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## Mapping Chinese Influence in Hollywood

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**AIR UNIVERSITY**



# **Mapping Chinese Influence in Hollywood**

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## **Foreword**

The Kenney Papers series from Air University Press provides a forum for topics related to the Indo-Pacific region, which covers everything from the western shores of the Americas to the eastern coast of Africa and from Antarctica to the Arctic. Named for General George Churchill Kenney, Allied air commander in the Southwest Pacific during World War II and subsequently commander of Strategic Air Command and then Air University, this series seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the region, the geopolitics and geoeconomics that shape the theater, and the roles played by the US military in providing for a free and open Indo-Pacific.



DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL  
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Editor in Chief

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## **Abstract**

China has invested in several American industries since its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. Once an engine for American soft power, Hollywood has seen a dramatic increase in investment from China, with deals being valued at billions of dollars. The resulting financial influence has given Chinese film studios the placement and access necessary to change the content of American films while forcing American film studios to self-censor to appease Beijing's sensibilities. Although some have recognized that this puts China in a position to leverage Hollywood for its own soft-power goals, there is a gap in the literature concerning whether there are coherent themes and messages in Chinese-funded American films. This paper aims to discern and describe those themes and messages, if present, by using social network analysis, comparative film analysis, and narrative paradigm theory. It concludes that, when depictions of China or of Chinese film characters appear in Chinese-funded American films, they are portrayed in consistent, prescribed ways that are indicative of planned propaganda. The research concludes with two recommendations to mitigate China's influence in Hollywood and provides suggestions for further research.



## **Introduction: The PRC's Ends, Ways, and Means**

Chinese film companies are essentially extensions of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) propaganda machine. The current relationship between the PRC and the Hollywood film industry provides the Chinese Communist Party a willing and able means to disseminate propaganda directly and subliminally to US audiences. The consonance and repetition of motifs and themes with soft-power implications in Chinese-funded Hollywood films indicates that the dissemination of such propaganda is already in progress. Intentionally shaping audiences' perceptions of China is key to Beijing's soft-power strategy and a key component in realizing the PRC's goal of National Rejuvenation. It is urgent that US decision makers mitigate Chinese influence in the American entertainment industry as part of Washington's holistic strategy in this era of renewed great-power competition.

China's involvement in Hollywood has garnered national attention since the late 2010s. Although several entertainment industry trade publications and scholarly works have addressed this, there continues to be a gap in the literature concerning key factors of Chinese influence in Hollywood. In the subsections below we review the literature that illuminates our analysis of China's activities in the American entertainment industry.

The PRC has a single end-state in mind that drives its soft-power initiatives and lavish overseas investments to achieve what the CCP calls "National Rejuvenation."<sup>1</sup> To the political leadership and much of the population of the PRC, achieving National Rejuvenation signals a supposed return to international hegemony. All the PRC's instruments of national power are oriented toward this goal.

The use of influence activities is one of the main ways with which the PRC plans to achieve its National Rejuvenation. Two PLA officers first posited using asymmetric, nonlethal methods in a book titled *Unrestricted Warfare*. Published by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1999, the book's main thesis was that the nature of warfare had changed in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War in Kuwait and Iraq and that warfare could no longer be defined by set territorial limits and the use of physical weapons.<sup>2</sup> Under the new paradigm, they suggested, warfare would become a boundless endeavor in which rival countries would use whatever ways and means available (both lethal and non-lethal) to achieve their ends.<sup>3</sup>

*Unrestricted Warfare's* ideas on the changing nature of warfare quickly gained traction within the PLA and Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>4</sup> The tenets of *Unrestricted Warfare* were again reinforced in the opening days of the 2003 Iraq War; this led the chairman of the PRC's Central Military Com-

mission, Jiang Zemin, to encourage the PLA to revise its 2003 edition of the “PLA Political Work Regulations” to include elements from *Unrestricted Warfare*. The resulting doctrine, known as the “Three Warfares,” retained the no-boundaries philosophy of the book but pared down the types of warfare to Psychological Warfare, Media Warfare, and Legal Warfare.<sup>5</sup> Media Warfare in Chinese doctrine is similar to psychological operations in American doctrine and is the most relevant for this subject matter; it involves relaying curated information to specifically selected target audiences (including those domestic to China and foreign ones) via mass media to achieve the PRC’s ends. The doctrine makes allowances for using domestic Chinese media or for using foreign media sources.

The PRC’s primary means to influence American target audiences is through targeted investments and economic coercion to influence American film studios. This influence has manifested itself in American studios’ tendencies to self-censor and amplify messaging that contributes to the PRC’s end of National Rejuvenation. One film executive’s testimonial details how American film companies exploited a loophole in Chinese law to ensure that American films could access Chinese audiences: making the films “co-productions” with Chinese film companies. Making the film a co-production required hiring Chinese talent, filming on location in the PRC, and agreeing to terms dictated by Chinese censors. Over time, the film executive described how Chinese bureaucrats’ demands became increasingly stringent and specific. American film studio executives, wishing to maintain lucrative overseas revenue streams, felt increasingly obliged to comply.<sup>6</sup> Chinese leaders realize that they are in a “cultural trade deficit” with the rest of the world and that film co-productions with Hollywood are a way to attempt to overcome this deficit.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, the PRC believes that it will be able to increase its soft power across the world. Although this relationship started out innocently enough after China’s 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), it has led to a situation in which the PRC has de facto control over the entertainment that audiences across the world consume.

Using an “ends, ways, and means” framework, one can see that the PRC has a clearly defined end-state that it wishes to achieve: regaining what it sees as its rightful place on the world stage by achieving National Rejuvenation. One of the strategic frameworks through which it intends to achieve this is the Three Warfares doctrine. The PRC has used targeted investments in the American entertainment industry as the means to achieve its ways. While there are several works that recognize that there is a problem regarding the PRC’s potential to execute influence operations against American citizens, they do not take the next logical step to address the particulars of these influ-

ence operations; specifically, they do not explore the themes and messages that the PRC is using, or attempt to determine the likely goals of these influence activities. This paper seeks to address this gap in understanding.

### **Analysis and Methodology**

What are the themes and messages that the People's Republic of China is disseminating to American audiences via the PRC's connections in Hollywood? Ultimately, this is a question about foreign propaganda in the United States. Propaganda is defined here as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."<sup>8</sup> To answer this, the paper is broken down into seven major sections, not including the introduction and conclusions. These sections mirror the first seven of the Ten Divisions of Propaganda Analysis found in Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell's book *Propaganda and Persuasion* (2012). The first seven divisions and how the paper addresses them are identified below:

- **Ideology and Purpose of the Propaganda Campaign.** This section will address the PRC's ideology regarding propaganda since its founding, as well as its soft-power ambitions.<sup>9</sup>
- **Context in Which the Propaganda Occurs.** This section will cover Sino-US relations since 1949, as well as China's relationships with Taiwan and Japan.
- **Identification of the Propagandist.** This section will cover the PRC's propaganda apparatus and the linkages the PRC has with private businesses in China.
- **Structure of the Propaganda Organization.** Using social network analysis (SNA), this section draws upon information from trade-oriented open-source publications and websites to determine the financial relationships between Chinese and American film studios.
- **Target Audience.** This section will build upon the network presented in the preceding section and list the American films that have either received direct Chinese investment or are Sino-American co-productions. After analyzing which segments of the American population are most likely to view the films financed by China, this section will conclude by positing the likely target audience for the PRC's influence activities in Hollywood.

- **Media Utilization Techniques.** This section will describe why film is an effective means for propaganda and how film has been used as a means for propaganda in the PRC.
- **Special Techniques to Maximize Effect.** This section will include the ultimate findings of the research and will contain the core themes and messages that the PRC is disseminating to American audiences.

The section below titled “Special Techniques to Maximize Effect” examines films meeting certain criteria. The first is that the film was a co-production between American and Chinese studios identified in the section titled, “Structure of the Propaganda Organization.” American-made films that received direct investment from Chinese film companies but are not strictly co-productions were also considered. Among the films that meet the first criterion, the ones that meet the following conditions will be eligible for further analysis:

- films featuring a main or supporting character that is either a Chinese national or is ethnically Chinese;
- films having been shot in China or a setting that is made to emulate China, be it a fantastical or realistic depiction;
- films with references to China’s current status as a rising power;
- films with references to China’s historical status as an Asian hegemon;
- films with references to China’s role in the Pacific Theater of World War II;
- films with instances of overt comparisons between the “Western World” and China;
- films with representations of Confucian or Taoist philosophies; and/or
- films with themes dealing with “Asian unity” in general or the unification of China specifically.

These criteria directly deal with how the PRC specifically and Chinese people in general are seen by the outside world. Since improving the PRC’s soft power is a stated goal of the CCP, examining depictions of China or Chinese people in the films (hereafter referred to as the “China Element”) provides a key insight into the themes and messages that the PRC is disseminating to American audiences.<sup>10</sup>

Upon determining which films met both criteria listed above, we actively viewed them while taking notes on how the China Elements interacted with the rest of the elements of the film.<sup>11</sup> In the case of ethnically Chinese characters, for example, we noted which character archetype they were, their interactions with their environments or other characters, and their role in the overall plot of the film.<sup>12</sup> Regarding China as a setting, we examined what part

of the plot China was most prominent in. For example, some films portrayed China as an idyllic place where its imminent destruction spurred the protagonist in the first act; other films showed China as a “special world” that was sharply contrasted with a rapidly decaying “West.” Regarding plot, we noted whether the contributions of the China Element were crucial to the events of the plot, were a centerpiece of the plot, or were ultimately inconsequential.

“Narrative Paradigm Theory” states that coherence is what makes a recurring theme or narrative effective; determining these themes and narratives helps illuminate the propagandist’s long-term goals.<sup>13</sup> By noting which of the China Elements manifested themselves in a similar fashion a prescribed number of times, we were able to identify which elements are likely to be part of a PRC-influenced narrative.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Ideology and Purpose of the Propaganda Campaign**

*[T]he Century of Humiliation at the hands of the Western Powers is a period etched in acid on the pages of Chinese student textbooks today.*

—Robert Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*<sup>15</sup>

This section discusses the ideological basis and the purpose behind the People’s Republic of China’s propaganda within the United States. The PRC’s current ideology can best be characterized as an ethnocentric form of communism that places the PRC at the center of the world in terms of culture, politics, and prestige.<sup>16</sup> Much of this ideology developed during Chinese history from 1839 to 1949, an era known as the “Century of Humiliation.” An examination of this era and other events in China’s recent history will provide insight on the PRC’s ideology, worldview, and grand strategy. Having explored the underpinnings of the ideology, this section will conclude by identifying the purpose of the PRC’s ongoing propaganda campaign.

