does the appeal of the Rambo-style *Wolf Warrior* hero mean that a Chinese version of jingoistic American masculinity has taken root? I am reluctant to jump to that conclusion. It is important that the film locates Leng outside the People's Republic of China and further that he has been banished from the Chinese armed forces because of his failure to obey commands. This is a pattern that invokes a much older model. Kam Louie famously argues that in Chinese culture, there are two positive models of masculinity.²⁰ One, refined and cultured, or *wen* masculinity, is typified by the scholar-gentleman, a soft figure of great learning with no aggressive characteristics. The other, martial or *wu* masculinity, is closer to what is thought of, in the West, as *macho* masculinity. Perhaps surprisingly to Western audiences, it is the former of the two models that is represented as hot and attractive to women, whereas the latter must suppress desire completely in order to be an effective warrior. Furthermore, the *wen* man rules the kingdom and the home, whereas the *wu* man acts in a space outside civilization to secure its borders and chase down wrongdoers. That space is well known to martial-arts film fans as the *jianghu*, the “rivers-and-lakes outlaw world.”²¹

With this dual model of masculinity in mind, it becomes clear that Leng in *Wolf Warrior 2* is drawing not only on Rambo, but equally on the *wu* model of macho masculinity. In response to the need to come up with new narratives that respond to China's new global role, however, the space of the *jianghu* is no longer located inside China. Instead, in this film, Africa is the new *jianghu*. This geographic redistribution of the cultural imagination raises some interesting questions about how China imagines the world outside China

and its role in that world. In contrast to the strict self-control and ethical behavior expected in the world of civilization, as martial-arts fans will know very well, in the *jianghu* anything goes: anything is allowed in the effort to defeat one's enemies and protect one's friends. Leng's almost psychotic behavior is quite acceptable if that is what it takes to win in the *jianghu* that is Africa. According to the perspective articulated in *Wolf Warrior 2*, then, is the world outside the People's Republic the *jianghu*? Is the rest of the world simply part of an outlaw universe where anything goes in the drive to win?

There is one final point to make, regarding how the specifically Chinese resonances of Leng's Rambo-derived character might also have something to do with his appeal. Leng is not only a *wu* man, for he also resembles Monkey—the great trickster archetype of Chinese culture. In the original myth, Monkey is accompanying the Chinese monk Tripitaka on his journey to India, along with two other helper characters, Sandy and Pigsy, but it is Monkey who dominates in their numerous adventures along the way. Just like Leng, he is absolutely loyal and endowed with all sorts of superhuman fighting skills. But he is also impulsive, inclined to anger, and frequently loses control of himself. For that, he is often punished—again, much like Leng.

In a way, then, *Wolf Warrior 2* resembles one of the episodes of *Monkey King*, the one where Monkey has been banished and must prove himself again in order to be forgiven. This process is not just a matter of testing Monkey's martial skills, but also of assessing his ethical worth. Has Leng done enough to be redeemed? In interviews, Wu Jing says he always planned for a *Wolf Warrior* trilogy. The huge profits of *Wolf Warrior 2* have made that a certainty, so perhaps *Wolf Warrior 3* will reveal Leng's fate.

Furthermore, *Wolf Warrior 2* seems to have initiated a whole new subgenre for Chinese cinema: the action-adventure *overseas* film. To be clear, *Wolf Warrior 2* is not the first film to feature a maverick hero banished outside China. It was predated by *Meigonghe xingdong* (*Operation Mekong*, Dante Lam, 2016), in which a similarly angry hero bends the rules to help the Chinese authorities combat drug runners in the Golden Triangle. Lam's follow-up, *Operation Red Sea*, although also set overseas, is a more conventional military adventure film. However, especially in its ending it adopts the militant tone of *Wolf Warrior 2* that proved so popular with Chinese audiences, going beyond mere patriotic pride to issue direct anti-Western threats. There are some complications here. For example, when the warship in *Operation Red Sea* orders a ship entering Chinese waters to back off, the viewers are not told that the



The action-adventure overseas film: Leng Feng (Wu Jing) raising China's flag in *Wolf Warrior 2*.

other ship belongs to a Western power. However, given its location in the disputed waters of the South China Seas, many audiences will assume that the ship belongs to a Western power. Similarly, although Leng Feng's target is clearly Western in *Wolf Warrior 2*, neither he nor his opponent represents his respective government. Despite these prevarications, we can conclude that the film marks a new stage in Chinese cinema in the context of the global revival of nationalism. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, China moves beyond isolation from the West, beyond an accommodation with the West, into open hostility toward the West and contestation.

In the academic sphere, the decision of Ohio State University's MCLC Resource Center, which hosts a key website for Chinese Studies, to publish a collection of responses to *Wolf Warrior 2* solicited from Chinese and non-Chinese scholars confirms that the significance of the film extends well beyond

the Chinese film industry.²² The establishment of a new Transnational Asian Masculinities series, to be edited by Chinese masculinity scholars Derek Hird and Geng Song for the University of Hong Kong Press, is a further sign that the dynamic developments around Chinese masculinity exemplified by *Wolf Warrior 2* are sure to receive more sustained analysis in the years to come.²³

Notes

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