### **National Rejuvenation and the CCP’s Current Ideology**

The strange mélange of the collapse of China’s millennia-old dynastic system of government, tens of millions of deaths in the ensuing wars, and Marxist philosophy established and formed the CCP’s ideology. Viewed from the outside, it is a distinctly ethnonationalist form of communism that attempts to cement its legitimacy domestically by linking itself to China’s past.<sup>17</sup> Its ideology tells the people of China that it is their birthright, as the inheritors of a civilization whose history stretches back thousands of years, to once again live in a country that is the cultural and political center of the world. This

message comes with a caveat from the CCP, however: the only way for the Chinese populace to avoid another cataclysmic dynastic collapse and regain the glory of centuries past is to embrace the CCP as the legitimate ruling organization of China.<sup>18</sup>

The way that the PRC intends to restore itself is through National Rejuvenation, also referred to by China's president, Xi Jinping, as the "Chinese Dream": the restoration of China to what it considers its former glory prior to the decline and collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 following a revolution.<sup>19</sup> Key elements of National Rejuvenation include gaining a commanding position in world affairs and regaining territories that were lost during the Century of Humiliation. Of these territories, only Taiwan (officially the Republic of China, or ROC) remains outside the PRC's full control.<sup>20</sup> The internal deadline that the PRC has set for achieving National Rejuvenation is 2049, the centennial anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1949.<sup>21</sup>

This explicit, deliberate linkage connecting the CCP and China's history stands in stark contrast to the Cultural Revolution. Enacted during the height of Mao Tse-tung's reign as chairman of the CCP during the late 1960s and early 1970s, this social movement was engineered by the Party to remove what it saw as "bourgeois" tendencies in Chinese culture.<sup>22</sup> This manifested itself in the widespread persecution of intellectuals and longtime party cadre members, as well as the destruction or desecration of historical sites and tombs. Since Mao's death in 1976, however, the Party has since pivoted to embrace facets of traditional Chinese culture to exercise control over the populace. Xi Jinping has styled himself as a devotee of Confucius, for example, and the CCP has announced that it is writing the official history of the Qing Dynasty.<sup>23</sup> Writing such a history is significant because it has long been a mark of a dynasty's legitimacy to memorialize its predecessor; in undertaking this task, the CCP positions itself as the ruling party of a new sort of dynastic system.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Century of Humiliation**

The CCP's ideology developed over the span of roughly a hundred years during what was arguably the most tumultuous period in China's long history. Called the Century of Humiliation, it is the foundational historical event of modern China and acts as the lens through which many citizens of the PRC view the world.<sup>25</sup> This era began in 1839 when the British declared war on the Qing Empire after the Chinese imperial court refused to buy imported opium. The ensuing Opium Wars (1839–1860) ended with the loss of several Chinese ports to the British as well as entry into trade agreements that the Qing condemned as exploitative.<sup>26</sup> Other countries, recognizing the opportunities

posed by China's military weakness, soon vied for influence in China. France, Germany, Japan, Russia, and the United States were all involved in China's internal affairs during this period. These developments accelerated the Qing Dynasty's decline before its eventual collapse in 1911.

While the Republic of China (Taiwan) was soon established atop the ashes of the Qing Dynasty, the fledgling Republican government was unable to soothe the internal unrest that was spreading among the civilian population since the defeats of the Opium Wars.<sup>27</sup> The ROC was further hampered by territorial losses in the ensuing decades as Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet broke away, spurred by independence movements. Japanese incursions into Manchuria in the early 1930s exacerbated civil tensions and caused further territorial losses.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately for the ROC, the rivalry between the ruling Kuomintang (KMT, literally "Nationalist Party") and the nascent CCP often resulted in bloodshed despite the external threat of Japanese aggression.<sup>29</sup> This situation continued throughout World War II. While the KMT busied itself trying to assert its legitimacy by fighting the Japanese, the CCP focused its efforts on undermining KMT rule and attacking KMT formations while conducting only nominal attacks on the Japanese.<sup>30</sup>

The end of World War II in September 1945 took the Japanese out of the equation and left the KMT and CCP to resolve the issue of who would come to dominate China.<sup>31</sup> Although the two sides attempted to form a coalition government at first, this arrangement quickly fell apart and they resumed fighting. The Chinese Civil War raged from 1945 until the KMT's eventual defeat and escape to Taiwan in 1949. Mao Tse-tung, the chairman of the CCP, announced the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949. In a speech in Beijing, he stated that the Chinese people had "stood up" and ended the Century of Humiliation.<sup>32</sup>

The impact of the Century of Humiliation on the way that the government under the PRC and the average Chinese citizen see the world cannot be overstated.<sup>33</sup> To this day, many Chinese think of their recent history as having occurred either before or after the Opium Wars, much in the same way that Americans think about September 11. The Qing Dynasty's weakness compared to the strength of foreign powers contradicted the Chinese worldview. Since the Chinese people held that China was the center of the world, both culturally and physically, they expected the same level of deference that neighboring countries had historically shown China during the height of its power. Seeing the opposite was profoundly disturbing to them. Indeed, the Mandarin name for China itself, 中国 (Zhōngguó, literally "Middle Kingdom"), came to represent the central connection point between Heaven and Earth from which all



civilization had sprung, despite having its etymological origin as a purely geographical description.<sup>34</sup> China's defeat in the first Opium War and the "indignities" that followed served to effectively demolish this worldview.

### Cultivating Soft Power

Guided by its recent history, the PRC developed a grand strategy that involves achieving National Rejuvenation and regaining the hegemonic status that it believes it lost as a result of the Century of Humiliation.<sup>35</sup> Internationally, this requires bringing Taiwan into the fold of the PRC by any means necessary. Despite the PRC's increasingly bellicose rhetoric under Xi Jinping regarding Taiwan reunification, CCP leadership knows that reintegrating Taiwan by force would be an unacceptable action to many of its neighbors in Asia as well as to the United States (this point will be explored further below in the section titled "Context in Which the Propaganda Occurs").<sup>36</sup> Recognizing that the international community's perception of China is one of the major roadblocks to achieving one of the key goals of National Rejuvenation, the PRC has decided to cultivate its soft power to improve its image.<sup>37</sup>

Soft power, defined as the "ability [for a country] to influence by persuasion rather than by coercion," has as its basis a country's culture, policies, and values.<sup>38</sup> If the populations of other countries see these factors as being positive, the influencer can produce a level of attraction such that they are able to "shape the preferences of others."<sup>39</sup> These sentiments can be manipulated through the use of propaganda; messaging that consistently paints a country in a positive light, for example, can change a target audience's view of that country incrementally over time. This particular method will be explored in depth in the section titled "Media Utilization Techniques". Wielding soft power is especially effective against a democratic system, since the population's preferences, biases, and attitudes later translate into voting habits, which in turn drive a government's policies.

Cultivating an attractive image of one's country can therefore indirectly influence other countries to cooperate with it, but this is true only if the factors that make the basis of soft power are attractive in and of themselves.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately for the PRC, 2020 polling involving representative samples of more than 14,000 adults in 14 countries in North America, Europe, Asia showed that "unfavorable views of China [had reached] historic highs."<sup>41</sup> Despite its best efforts, the PRC could not control the narratives surrounding its abuse of the Muslim Uighur population or its abysmal handling of the opening days of the COVID-19 pandemic; in other words, its policies and values

were received so poorly abroad that any deliberate influence activities meant to cultivate soft power were ineffective.<sup>42</sup>

The PRC's soft-power deficit is especially evident in the United States. Generally, Americans' opinion of the PRC has been unfavorable since 1990, but this figure has changed drastically. In 2021, the number of Americans who said they view the PRC negatively in a Gallup poll was a staggering 79 percent; this is up from 67 percent in 2020 and only 45 percent in 2019.<sup>43</sup> This is a major problem for the PRC. In the PRC's calculus, the reaction of the United States is an important factor in the PRC's decision-making processes for a military action that would seek to integrate Taiwan by force.<sup>44</sup> The preponderance of people in the United States who have unfavorable opinions of the PRC make it very unlikely that they would democratically elect openly pro-China candidates for political offices; furthermore, it is likely in the current political climate that any overtly aggressive overtures to integrate Taiwan by force would be answered with swift repercussions from the United States and its allies.

The PRC recognizes its dilemma and has taken steps to mitigate it. CCP political leadership took the first steps to reorient the PRC's massive propaganda apparatus toward cultivating soft power during the 17th National Congress (2007). Then-President Hu Jintao said in a speech to the delegation: "The [National Rejuvenation] of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture. . . . We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country."<sup>45</sup> President Xi Jinping echoed his predecessor's emphasis on cultivating soft power during an August 2013 speech to the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference: "[We] must meticulously and properly conduct external propaganda, innovating external propaganda methods, working hard to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling China's story well, communicating China's voice well."<sup>46</sup> One phrase in particular from this quote—"telling China's story well"—merits further explanation. Far from simply equating to Chinese people telling Chinese stories, this phrase refers specifically to propagating narratives that contribute to the CCP's external propaganda goals. In the Party's parlance, "China's story" has four facets: portraying the Party in a positive light; controlling the narrative for National Rejuvenation; emphasizing China's traditional culture, values, and natural beauty; and emphasizing how dealing with China is ultimately beneficial.<sup>47</sup>

The CCP's ideology and the purpose of its propaganda campaign in the United States fit hand in glove. Affected deeply by what they see as insufferable indignities at the hands of the West, the populace and the PRC government have made it their missions to achieve National Rejuvenation and reclaim China's "rightful place" on the world stage. A key factor in this is

integrating Taiwan into the PRC, but China's strained relationships with its neighbors and the United States have forced it to explore using soft power to achieve its ends. The next section covers the modern-day context that forms the backdrop for the PRC's propaganda.

### **Context in Which the Propaganda Occurs**

Understanding the history of Sino-American relations since 1949 can provide important insight into why the PRC is using propaganda in the United States. In the words of Jowett and O'Donnell, "the propaganda analyst needs to be aware of the events that have occurred and of the interpretations of the events that the propagandists have made."<sup>48</sup> Understanding historical context also illuminates how the PRC has established financial relationships with American film studios. The PRC's membership in the WTO and subsequent economic growth, the question of Taiwan's independence, and Japan's relationship with Taiwan are also crucial factors that shape Sino-American relations.

### **Sino-American Relations, Phase 1: Containment**

Sino-American relations since 1949 have had four distinct periods: Containment, Rapprochement, Engagement, and a new "Cold War." The first period, Containment, lasted from the PRC's founding in 1949 to Henry Kissinger's secret diplomatic mission to China in late 1971.<sup>49</sup> This period was characterized by subdued hostility between the two countries. The United States' recognition of Taiwan as the seat of the legitimate Chinese government, its refusal to recognize the PRC, and American aid to the KMT during the Chinese Civil War led to elevated tensions between the United States and the PRC.<sup>50</sup> While the PRC and the United States never officially came to blows during this period, several crises in the Taiwan Strait brought them close to conflict.<sup>51</sup>

The United States used diplomatic means to mitigate the risk posed by the CCP as the prevailing fear was that communism would spread throughout Asia, the so-called the Domino Theory.<sup>52</sup> American diplomats worked tirelessly to forge alliances with Asian countries to maintain their influence in the region and establish military bases. The United States also cut off trade from China and encouraged its newfound allies to do the same. However, in the larger context of the Cold War, the PRC was not without friends of its own.<sup>53</sup> A natural ally of the Soviet Union by virtue of proximity and ideology, the two countries enjoyed a close relationship for a short time. Eventually differences surfaced, however, and the PRC came to resent its status as the junior partner, and the subsequent diplomatic break became known as the "Sino-Soviet split."

## **Sino-American Relations, Phase 2: Rapprochement**

At the time of the Sino-Soviet split, President Richard Nixon saw the fissure between the Soviet Union and the PRC as an opportunity to mend relations with the Party and isolate the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> To this end, he sent National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to Beijing on a secret mission to meet the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai. Beijing was receptive to US diplomacy, and Nixon made an official visit to China in 1972. The terms of the renewed Sino-American relationship were recorded in a joint communiqué, which highlighted both parties' agreement that a two-state solution for Taiwan and China was not feasible and that establishing trade would benefit both countries.<sup>55</sup> The 1972 joint communiqué marked the end of the Containment period of Sino-American relations and marked the beginning of the Rapprochement period.<sup>56</sup> Dialogue between the nations continued through the Nixon administration into President Gerald Ford's administration, with improvements continuing until President Jimmy Carter's administration.<sup>57</sup>

## **Sino-American Relations, Phase 3: Engagement**

President Jimmy Carter's administration saw another change in the relations between China and the United States. During a visit in 1978, Carter and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping agreed to normalize relations. This marked the beginning of the Engagement period.<sup>58</sup> They recorded the terms in a second joint communiqué, which went into effect in early 1979. In this second communiqué, both parties agreed to formally establish embassies and exchange ambassadors while affirming that neither nation would seek hegemony in Asia.<sup>59</sup> The two countries also signed a bilateral trade agreement.<sup>60</sup> Most notably, establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC came with the condition that the United States would have to sever official ties with Taiwan and recognize the PRC as the legitimate government of China.<sup>61</sup>

Carter's decision to cut ties with Taiwan angered several members of Congress, who posited that the United States' departure from the mutual defense treaty with Taiwan would leave the island vulnerable to attack from the PRC.<sup>62</sup> Members of Congress responded by drafting the Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>63</sup> Signed by Carter in 1979, it stipulated that the United States would continue selling defensive weapons to Taiwan and that the United States and Taiwan would continue to maintain an unofficial diplomatic relationship.

President Ronald Reagan continued to engage with the PRC during his terms in office, drafting a third joint communiqué with the Chinese in 1982.<sup>64</sup> The highlights of this communiqué were to establish that the United States would continue to maintain unofficial ties with Taiwan and continue defen-

sive arms sales to the Taiwanese. The Taiwanese government has been understandably anxious about the developments between the PRC and the United States since 1979. To alleviate this, Reagan authorized his unofficial diplomat in the American Institute of Taipei to provide the Taiwanese president what later became known as the “Six Assurances.”<sup>65</sup> These assurances set no end date on arms sales, prevented Beijing from influencing future arms sales, maintained the Taiwan Relations Act, took no policy position on Taiwan’s sovereignty, and ensured that the United States would not pressure Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC or mediate between the two.

Bilateral trade between the United States and the PRC increased dramatically during the Engagement period.<sup>66</sup> This is due, in part, to China’s entry into the WTO in 2001. The WTO is an international body that facilitates trade between member states; its three primary purposes are promoting trade deals, monitoring compliance between member states for those deals, and arbitrating any disputes between member states. Membership in the WTO has also made it easier for the PRC to invest in American companies, especially within the entertainment industry.<sup>67</sup> These relationships will be covered in depth in the following sections. Both the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, supported China’s entry into the body with the expectation that the liberalization of its economy would lead to a shift away from its authoritarian system.<sup>68</sup> Manufacturing from the United States and other industrialized countries moved to the PRC to take advantage of cheaper labor, and by 2006 China had become the United States’ largest trading partner.<sup>69</sup> By 2009, the PRC had become the world’s largest exporter of goods.<sup>70</sup> The poverty rate in the country declined rapidly during the same time; the CCP used this fact to enhance its legitimacy rather than let the inherent economic contradiction undermine it.<sup>71</sup>

In 2012, Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as the PRC’s president. Xi’s tenure has seen a discernible shift in tone in several areas.<sup>72</sup> To the dismay of those who thought increased economic prosperity would lead to political liberalization, Xi has consolidated his power within Party decision-making structures. As of late October 2022, he has also managed to secure an unprecedented third term as the president of the PRC.<sup>73</sup> Xi’s reforms are not isolated to the political realm; he has also spearheaded efforts to bring private enterprise back in line with the goals of the CCP.<sup>74</sup> To ensure compliance with the party line, the government has mandated that private enterprises include CCP cells within their boards of directors. This mandate extends to foreign-owned businesses. Far from being ceremonial, these party members maintain an active role in steering the companies. Official Chinese state media have reported

that more than 70 percent of Chinese firms currently have CCP representation in leadership positions.

As the CCP tightened its grip domestically, American political leaders attempted to reorient American foreign policy away from the Middle East and toward Asia.<sup>75</sup> President Barack Obama touted his roots in the region, having been born in Hawaii and having spent part of his childhood in Indonesia, and publicly expressed his desire to have a proverbial seat at the table for any Pacific-specific developments. Beijing, however, saw this reorientation as an attempt to hedge Chinese influence in the region rather than as a simple reprioritization.<sup>76</sup> As a result, some have argued that the PRC became more aggressive in trying to secure its claims in the South China Sea.

#### **Sino-American Relations, Phase 4: A New Cold War?**

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election marked the beginning of the current phase of Sino-American relations: the new Cold War. Trump had repeatedly lambasted China on the campaign trail for what he saw as its role in unfair trade agreements, reckless cyber attacks, and manipulation of the yuan.<sup>77</sup> He vowed to correct these imbalances, and in 2018 he imposed the first of several tariffs on imports from the PRC.<sup>78</sup> China reacted with tariffs on American goods as relations between the two countries worsened. This deteriorated state continued into the first years of President Joseph Biden's term as the world grappled with the PRC's actions in the South China Sea, its so-called debt-trap diplomacy, and its role in the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>79</sup>

#### **The Question of Taiwanese Sovereignty**

China's rhetoric toward unification with Taiwan has also increased tensions with neighbors and the United States. While Hu Jintao took a gentle approach to cross-strait relations, Xi Jinping has taken a hard line with Taiwan.<sup>80</sup> Saying that the island nation "must and will be" reunited with the mainland, Xi maintained that the PRC "reserved the right to use force" to achieve that end.<sup>81</sup> The root of this contentious relationship is the PRC's requirement for Taiwan to rejoin mainland China as part of the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese people," as described above in the section titled "The Ideology and Purpose of the Propaganda Campaign"<sup>82</sup>

This change in tone, as well as Xi's instructions to the PLA to "prepare for war," alarmed several of China's neighbors.<sup>83</sup> Not least of these is Japan; while the PRC still has a great deal of hostility for Japan stemming from the two countries' recent histories, Japan maintains good relations with Taiwan.<sup>84</sup> The two

countries are major trading partners, and Taiwan's location in the Pacific puts it within the center of many of the sea lines of communication that supply Japan.

### **The Japan Factor**

While Japan has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo between the PRC and Taiwan, the Japanese constitution severely limits the military actions that the country can take should that status quo be threatened.<sup>85</sup> Specifically, article 9 of the Japanese constitution bars the use of the Japan's Self-Defense Forces to settle international disputes unless there is evidence of an imminent threat to the homeland. However, there are provisions to intervene with the Self-Defense Forces in the event of a "survival-threatening situation."<sup>86</sup> Given Taiwan's proximity to Japan and Japan's heavy reliance on imports for energy and food, the Japanese legislature may see a PRC attack on Taiwan as a survival-threatening situation and decide to intervene militarily.

Several prominent Japanese politicians have stated that a cross-strait invasion would be a "red line" that would require Japanese retaliation.<sup>87</sup> Incensed, Chinese official social media accounts shared a video stating that any Japanese interference in the forceful reunification of Taiwan would result in the "continuous nuclear bombing" of Japan.<sup>88</sup> This wild departure from international norms is of particular concern to the United States. Although the United States is no longer treaty-bound to guarantee the freedom of Taiwan, Japan and the United States are still allies.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Japan currently hosts more American troops than any other country. Attacks against Japan would inevitably draw the United States into the conflict.

The context in which the PRC's propaganda occurs in the United States has developed in fits and starts since the PRC's founding in 1949. Traveling along a road paved with good intentions, the United States established relations with the PRC before advocating for its membership in the WTO. Alarmed by China's resulting economic growth as a member of that organization, the United States attempted to refocus on the Pacific during President Obama's administration. Angered at the perceived overreach, the PRC adopted an aggressive stance in the region under increasingly hardline leadership. PRC leadership has also hinted increasingly at using military means to seize Taiwan and has threatened Japan with nuclear weapons to dissuade it from intervening. Against this backdrop of deteriorating relations, private enterprises in the PRC made transpacific investments in the American entertainment industry. This section provided an overview of the context in which the PRC is executing its influence operations. The next section identifies the propagandist itself: China's Central Propaganda Department.



## **Identification of the Propagandist**

*They are not mad. They're trained to believe, not to know. Belief can be manipulated. Only knowledge is dangerous.*

—Frank Herbert, *Dune Messiah*<sup>90</sup>

Effective propaganda requires continuous messaging through different media to be most effective.<sup>91</sup> A permanent administrative organization is necessary to coordinate these elements. Correctly identifying the organization that is producing and disseminating propaganda provides insight into the organization's overall goals and processes.<sup>92</sup> Sometimes, the organization obfuscates its role in designing and disseminating propaganda. This makes it difficult to determine the organization's desired end-states and the ways and means that it is employing to reach those end-states. Fortunately, details about the PRC's Central Propaganda Department—the part of the Chinese government that is in charge of the country's internal and external propaganda efforts—are well documented. This section will cover the duties and responsibilities of the Central Propaganda Department, as well as how it went from an internally focused organization to an externally focused one. The next subsection will examine how the Central Propaganda Department fits into the larger influence network of the CCP, Chinese film studios, and American film studios.

### **China's Central Propaganda Department: Origins**

The use of propaganda and censorship for population control has been important to CCP leadership since before the PRC was founded.<sup>93</sup> The CCP established the Central Propaganda Department in 1922 to disseminate propaganda in CCP-controlled areas and to shape the population into the sort of citizen body that would function in a communist society. Mao Tse-tung himself emphasized the effective execution of propaganda as being necessary to sway the rural populace of China to fight for the communist cause. So invested was he in propaganda that he encouraged his field commanders to spend more time on “propaganda work” than actual kinetic operations.<sup>94</sup> Mao believed that this emphasis on propaganda was necessary to raise the massive armies needed to defeat the KMT during the course of the Chinese Civil War.

After the establishment of the PRC in October 1949, the scope of the Central Propaganda Department's duties and responsibilities grew dramatically. First and foremost, the CCP saw the use of propaganda as a way to educate the populace.<sup>95</sup> This “education” involved doing away with prevailing ideas of the past and installing new ones. With this mission, the Central Propaganda

Department took control of all forms of media in the PRC, including newspapers, radio, films, and books. Its involvement was not only relegated to censoring information for Chinese audiences; rather, it actively participated in inserting themes and messages into media that the CCP deemed crucial for creating a functioning communist state.

### **Modern Orientation and the Consolidation of Control**

Over time, the Central Propaganda Department added several subordinate departments and began to delegate different aspects of censorship and propaganda work to them.<sup>96</sup> One, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) was charged with the oversight of the PRC's state-owned media and censoring all other media. After China's entry into the WTO, SAPPRFT was also one of the main actors involved in approving film co-productions between Chinese and American film studios.<sup>97</sup>

A notable shift in the Central Propaganda Department's priorities began to emerge under the direction of President Hu Jintao during the later years of the Engagement period of Sino-American relations, as described above in the section titled "Context in Which the Propaganda Occurs."<sup>98</sup> While China's propaganda apparatus had been geared toward internal propaganda, CCP leadership began to orient it toward disseminating propaganda to foreign audiences.<sup>99</sup> The Central Propaganda Department's external propaganda fell under four lines of effort: telling "China's story" to the rest of the world in a manner that is acceptable to the CCP, countering "hostile foreign propaganda," promoting unification with Taiwan, and presenting China's foreign policy in a positive way.

Hu Jintao's successor, President Xi Jinping, has continued this trend and put even more emphasis on external propaganda than did his predecessor. Under Xi's leadership, the PRC's external propaganda efforts have branched out to include a variety of different media all over the world; these efforts are as varied as propping up Chinese YouTube content creators in Africa to increasing the number of Confucius Institutes in universities worldwide.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Xi has taken steps to consolidate duties and responsibilities relating to external propaganda back into the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>101</sup> In 2018, for example, SAPPRFT was abolished and its duties were absorbed by Central Propaganda. Per Chinese state-run news outlets, Xi then charged the department with "propagating the party's theories, directions, principles, and policies," in addition to "telling good China stories"—a mission that now explicitly extends to other countries.<sup>102</sup>

This restructuring brought the PRC's propaganda apparatus closer to one central point of control.<sup>103</sup> The very leadership structure of the Central Propaganda Department also lends itself to centralized control: historically, the director of Central Propaganda has been a very senior CCP member who has already occupied party leadership roles throughout the PRC. Furthermore, the director wears several hats by virtue of being a member of different committees and policymaking groups simultaneously. Specifically, the director also leads the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Ideological Work and has a seat on the 25-member Politburo. This puts the director of Central Propaganda within the inner circles of the PRC's massive bureaucracy while granting him a great deal of control of the themes and messages that are disseminated both inside and outside the PRC's borders. This level of centralization in a propaganda organization is associated with successful propaganda.<sup>104</sup>

In 2017, Xi Jinping appointed a senior party member named Huang Kunming as the director of the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>105</sup> Huang was personally loyal to Xi; his appointment to the director position allowed Xi to take advantage of the department's organizational streamlining and centralized leadership structure by further consolidating control.<sup>106</sup> Serving as the director until late 2022, Huang brought several decades of experience to his position in political leadership and in propaganda work. He enshrined Xi's philosophy on governance ("Xi Jinping Thought") in the department's internal propaganda, ensuring that it is taught in schools and universities throughout China. Furthermore, Huang oversaw the co-production and dissemination of many of the films listed in Appendix C by virtue of his position as the head of the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>107</sup> In the October 2022 CCP Congress, Xi rewarded Huang with an elevated position and installed a former deputy, a senior party official named Li Shuhei, as the current head of the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>108</sup>

Throughout its lifetime as an organization, the Central Propaganda Department has become increasingly more important as the need to control information has grown. While the department has been concerned with internal propaganda for most of its existence, recent restructuring and leadership changes have brought it closer to a centralized control system headed by President Xi Jinping. Specifically, the department's consolidation of the former SAPPRT's duties in policing film co-productions draw a direct line from the innermost circles of the CCP to American homes and movie theaters by way of investment relationships between Chinese and American film studios. These investment relationships will be examined in detail in the next section.

## **Structure of the Propaganda Organization**

The previous section described the ways in which the PRC's Central Propaganda Department has consolidated control of the country's media since Xi Jinping took office. This section uses SNA to explore the linkages between the Central Propaganda Department, Chinese film studios, and major American film studios and to examine key subnetworks within the overall propaganda organization. SNA dates back to at least the 1930s; it developed into a distinct discipline largely because of the efforts of a handful of anthropologists, sociologists, graph theorists, and social psychologists.<sup>109</sup> The discipline is a collection of theories and methods that, rather than seeing actors (e.g., individuals or organizations) as unaffected by those around them, assumes that behavior is affected by ties to others and the networks in which they are embedded.<sup>110</sup> SNA has been used to study a wide range of phenomena including relationships within terrorist groups,<sup>111</sup> the dynamics involved with interlocking corporate directorates,<sup>112</sup> and international alliances.

### **Data Description**

The Propaganda Organization described in this section is a one-mode, asymmetric network. "One-mode" means that all actors within this network belong to a specific category; in the case of this network, they are organizations. "Asymmetric" refers to the fact that not all relationships within the network are reciprocal. Data points were collected via trade publications like *Hollywood Reporter* and *Vanity Fair* and through IMDb (the popular online Internet Movie Database). Trade publications routinely report on investment deals between Chinese and American film studios. In the case of a Chinese company investing in a film with an American company (or multiple companies), these results were recorded with the Chinese company as the investor and the American company as the investee. All results were recorded in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and then uploaded into the Gephi SNA package to calculate relevant metrics and generate the network graphs highlighting relevant relationships of the network.<sup>113</sup> See Appendix B: Structure of the Propaganda Organization: Subnetworks.

### **Relationship Definitions**

Several types of relationships exist between the different nodes in the network. In the body of this text, relationships will be portrayed in writing. In Appendix B, they will appear as depicted in the Gephi software. Relationships are defined as follows:

- “Financial ties” are directed from a Chinese film studio to an American one and indicate that the Chinese studio has either directly invested in an American studio, invested in a finite slate of films for that studio, and/or has made a film with that studio via co-production.<sup>114</sup> Financial ties are weighted in the graphs depicted in the appendix. Weights correspond to the number of co-productions that the Sino-American partnerships have made. One co-production yields a tie weight of one; two co-productions yield a tie weight of two, and so on. These scores are visually depicted by increased tie thickness; higher scores result in thicker ties. These ties are colored green in the graphs.
- “Collaboration” indicates a two-way dialogue between the CCP, its state organs, and the Chinese film production companies. Communications flow between official channels in state-to-state dialogues and via CCP members in state-to-company dialogues. These ties are colored yellow in the graphs.
- “Ownership” indicates that one actor owns another; in the case of this network, it is either one company being a subsidiary of another or the PRC directly owning a media company. These ties are colored black in the graphs.
- “Guidance” is a directed relationship; it begins with the CCP, goes to the Central Propaganda Department, and then to the various Chinese film studios. Guidance includes themes and messages to stress and avoid, in addition to censorship guidelines; it also nests within the PRC’s five-year plan or long-term plan goals.<sup>115</sup> These ties are colored white in the graphs.

All ties in this network, identified as “edges,” are directed, meaning that actions originate from one node and are received by another. Directed edges appear as arrows on the graphs. Nodes associated with the PRC (to include Chinese film studios, CCP organizations, and PRC government organizations) are colored red. Nodes associated with the United States (American film studios) are colored blue.

### **The Overall Propaganda Organization**

The network that comprises the propaganda organization consists of 133 nodes overall. Of these, 25 are Chinese film production companies, 106 are American production companies, and two are affiliated with the CCP. The network can be seen in full in figure 1 in Appendix B.

## The CCP-aligned Central Hub Subnetwork

A more detailed view of the Central Hub that is aligned with the CCP can be seen below. This subnetwork consists of the CCP, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Chinese film studios that have invested in American film studios. Unlike in the United States, private companies are required to work with the government of the PRC due to the provisions of the 2017 National Security Law.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, Xi Jinping has pushed for the CCP to have a more active role in China's businesses by compelling them to include party members on their boards of directors. Far from being figureheads, these party members are often key decision makers who are involved in the companies' operations.<sup>117</sup> The legal requirement to cooperate with the government, the installment of party members in key leadership positions, as well as obligatory cooperation with the Central Propaganda Department mean that Chinese film studios are de facto agents of the state. The subnetwork can be seen in figure 2 in Appendix B.

The following Chinese film studios, legally obliged to cooperate with the Central Propaganda Department, have invested in American studios:

- Zhengfu Pictures
- China Film Group
- Ruyi Media
- Starlight Culture Entertainment Group
- Bona Film Group
- Emperor Motion Pictures
- TIK Films
- Tencent Pictures
- Sparkle Roll Media
- Huayi Brothers Media
- Kylin Pictures
- Hunan TV
- China Lion Entertainment
- Wanda Group
- China Media Capital
- China Movie Media Group
- Ali Baba Pictures
- Huahua Media
- Shanghai Film Group
- Perfect World Pictures
- China Movie Channel
- China FilmCo-Production Corporation
- Hishow Entertainment

As described in the previous sections, the CCP provides guidance to the Central Propaganda Department in terms of the themes and messages that it wants disseminated in its internal and external propaganda. The department in turn provides guidance to the different Chinese film studios. The Chinese

film studios also maintain ties to the CCP through the party members that occupy leadership positions within the studios themselves. The CCP and Central Propaganda Department dominate this network in terms of out-degree centrality due to the sheer number of collaboration and guidance ties, respectively, that they have with the film studios.<sup>118</sup>

### **Ties Between Chinese and American Film Studios**

The establishment of financial ties between Chinese and American film studios gives Chinese film studios, and by extension the CCP, a large degree of influence over American film studios in terms of the content that is in the resulting films. This influence can manifest in several ways. Regardless of the manifestation, American film companies are beholden to the wishes of the CCP once a financial relationship is established. Disney Studios, for example, worked closely with the China Film Group Corporation during the production of the live-action 2020 *Mulan* remake, going so far as to get the script approved by the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>119</sup> Other times, Chinese influence involves removing elements that go against the PRC's soft-power ambitions. Chinese diplomats intervened to force Sony to make drastic content changes to the 2014 *Robocop* reboot, as well as to the 2012 *Red Dawn* reboot.<sup>120</sup> In both instances, the changes removed elements that were unflattering for China. Leaked emails show other instances of an American film studio executive haggling with his Chinese counterparts about what is and is not acceptable to the CCP, such as the question about whether the 2015 animated film *Pixels* could depict the destruction of the Great Wall. Not limited to removing elements that the CCP would deem unflattering, another account from an American film executive details how Chinese investors took an increasingly active role in influencing co-productions' content.<sup>121</sup>

### **The Perfect World Pictures Financial Tie Subnetwork**

In terms of the overall network, Perfect World Pictures is one of the most influential film studios. Both its regular out-degree centrality score and weighted out-degree centrality scores (36 and 63, respectively) are the highest in the network. This means that Perfect World Pictures not only has the most one-to-one investment relationships with American film studios out of any of the Chinese film studios in the overall network; Perfect World has repeatedly leveraged many of these relationships to produce multiple films. The American film studios with whom Perfect World Pictures has the strongest relationships, as determined by tie weight, are Legendary Pictures with four co-productions, Focus Features with five co-productions, and Universal Pictures



with nine co-productions. The Perfect World Pictures Financial Tie Subnetwork can be seen in figure 3 in Appendix B.

Perfect World Pictures has financial ties with the following American film studios:

- Media Rights Capital
- Playtone
- Miramax
- Annapurna Pictures
- New Line Cinema
- Warner Brothers
- DreamWorks Pictures
- Universal Pictures
- Legendary Pictures
- Amblin Entertainment
- Blumhouse Productions
- Platinum Dunes
- Fade to Black Productions
- Captivate Entertainment
- RatPac Entertainment
- Artina Films
- Temple Hill Entertainment
- Plucky
- 87 North
- Roth Films
- Anonymous Content
- ImageMovers
- Feigco Entertainment
- Good Universe
- Monkeypaw Productions
- Odenkirk Proviissiero Entertainment
- New Balloon
- Will Packer Productions
- The Kennedy/Marshall Company
- Stay Gold Features
- Gold Circle Entertainment
- Blinding Edge Pictures
- Focus Features
- Team Downey
- Apatow Productions
- Etalon Films

### **The Huayi Brothers Media Financial Tie Subnetwork**

Huayi Brothers Media is the second most prominent network in terms of weighted out-degree centrality with a score of 34, but it comes in fifth in non-weighted out-degree centrality with a score of 16.<sup>122</sup> This discrepancy between weighted and nonweighted out-degree centrality scores is due entirely to its investment relationship with STX Films. The investment relationship between Huayi Brothers Media and STX films is the strongest in the entire overall network, with a tie weight of 12. Lakeshore Entertainment is a distant second with four co-productions, while Summit Entertainment trails even

further behind with two co-productions. The graph can be seen in figure 4 in Appendix B.

Huayi Brothers Media maintains financial ties with the following American film studios:

- Universal Pictures
- Blumhouse Productions
- Legendary Pictures
- Voltage Pictures
- Casey Silver Productions
- STK Films
- Thunder Road Films
- Summit Entertainment
- Route One Entertainment
- Lakeshore Entertainment
- Lionsgate
- Wonderland Sound and Vision
- Gracie Films
- AGBO
- Aperture Media Partners
- Closest to the Hole Productions

#### **The TIK Films Financial Tie Subnetwork**

Another subnetwork whose weighted and nonweighted out-degree centrality scores are grossly mismatched is that of TIK Films. Its nonweighted out-degree centrality score is seven, while its weighted out-degree centrality score is 26. This is due to TIK Film's repeated investments in Summit Entertainment and Lionsgate, which have tie weights of 8 and 9, respectively.

The Perfect World Pictures, Huayi Brothers Media, and TIK Films financial ties subnetworks are the three most influential subnetworks in the overall network when considering weighted out-degree centrality. The Chinese film studios that occupy central positions within these subnetworks appear to be the primary conduits with which the PRC is funneling money and influencing the content that appears in the films that result from these co-productions. This subnetwork can be found in figure 5 of Appendix B.

TIK Films maintains financial ties with these American film studios:

- Summit Entertainment
- Participant Media
- Lionsgate
- Lakeshore Entertainment
- The Tyler Perry Company
- CBS Films
- Thunder Road Films

A similar pattern emerges when looking at American film studios in terms of weighted in-degree centrality. While nonweighted in-degree centrality would simply reflect the number of investment partners that a film studio has,

weighted in-degree centrality reflects the strengths of recurring investment relationships between Chinese and American film studios.

### **American Investment Recipient: Lionsgate**

With a weighted in-degree centrality score of 20, Lionsgate appears to be one of the primary American film studios that the Chinese are leveraging for its soft-power designs in Hollywood. Despite only having four investment partners, it has received repeated investments from TIK Films, state-owned Hunan TV, and Emperor motion pictures. A graphical representation can be seen in figure 6 in Appendix B.

The following Chinese film studios are investors in Lionsgate:

- Emperor Motion Pictures
- Hunan TV
- Huayi Brothers Media
- TIK Films

### **American Investment Recipient: Paramount Pictures**

Although Paramount Pictures has a higher nonweighted in-degree centrality score than Lionsgate with a score of 8, its weighted in-degree centrality score is lower with a score of 18. This score is driven by repeated investments from Ali Baba Pictures, Huahua Media, the Shanghai Film Group, and single investments from other studios. A graphical representation can be seen in figure 7 in Appendix B.

The following Chinese production companies maintain ties with Paramount Pictures:

- Shanghai Film Group
- Huahua Media
- Ali Baba Pictures
- China Movie Media Group
- China Movie Channel
- Tencent Pictures
- China Film Co-Production Corporation
- China Film Group

### **American Investment Recipient: Summit Entertainment**

The third-highest recipient of Chinese investment is Summit Entertainment, tied with Universal Pictures. With a weighted in-degree centrality score of 15, it has received repeated investments from TIK Films and Huayi Brothers Media and singular investments from other Chinese film studios. A graphical representation can be seen in figure 8 in Appendix B.

The following Chinese film studios maintain financial ties with Summit Entertainment:

- Ruyi Media
- Bona Film Group
- Kylin Pictures
- Hishow Entertainment
- Emperor Motion Pictures
- Huayi Brothers Media
- TIK Films

### American Investment Recipient: Universal Pictures

Universal Pictures has the same weighted in-degree centrality score as Summit Entertainment. Although Universal Pictures has six investment partners, this score is primarily driven by repeated investments from Perfect World Pictures. A graphical representation is presented in figure 9 in Appendix B.

The following Chinese film studios maintain financial ties with Universal Pictures:

- China Film Co-Production Corporation
- China Film Group
- Perfect World Pictures
- Huayi Brothers Media
- Tencent Pictures
- Shanghai Film Group

The relationships between the CCP, the PRC's Central Propaganda Department, Chinese film studios, and American film studios create a direct line for steering influence into American homes and movie theaters. Per the network topography measures described above, it appears that the primary Chinese investors in Hollywood are Perfect World Pictures, Huayi Brothers Media, and TIK Films. These three studios have the highest weighted out-degree centrality measures of the 25 Chinese film studios in the network. Conversely, looking at the American film studios in terms of weighted in-degree centrality provides insight on which of them have received the most Chinese investment. Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment, Paramount Pictures, and Universal Pictures have the highest scores in this category.

The next section will explore which films have resulted from the relationships captured in this network and attempt to identify the PRC's possible desired target audiences.

### Target Audience

This section examines the audiences that the CCP is likely targeting as part of its external propaganda within the United States. After taking a wide view of the films that the PRC has invested in or co-produced, it further refines the

list by identifying which films have elements that feed into the PRC's soft-power goals. It continues by identifying the audience for that particular subsection of films and concludes that the resulting set of demographics is most likely the Central Propaganda Department's target audience.

Creating effective propaganda requires the propagandist to follow a specific process. First, the propagandist must determine the effect that it wants to achieve.<sup>123</sup> Upon determining this, the propagandist then decides which segment of a given population can best achieve that goal through engaging in a desired behavior; this population segment is the *target audience*. The propagandist would then proceed to analyze the target audience. One of the main points of analysis is discovering what sorts of media the target audience regularly consumes.<sup>124</sup> The propagandist would then proceed to create products with messaging that resonates with that target audience in particular.

As seen in the section titled "Structure of the Propaganda Organization", companies with connections to the PRC have been active in Hollywood via direct investment, film studio acquisitions, and co-producing movies with American studios. From 2003 to 2021, Chinese studios have either directly invested in or co-produced 147 films.<sup>125</sup> Of these, 33 have clear China Elements as described in this paper's methodology. This section will examine the rating distribution, genre distribution, and number of productions by year for the films with and without China Elements. Information related to genre, release year, co-production or investment status, and rating was gathered from the respective films' pages on IMDb. Films that are a product of either Chinese direct investment or Sino-American coproductions can be seen in Appendix C: Filmographies and Supplemental Graphs.

### **Film Ratings**

The ratings breakdown for the total number of films can be seen below. Since 2003, Sino-American co-productions have resulted in 18 films rated PG, 85 films rated PG-13, and 44 films rated R. Three were not rated. Conversely, the films containing China Elements had a different rating distribution. Seven are rated PG, 23 are rated PG-13, and two are rated R. One was not rated. Films rated PG-13 are the majority in both categories, comprising 57 percent of the overall list and 71 percent of the films with China Elements. A visual representation of this data can be seen in table 1 in Appendix C.

## **Film Genres**

Comedies and science-fiction films both comprise 17 percent of the total, while action/adventure films have the largest share out of any category with 26 percent of the total.

The genre selection of co-productions with China Elements is much more focused, with five genres versus the overall category's ten genres.

Action/adventure films and science-fiction films both comprise a third of the total for films with China Elements, with 33 percent respectively. Family films comprise 15 percent, martial-arts films comprise 12 percent, and comedies comprise only 6 percent. This breakdown differs with the genre distribution seen in the total number of films. While action/adventure films still dominate, they are tied for first place with science-fiction films in the China Element distribution. A graphical representation of this information can be seen in table 2 in Appendix C.

## **Release Dates**

Co-productions began in 2003 after the PRC's entry in the WTO, as described in the section titled "Context in Which the Propaganda Occurs."<sup>126</sup> Sino-American partnerships made an average of one co-production per year until 2015 with nine co-productions. The total per year then shot up dramatically in 2016, with 28 before hitting a high-water mark in 2018 with a total of 32. This number tapered down in 2019 and was even lower in 2020 and 2021, most likely due to external factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The films with China Elements follow the same basic pattern as the total number of co-productions. The overall number of co-productions with China Elements in earlier years was low compared to later years. The year 2016 saw a drastic increase in the total number of films, while 2017 saw fewer releases before the total reached 2016 levels again in 2018. The total declined again in 2019. Since then, the number of co-productions with China Elements has averaged three per year. Table 3 in Appendix C displays a graphical representation of release dates for the overall number of films and for the films containing China Elements.

## **Trends**

Several trends emerge when viewing the collection of co-productions as a whole. A Sino-American co-production will most often be rated PG-13 and fall into either the comedy, science-fiction, or action/adventure genre. Films with China Elements are more pigeonholed regarding genre and rating. They are

almost exclusively rated PG-13 (69 percent of films) and most often fall into either the science-fiction or action/adventure genres (66 percent of films).

Effective propaganda requires the consistent dissemination of messages to a specific target audience. Limiting consistent messaging to the sorts of media that a target audience regularly consumes presents a propagandist with the opportunity to access that target audience reliably and regularly.<sup>127</sup> The over-representation of science-fiction or action/adventure films rated PG-13 in the China Element category suggests that this is most likely the preferred genre/rating combination chosen by the Central Propaganda Department to consistently message a specific target audience. As seen in the series of graphs, Chinese studios' preference for this combination does not necessarily track with financial success. Information from the Motion Picture Association (MPA) about film attendance can help shed light on the target audience most likely to attend this sort of film.

### American Film Ratings and Associated Audiences

In the United States, the ages of a film's target audience are shaped in large part by the MPA's rating system. Created in 1968, this system labels films with one of five ratings:

- G: General Audiences. Films in this category are appropriate for all ages.<sup>128</sup>
- PG: Parental Guidance Suggested. Films in this category may contain material that is inappropriate for small children.
- PG-13: Parents Strongly Cautioned. Films in this category may contain material that is inappropriate for preteens.
- R: Restricted. These films contain adult material and are inappropriate for people younger than 17 years old. Children younger than 17 can see these films when accompanied by an adult.
- NC-17: Adults Only. People younger than 17 are not permitted, even with an adult.

Minors or adolescents that are otherwise too young for any movie rated R or NC-17 are prohibited from purchasing tickets and are often physically prevented from entering screening rooms showing those features. Of note, films carrying the NC-17 rating are exceedingly rare, as many theaters throughout the United States are hesitant to show them.<sup>129</sup>

Since 2000, the majority (58 percent, or 129 out of 220 films) of the top-ten highest-grossing films in the United States have been rated PG-13.<sup>130</sup> In terms of genre, action/adventure movies have been top earners since 2000, repre-

senting a total of 42 percent of top-ten earners (129 out of 220 films). Family films (38 out of 220, 17 percent), comedy films (25 out of 220, 11 percent), fantasy films (22 out of 220, 10 percent), and science-fiction films (21 out of 220, 9 percent) follow in descending order in terms of earnings. Tables 4 and 5 in Appendix C illustrate these points.

### **Determining the Target Audience**

Most films that have China Elements are rated PG-13. This rating helps bracket the target audience in terms of age. Although children younger than 13 are allowed to attend showings of films rated PG-13 when accompanied by an adult, this is relatively uncommon.<sup>131</sup> This places the floor of the target audience at 13 years old. Historical data about PG-13 film ticket sales helps further refine the age group, putting the ceiling at 39 years old. In the age groups comprising those aged 13 to 39 years old, people aged 18–24 and 25–39 buy the most tickets when compared with other age groups, with a combined average of 39 percent of overall sales. Ticket sales for PG-13 movies fall off sharply after 40 years old.<sup>132</sup> The likely intended age range for the target audience is, therefore, 18–39 years old.

The choice of genre provides insight into the likely gender of the target audience. Science-fiction and action movies are the most represented categories, each with 33 percent of the total offering China Elements. From a classification standpoint, however, there is a great deal of overlap between these two genres.<sup>133</sup> Action/adventure films often carry the subclassification of science fiction, and vice versa. Moreover, the two categories share characteristics such as “action, competition, and violence” that make them attractive to the same audiences; in this case, males prefer action/adventure and science-fiction films more than females do.<sup>134</sup> It is therefore not unreasonable to them as a single genre representing 66 percent of the total films when considering them in terms of their target audience.

Currently, the data is limited on how different ethnicities or races within the United States differ in their genre preferences. The data that does exist is inconclusive.<sup>135</sup> Historical data from the MPA provides some insight, however. Across the board, Caucasians living within the United States buy more cinema tickets than African Americans, Hispanics, or Asians. Caucasians are also the most represented ethnicity in top-grossing films, representing an average of around 50 percent of the audience for any given film.<sup>136</sup> As discussed earlier, the top-grossing films overlap considerably with the films that have China Elements. Given the rate of Caucasian viewership with topgrossing



films, it follows that the target audience's intended ethnicity is most likely Caucasian.

Audience details about films with China Elements appear to indicate that the CCP's desired target audience for soft-power cultivation propaganda delivered through films consists of Caucasian males aged 18–39. This determination does not preclude the possibility of members of other demographics from being impacted by films with China Elements, but it is less likely that they will be exposed to those messages because of the historical audience trends of the films regarding genre and rating.

### **Media Utilization Techniques**

*How would we flood village and city with our information? The people must learn how well I govern them. How would they know if we didn't tell them?*

—Frank Herbert, *Dune*<sup>137</sup>

This section will examine the PRC's media utilization techniques for influence activities in the United States. While the previous sections have established that the PRC has the necessary doctrine and propaganda organization in place to reach key target audiences, this section will examine the ways in which film is used as a vehicle for propaganda. It will then highlight historical examples in which governments have used film for propaganda. Examining the impact that film can have on a target audience's attitudes provides insight into why the PRC has chosen to continue using film to propagate the themes and messages that will be covered in section IX (“Special Techniques to Maximize Effect”).

### **Film as a Medium for Influence**

Film is an effective medium for influence for several reasons. First, researchers using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) technology to measure test participants' brain activity while watching films found that the activity engages more areas of a viewer's brain than purely audio or visual media.<sup>138</sup> This finding was more pronounced when researchers showed participants films that were structured in terms of plot, deliberate camera work, and deliberate sound design versus films showing static shots of scenes with no discernible plot. For influence purposes, a high level of engagement is an important factor for would-be propagandists. The “cognitive and emotional demands” presented by being absorbed in a plot's narrative leaves viewers “with little ability or motivation to

generate counterarguments. Absorption into a narrative is believed to be a convergent process, where all mental faculties are engaged in the narrative experience.”<sup>139</sup> Audiences generate counterarguments or other means of resistance when they are presented with material that is considered to be explicitly “influential,” like a campaign speech from a politician or a handbill. Since media like film and fiction novels are generally consumed for entertainment value, audiences do not anticipate them to be vehicles for influence, and those media are able to circumvent this resistance.<sup>140</sup>

Propagandists can take advantage of an audience’s lack of resistance while watching a film by obfuscating influential messaging within the film’s narrative. In this way, the narrative serves as a proverbial Trojan horse that a propagandist can use to infiltrate the “defensive structures” of the viewer’s resistance.<sup>141</sup> The social scientist Dr. Michael Slater has posited that the “use of narratives, in fact, may be one of the only strategies available for influencing the beliefs of those who are predisposed to disagree with the position espoused in the persuasive message.”<sup>142</sup> From China’s perspective, this is significant. Given Americans’ overwhelmingly negative view of the PRC, any attempts cultivate soft power by overtly disseminating pro-China messaging in films would be rejected by American audiences outright.<sup>143</sup> Surreptitiously obfuscating pro-China messages in films’ narratives would likely be more successful.<sup>144</sup>

### **How Governments Can Use Film to Shape Attitudes and Encourage Behaviors**

The CCP recognized film’s potential for influence early in its history.<sup>145</sup> The Central Propaganda Department’s earliest policy on film was that it, like other arts, would be allowed in communist territory only insofar as it could further the goals of the revolution. For practical purposes, film was also valuable during this time because it allowed the Party to disseminate messages to the largely illiterate peasant population. By eliminating audiences’ need to read, the department was able to include more people in the target audience.<sup>146</sup> Through extolling the virtues of the CCP and amplifying its successes, films “educated” and shaped the Chinese populace in a way that the Party deemed necessary.

One way that the CCP influenced target audiences was by presenting them with “revolutionary ideal” archetypes to emulate.<sup>147</sup> The Chinese Civil War provided numerous examples of these archetypes for the Party to prop up; their stories were often dramatized and exaggerated to fit the big screen. One such example was a PLA soldier named Lei Feng; orphaned at a young age when his parents were killed by Japanese soldiers, Lei Feng joined the communist cause after becoming convinced that only the CCP could save China.<sup>148</sup> He grew up serving in the PLA throughout the 1940s and 1950s before

being crushed by a telephone pole in 1962. Soon thereafter, the Central Propaganda Department started a campaign elevating Lei Feng to quasi-sainthood as a hero of the communist revolution. Mao wrote pamphlets beckoning the populace to “learn from Comrade Lei Feng,” posters were disseminated showing Lei Feng in various stages of his life, and several films were directed that told his life’s story.<sup>149</sup> Whatever Lei Feng’s faults in real life, the idealized film depiction of him was that of a young man totally devoted to the CCP: he pored over Mao’s writings, lived selflessly, and was always ready to lend a helping hand to whomever needed it. Ultimately, he was presented as the paragon of self-sacrifice for the average Chinese citizen to emulate as the country struggled with collectivization.

Overall, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of any propaganda campaign.<sup>150</sup> Although internal documents detailing the effectiveness of the Lei Feng campaign are unavailable outside official channels within the CCP, there are several effectiveness indicators that suggest the goal of encouraging the population to adopt a prescribed value system was effective. The transmission of “revolutionary values” through Lei Feng propaganda has been attributed to being one of the factors that led to the dogmatic excesses of China’s Cultural Revolution.<sup>151</sup> Specifically, Lei Feng’s devotion to Mao and the CCP inspired Chinese youth to follow Mao’s instructions to “get rid of those old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits” associated with traditional Chinese culture.<sup>152</sup> Other memoirs recount more benign examples of children emulating Lei Feng’s example by doing good deeds for their neighbors in secret.<sup>153</sup> Lei Feng continued to be a popular figure decades after his death. A 1996 film detailing his life, *Days without Lei Feng*, grossed millions of yuan in the Chinese box office and won several awards. To this day, to be called a “living Lei Feng” is a ubiquitous phrase that means to be selfless.<sup>154</sup>

Another way that governments can leverage film for propaganda is through the creation and dissemination of media showing stereotypes. In this context, a stereotype is defined as “the positive or negative beliefs that [a target audience holds] about the characteristics of a racial or ethnic group.”<sup>155</sup> While this practice is rightly viewed as unethical in many parts of the world today, several countries used propaganda films to paint the citizens of enemy countries as “the other” in the first half the twentieth century. This is because repeated depictions of stereotypes can push target audiences to accept them as reality, in turn changing how they behave toward the stereotyped group. Propagandists did this with the belief that a target audience that saw the denizens of another country as inherently evil would be more willing to fight in a war against that country. Conversely, the creation of positive stereotypes about other groups would likewise affect a target audience’s behavior toward that group.

The United States used film to propagate negative stereotypes extensively during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>156</sup> George Creel's Committee on Public Information, a government agency established to influence the American public during World War I, partnered with Hollywood for this very purpose.<sup>157</sup> As part of the "Hate the Hun" campaign, films were produced that depicted the average German soldier as a ruthless killer. These features were associated consistently with Germans in multiple films to the point that the stereotype became firmly entrenched to most Americans. This trend continued into World War II, where the US government again enlisted the entertainment industry to create propaganda. The resulting "Germans as Nazis" trope was so prevalent that it continues to this day.<sup>158</sup>

Film can be a powerful tool for propaganda. Its potential to engage audiences with engrossing narratives provides a way for propagandists to introduce messaging in a way that bypasses a viewer's resistance to influence. Whether it is through propagating value systems or establishing stereotypes, the continuous dissemination of coherent themes can have long-term effects on target audiences. As discussed in the methodology for this paper, identifying narrative coherence can help illuminate a propagandist's long-term goals.<sup>159</sup> The next section will examine how the PRC, through its de facto proxies in Hollywood, has leveraged the processes described in this section to influence American audiences.

### **Special Techniques to Maximize Effect**

*How could I forget when I have to think about you guys every time I watch a movie? You've ruined my life.*

—Shannon Houck, PhD<sup>160</sup>

This section examined films meeting certain criteria. The first was whether the film was a co-production by a film studio identified in the section titled "Structure of the Propaganda Organization." Of the films that met this criterion, the films that met the following conditions were deemed eligible for further analysis:

- the film featured a main or supporting character that is either a Chinese national or is ethnically Chinese;
- the film was filmed in China or a setting that is made to emulate China, be it a fantastical or realistic depiction;
- the film had references to China's current status as a rising power;

- the film had references to China's historical status as an Asian hegemon;
- the film had references to China's role in the Pacific Theater of World War II;
- the film had instances of overt comparisons between the "Western world" and China;
- the film had representations of Confucian or Taoist philosophies; and/or
- the film had themes dealing with "Asian unity" in general or the unification of China specifically.

These criteria deal directly with how the PRC and its citizens are seen by the outside world. Since cultivating soft power is a stated goal of the CCP, examining depictions of China or Chinese people in the films (the China Element defined earlier) provides a key insight into the themes and messages that the PRC is disseminating to American audiences.<sup>161</sup> Upon determining which films met the criteria listed above, we independently viewed them while taking notes. Christopher Vogler's book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* provided insight into general rules for how the plot, setting, and character archetypes interact in any given film.<sup>162</sup> This knowledge allowed us to structure the notes along those lines, noting transitions between acts, the significance of setting changes, as well as how and when character archetypes were most often used. After viewing the films in their entirety, we reviewed and compared our notes and examined how the China Element fit into the film, as described in the methodology of this paper.

After finding three or more instances of a similar manifestation of the China Element, we considered it to be part of a PRC-influenced narrative. Three exposures to a message are considered to be the minimum necessary to begin to change an audience's attitude toward a given object.<sup>163</sup> Additionally, considering three films as the minimum bar reduces the likelihood that the similarities are merely a coincidence.

Recurring themes that were found in the films annotated in the section titled "Target Audience" make up the rest of this section. Sections and subsections consist of a brief explanation of the theme in question and a description of how different films contributed to that theme.

### Chinese Supporting Characters as Specific Archetypes

Storytellers throughout history have used recurring character templates to tell stories.<sup>164</sup> Called "archetypes," these universal character types serve a specific function in the story and cut across all cultures and people groups; for example, a confident young hero or a wise old mentor would be familiar figures

anywhere in the world. Some kinds of fiction, however, have genre-specific archetypes: a spy movie set in the Cold War may feature a femme fatale, or a film set in the American West may follow the travels of a jaded antihero.

Archetype: The Benevolent Femme Fatale. One of the archetypes that appeared in several of the action/adventure films was that of a variation of the classic femme fatale. This standard archetype is usually manifested as a woman who uses violence to further her own ends, which are at odds with the protagonist's.<sup>165</sup> The version seen in the Chinese co-productions (hereafter called the "Benevolent Femme Fatale") has some small differences: although she uses violence to achieve her goals, she is accomplished in some other area as well. Additionally, she is key to resolving an impasse in the plot for the protagonist, and she is ethnically Chinese.

- *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2013) featured a character named Shao Liwen who was Chinese business magnate.<sup>166</sup> Although she was portrayed initially as an antagonist, she was truly on the side of the protagonists and was able to rally her considerable resources to help them during a confrontation with attacking monsters. In addition to providing aid, she also demonstrated her prowess at hand-to-hand combat while piloting a giant robot. Her personal intervention during the film's climax was the linchpin of the film's plot.
- *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) featured this archetype with the character Su Yueming.<sup>167</sup> Similar to Shao Liwen, she was a factory owner and martial-arts enthusiast who helped the film's protagonists when they were faced with an evil robot attack as they traveled through China. Throughout the film, other characters openly commented on her martial-arts abilities and expressed their admiration for her.
- *Mortal Engines* (2018) featured a character named Anna Fang.<sup>168</sup> A competent airship pilot, martial artist, and gunslinger, Fang appeared at the beginning of the second act with no prior introduction and rescued the film's protagonist from a predicament. Although Fang hailed from a fictionalized, future version of China called Shan-Guo (Shānguó, 山国, literally "Mountain Country"), her characterization was consistent with other entries in this subcategory.

Archetype: Chinese Female Scientist. Another female-specific archetype that appeared in Chinese-funded films was that of the Chinese Female Scientist. This archetype has characteristics similar to the Mentor archetype due to the advice that the character usually provides to the protagonist.<sup>169</sup> In keeping with the character's role as a Scientist, this advice or insight usually deals with

matters relating to science or the natural world. Otherwise, the character usually renders some sort of scientific aide to the protagonist.

- *The Martian* (2015) featured a scientist named Zhu Tao who worked at the Chinese National Space Administration.<sup>170</sup> When news broke that the film's protagonist, an American astronaut, was stranded on Mars, Zhu quickly assessed the situation and realized that top-secret Chinese rocket booster technology would provide NASA the capability needed to save the astronaut. She and her supervisor decided that it would serve the greater good to use the technology to rescue the stranded American.
- *Kong: Skull Island* (2017) featured a scientist named San Lin who accompanied a group of soldiers on a secret mission to the fictional Skull Island.<sup>171</sup> While there, she provided the protagonists with “world building” information about the megafauna present on the island.
- *The Meg* (2018) featured a character named Zhang Suyin, who was an accomplished marine biologist and miniature-submarine pilot.<sup>172</sup> When the titular megalodon emerged from the Marianas Trench and began wreaking havoc in the Pacific, she drew upon her knowledge of sharks to provide the protagonist with information he needed to subdue the beast.
- *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019) featured a character named Dr. Ilene Chen who served in much of the same role as *The Meg's* Zhang Suyin and *Kong: Skull Island's* San Lin. As the member of Monarch, a worldwide secret organization that monitors megafauna, she provided the film's protagonists with information that helped them resolve the difficulties presented by giant monsters.<sup>173</sup>

All these characters served a similar purpose in the overall plot. The Benevolent Femme Fatale was able to sweep aside seemingly insurmountable obstacles for the sake of the protagonist. While the Chinese Female Scientist archetype didn't use violence to solve the protagonist's problems, she provided background information or science-based solutions that helped the protagonist. As discussed in the section titled “Media Utilization Techniques,” the repeated depiction of a people group in media—whether positive or negative—can serve to create stereotypes. These stereotypes can in turn affect the target audience's real-life attitudes toward that people group.<sup>174</sup> In this case, Chinese film studios have attempted to establish these female-specific archetypes as representative of Chinese women. This tactic is not relegated solely to film; Chinese state media outlets routinely amplify female Chinese influencers that spread CCP sanctioned propaganda.<sup>175</sup> As of late 2022, this effort is currently active on six continents, and influencers create content that extolls

the virtues of the PRC in 25 different local languages. Using women in film in the same way is consistent with other influence methods that the PRC is currently using in other parts of the world.

### Competing Values: East Versus West

A theme that emerged several times was that of competing “Western” and “Eastern” value systems. The Eastern value systems espoused by Chinese characters were presented as being superior to those of their Western counterparts. Western (or Westernized Chinese) characters often struggled with this revelation, and a large part of their character development involved coming to accept the Eastern value system as superior and adopting it. Whether or not the value systems in question could accurately be attributed to the East or West in a real-world sense was largely irrelevant; once the attribution was made within the context of a given film, it was consistent. That being said, many of the Eastern values tracked closely with Confucian values, like those of filial piety and emphasizing the collective good over individual desires.<sup>176</sup>

Martial Arts as a Vehicle for Discipline and Character Development. The films within this subcategory used martial arts as the primary vehicle for value transmission and character development. In most of these films, the protagonist was either Western (or a Westernized Chinese person, in the case of *Birth of the Dragon*) and had to learn a martial art to overcome the difficulties presented by the plot. A Chinese Mentor figure was invariably involved in the learning process and guided the protagonist away from his Western values or ideas toward more enlightened Eastern ones.<sup>177</sup> Since the Chinese Mentor figure is such a prominent fixture in this subcategory, we have opted not to include it in the previous section dealing with archetypes to avoid redundancy.

- *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008) told the story of a meek youth from Boston named Jason who was transported to ancient China through the use of a magic staff.<sup>178</sup> While there, he met a drunken kung fu master named Lu Yan who taught him kung fu in a series of training montages. Although Jason was initially hesitant to accept Lu Yan’s lessons, the montages showed him growing in confidence, ability, and self-control. At the end of his training, Jason had the grit and determination needed to defeat the film’s antagonist and save China.
- *Karate Kid* (2010), a reboot of the 1984 classic of the same name, told the story of a young boy named Dre who moved to China from Detroit with his mother.<sup>179</sup> After running afoul of neighborhood bullies, Dre fell under the tutelage of his apartment’s handyman, Mr. Han, who was skilled in kung fu. Instead of emphasizing physical violence, Mr. Han stressed



the importance of finding inner peace and discipline. After internalizing these lessons, Dre defeated his bullies in a martial-arts tournament. This earned Dre their respect, as well as the admiration of his love interest.

- *Man of Tai Chi* (2013) followed a slightly different formula. It told the story of a young Chinese man named Tiger Chen who practiced the martial art of tai chi. When a shady Western businessman offered him money to fight, Tiger initially refused until his temple ran into money troubles.<sup>180</sup> He further strayed from his values as he earned more money, only to realize the error of his ways in the third act. After admitting he made a mistake, he internalized the spiritual lessons of tai chi, reconciled with his master, and defeated the film's antagonist. While previous films showed a Western person learning to be better through lessons taught by martial arts, this film showed a Chinese person being corrupted by a Western influence before being redeemed through the values instilled by his martial-arts instructor.
- *Birth of the Dragon* (2016) depicted a fictionalized version of Bruce Lee as he was teaching kung fu in San Francisco in the early 1960s. Flashy and arrogant, Lee's demeanor and decision to teach kung fu to Caucasians made him unpopular with other martial artists in both China and the United States.<sup>181</sup> When a Shaolin monk named Wong Jack-man came from China to take Lee to task for his transgression, the two engaged in verbal spats before eventually agreeing to an underground exhibition match to prove whose style was superior. Wong eventually gained the upper hand during the bout, impressing Lee with the grace and fluidity of his style. Lee came to realize the limitations that his style had placed upon him, both in a spiritual and physical sense, and accepted the tenets of Wong's teachings. The two then joined forces to vanquish the criminal underground in San Francisco's Chinatown.

The use of martial arts as a vehicle to transmit a value system is in keeping with the PRC's overall soft-power strategy to make certain facets of Chinese culture as attractive as possible. As traditional Chinese art forms, martial arts in their various incarnations specific to China (kung fu, tai chi, etc.) serve as the attractive cultural element that brings in members of the target audience. Entertained by the spectacle and violence of the bouts, the audience would be unaware that the messages that are being disseminated through the ever-present Mentor archetype are meant to make them associate China with superior values; conversely, the protagonist's transformation in any given film invariably serves to associate the negative traits at the beginning of the character's development arc with the West.

Martial Arts and Character Development: The Case of Kung Fu Panda. The *Kung Fu Panda* series is interesting when it comes to the question of Chinese influence in the American entertainment industry. While the first *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) was a commercial success in China, it raised questions as to why it was made by an American studio rather than a Chinese one.<sup>182</sup> CCP officials in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan Province, attempted to rectify the situation by inviting DreamWorks staff to observe pandas in their natural habitat and expand their knowledge of Chinese culture.<sup>183</sup> Although *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011) was not a Chinese co-production, the visit's influence on the film was clear; the film is more distinctly Chinese in its motifs (excluding the Japanese-style bamboo mats, paper walls, katana, and shuriken seen in the first) and themes.<sup>184</sup> *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), a Chinese-American co-production between the China Film Group Corporation and DreamWorks, leans even more heavily into Chinese-influenced themes.

The first *Kung Fu Panda* followed the “Hero’s Journey” narrative format.<sup>185</sup> The main character, Po, was a kung fu enthusiast panda who lived in a town in an idealized fictional version of ancient China.<sup>186</sup> After he stumbled upon a ceremony and was unexpectedly anointed as the “Dragon Warrior,” Po struggled to live up to his new title alongside local kung fu legends. He was eventually able to answer the “call to adventure” put forth by his anointing by believing in his potential as an individual. This gave him the confidence necessary to defeat the film’s antagonist, succeeding where his former mentors had failed.

*Kung Fu Panda 2* continued Po’s story. Now a full-fledged kung fu master, Po had to confront an antagonist that was using gunpowder weapons to subdue China.<sup>187</sup> Although Po was initially injured by the weaponry in a confrontation with the antagonist, he recovered under the tutelage of a mentor figure who taught Po to harness his inner peace. Having internalized this new lesson, Po defeated the antagonist despite his technological advantage.

*Kung Fu Panda 3* completed Po’s development arc and contains the most China Elements. The plot dealt with a long-dead villain figuring out a way to escape the afterlife and steal other deceased kung fu heroes’ life force, or *chi*, in the process.<sup>188</sup> This process in turn made the antagonist stronger. Confronted with seemingly insurmountable odds, Po turned to the local townspeople for help in defeating the villain and attempted to cultivate his own *chi*. By mastering his own *chi* and training the townsfolk in kung fu, Po gained the upper hand against the antagonist and banishes him back to the afterlife. Throughout all three films, Po transformed from a bumbling novice to wise master and brought peace to China.

The overall amount of Chinese influence in the three films increased over time. While the first installment of *Kung Fu Panda* had superficial motifs that

tied it to China, it was at its heart a standard Hero's Journey that could have just as easily been based around other forms of martial arts in other countries throughout Asia.<sup>189</sup> After the DreamWorks staff visit to Chengdu in 2008, the visual Chinese elements became more accurate, and the themes had also started to become more specifically Chinese. When the China Film Group Corporation finally came on board to do the co-production with DreamWorks for *Kung Fu Panda 3* in 2016, the transition was complete. Far from recognizing his worth as an individual being the key to success as in the first installment, Po instead had to encourage the peasantry to take up arms in what could be described only as an animated "people's war" against the antagonist and his minions. Furthermore, the heavy emphasis on chi cultivation in the third film constitutes a China Element whose roots go back to the times of Confucius, circa 500 BC. Confucian scholar Xinzhong Yao describes *chi* as "both the Supreme Ultimate—the source of the universe—and the driving force of endless changes. In the beginning, [*chi*] exists without form and is called the Great Void. . . . All things, creatures, and humans are made of consolidated [*chi*] and return to dissolved [*chi*]."<sup>190</sup> The concept of managing one's *chi* is also a cornerstone of traditional Chinese medicine; it is not confined to being a purely philosophical, religious, or martial concept.<sup>191</sup>

The *Kung Fu Panda* series saw a gradual shift in tones, imagery, and values from the first to the third installments. The motifs, architecture, and landscapes became more explicitly Chinese with each installment. Additionally, as Chinese entities became more involved in the production process, the films went from valuing the individual (Po's journey to believe in himself) to valuing the collective, rather than rely on himself, Po was most effective when working as a group with the other kung fu masters or when leading a peasant rebellion against *Kung Fu Panda 3*'s antagonist. While the *Kung Fu Panda* series lacked the blatant East-versus-West juxtapositions that other films in this category have displayed, Eastern values slowly replaced Western values throughout the course of the series.

The Transition from a Western Scoundrel to an Honorable Man. The films in this category dealt with the Western protagonist's transition from a Scoundrel to an Honorable Man in the context of an Eastern value system. In the cases of *Skiptrace* (2016) and *Great Wall* (2016), this transition was prodded by a Chinese Mentor figure that helped the Scoundrel see the error of his ways and prodded him toward self-improvement. While *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018) lacks a Chinese Mentor figure, its protagonist's development continued along the same track as the other two films.

- *Skiptrace* (2016) told the story of an American con man named Conor who witnessed a murder while gambling in Macau.<sup>192</sup> Soon thereafter, he attempted to flee China to avoid retribution from the mob. A Chinese detective named Benny was charged with tracking down Connor to testify at the murder trial. Much of the film dealt with their travels through China and working their way through comedic predicaments. While Conor was portrayed as a lowlife, Benny adhered to a strict honor code. Eventually, Conor came to realize that his troubles were his own doing and that Benny modeled a better way to live.
- *Great Wall* (2016) recounted the fictional account of two Europeans traveling along the Silk Road who fled to the Great Wall of China after a monster attack on their convoy.<sup>193</sup> Upon entering, they found themselves caught up in a series of battles side by side with Chinese soldiers against hordes of monsters attempting to breach the wall. During a pivotal scene, one of the Europeans, William, sat down with a commander of Chinese forces and talked about their childhoods. After he recounted stories growing up as a mercenary in Europe, she retorted that she fought solely for the safety of her people, while he fought only for personal gain. Deeply moved by the conversation, William resolved to emulate the commander by helping the Chinese defeat the threat to their country.
- *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018) told the story of a veteran giant robot pilot named Jake who had fallen into a hedonistic rut in the ruins of a mansion in California.<sup>194</sup> To avoid jail time after being arrested in the first act, he agreed to travel to China to train pilot cadets. Gradually, he began to see that his problems were his own doing and that true fulfillment lay in contributing toward the defense of the Pacific Rim.

The examples in this subcategory are less subtle than the ones involving using martial arts as a vehicle for value transmission. Instead, Chinese characters in these films often call a spade a spade and shame Western characters for their supposed lack of integrity. In the case of *Pacific Rim: Uprising*, another Western pilot served the function of showing the protagonist that his lifestyle was lacking. The practice of directly criticizing foreign countries and their cultures is regularly used by CCP-sponsored social media users; this practice in film is therefore consistent with other propaganda means.<sup>195</sup>

Living with Nature versus Subduing It. This subcategory dealt with a specific philosophical difference regarding how to deal with the natural world. In general, Western characters' first inclination in problems involving the natural world was to subdue it; Chinese characters, by contrast, advised finding harmony with nature. In other instances, Chinese characters strived to cor-

rect in imbalance that had occurred because of human interference. In the films, the inevitably negative result of trying to subdue nature vindicated the Chinese characters' viewpoints.

- In *Kong: Skull Island*, the Scientist San Lin advised the expedition's military escort against disturbing the island's environment.<sup>196</sup> The escort's commander rejected her advice and ordered his men to drop napalm on the jungle to flush out fauna for study. This action enraged King Kong, who subsequently destroyed several of the escort's helicopters in a fit of rage.
- *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* had a similar scenario. In a conversation with another character, Dr. Ilene Chen recounted how her grandmother and mother were also Monarch members who hoped to learn more about the megafauna and strengthen mankind's connection to nature.<sup>197</sup> She went on to say: "Slaying dragons is a Western concept. In the East, they are sacred creatures who brought wisdom and strength . . . even redemption."<sup>198</sup>
- *The Meg's* Zhang Suyin echoed this sentiment in the film's second act. After a marine biologist was killed on the ocean floor by the megalodon, many members of the research team in the undersea lab began discussing the best way to kill the beast.<sup>199</sup> Suyin was against this proposal and suggested that they instead capture it for later study to better understand sharks and their evolution. Although she was overruled by the other marine biologists, she was later vindicated when the death of the original megalodon prompted an even larger shark to emerge from the depths and terrorize the Pacific.
- The animated film *Abominable* (2019) opened with a yeti escaping from a lab run by a crooked British businessman in Shanghai.<sup>200</sup> A young girl named Yi discovered the yeti while he was on the lam and decided to help him return to Mount Everest. Throughout the film, there was a good deal of emphasis placed on Yi's relationship with the yeti and the natural world, which contrasted with the disregard for nature shown by the Western antagonist.

This narrative subcategory is likely propagated to steer global narratives regarding the PRC's role in propagating climate change. Although there is indeed a historical basis for Chinese characters' advocating for living in harmony with nature, this philosophy cannot be said to be widespread today.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, as of 2019 China had the dubious distinction of emitting more greenhouse gasses than the United States and all other industrialized countries combined.<sup>202</sup> The

propagation of this narrative, and the PRC's much-publicized pivot to fund clean energy as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, are likely meant to shift global perceptions about China's role as the primary worldwide polluter.<sup>203</sup>

The Emphasis on Confucian Values. Several of the films in this category have character interactions or plot developments that directly portray Confucian values. Confucianism is an ancient Chinese philosophical tradition that has its origins with Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BC.<sup>204</sup> Although its influence has waxed and waned throughout Chinese history, Confucianism has left an indelible impact on Chinese society that remains to this day. Its central tenets include maintaining reciprocal relationships to maintain societal integrity and prioritizing the collective good over the desires of the individual.

- The dialogue in *Great Wall* between the European mercenary and his Chinese counterpart had Confucian elements. The commander's emphasis on contributing to the collective prosperity of China at the possible expense of her own life and suppression of her personal desires was explicitly Confucian.<sup>205</sup>
- The 2017 *Power Rangers* reboot showcased the personal lives of several teenagers as they grappled with newfound powers. One of the teenagers, Zack, was ethnically Chinese and lived with his sick mother in a trailer park. He spoke Mandarin in the home and went to great lengths to take care of his bedridden mother.<sup>206</sup> This was a clear display of the Confucian value of filial piety in action. In the Confucian tradition, filial piety is considered to be the most important value, as the ancient Chinese considered a strong family unit to be the foundation for a stable society.<sup>207</sup> Part of a reciprocal relationship between parents and children, it posits that the care and resources that parents provide for their children while they are young imposes a lifelong obligation that the child must strive to repay. This involves caring for the parents as they grow older and striving to please them whenever possible.<sup>208</sup> Although some scenes characterized Zack as a charming rogue, the scenes showing him and his mother painted him as a dutiful son who was living up to the Confucian ideal.<sup>209</sup>
- The animated film *Over the Moon* (2020) told the story of a young girl named Fei Fei who lived with her parents in China. A montage early in the first act showed Fei Fei's mother falling ill and eventually passing away.<sup>210</sup> The main conflict of the film came when Fei Fei's father announced that he was ready to remarry and had a new girlfriend, named Ms. Zhong. Fei Fei rejected this outright, seeing it as a betrayal of her late mother. Her angst pushed her to run away from home. From a Confucian standpoint, Fei Fei violated the tenets of filial piety by not accept-

ing her father's desire to remarry.<sup>211</sup> The resulting disharmony within her extended family brought it into disarray. The film's conflict was solved only when Fei Fei returned home after a change of heart and told her father that she would be accepting of Ms. Zhong as her new step-mother; with this, she reinserted herself into her traditional place in the Confucian social hierarchy.

- *Wish Dragon* (2021), another animated film, told the story of a young man named Din who came across an enchanted teapot one day while exploring Shanghai.<sup>212</sup> After making a wish offhand later that day, a magic dragon named Long Zhu emerged from the lamp and told Din that he was entitled to three wishes. Throughout the course of the film, Long Zhu was characterized as cynical and greedy. During a low point for the character, he confided in Din that, while living, he was a ruler in ancient China. Instead of being benevolent and merciful, he was petty and cruel. After a long reign of enriching himself while neglecting personal relationships, he died alone. Upon arriving to the afterlife, the Lord of Heaven sentenced him to serve as a wish dragon for penance. Long Zhu's story about his background as an Earthly Ruler dealt with another one of the Confucian reciprocal relationships between a ruler and his subjects. While subjects are required to pay tribute and remain loyal to their rulers in the Confucian model, Rulers are in turn obligated to govern benevolently and provide for the common good.<sup>213</sup> Long Zhu's failure to do so meant that he not only died alone with no family or subjects to look after him but also was denied respite in the afterlife as well.<sup>214</sup>

Chinese-funded films are drawing on the supposed superiority of Confucianism to cultivate soft power. Repeated depictions of people adhering to Confucian principles as part of positive character growth or story arcs possibly serve to ingratiate this value system with the target audience. While there are certainly positive qualities associated with Confucianism, its emphasis on obeying authority as part of a reciprocal relationship between subjects and rulers has been abused by the Chinese government, both today and in the past.<sup>215</sup>

### **Fictionalized Depictions of China as an Idealized Location**

Fictionalized depictions of China in Chinese-funded films fell into two categories. The first depiction was an idealized version of present-day or the China of the past that gave the appearance of a clean, vibrant country with blue skies and safe streets. The other depiction was of a futuristic country with soaring skyscrapers, neon lights, and advanced technology. Some films made

overt comparisons between an idealized China and a depiction of the United States that emphasized urban decay or social turmoil.

Present or Past China as an Idealized Location:

- The depictions of Boston and ancient China in *The Forbidden Kingdom* presented a stark contrast to the viewer. While Boston was gritty, monochromatic, and rundown, China was vibrant and colorful.<sup>216</sup>
- *The Karate Kid* presented a similar juxtaposition. Establishing shots of Detroit at the beginning of the film showed a city racked with urban decay.<sup>217</sup> When the protagonist and his mother arrived in Beijing, however, they found a clean, orderly city that respectfully maintained ancient buildings next to modern skyscrapers. Throughout the course of the film, the protagonist's mother referred to China as a "magical place" where they could have a better life than what they had had in Detroit.<sup>218</sup>
- *Skiptrace* had several establishing shots of the Chinese countryside during the protagonists' travels. Majestic Chinese landscapes contrasted with establishing shots in Russia (which was bleak and run down) and Mongolia (which consisted of barren plains).<sup>219</sup>
- *Abominable* boasted several stunning computer-generated images of the Chinese countryside during the protagonists' travels with the yeti.<sup>220</sup>
- Much of the first and third acts of *Over the Moon* took place in a town that was modeled after tourist-attraction "water towns" near the Yangtze River.<sup>221</sup> The film opened with the protagonist and her family sitting on the banks of a canal under a willow tree while looking at the reflection of the moon on the surface of clean water.<sup>222</sup>

Emphasizing the natural beauty of China while downplaying factors like its ever-present pollution in Beijing or frequent manmade natural disasters helps create the impression among the target audience that the whole is as pleasant as its onscreen depiction.<sup>223</sup> This in turn could help increase "liking" for China or instill a desire to visit the PRC.<sup>224</sup> Whatever the motive, the emphasis on amplifying China's natural beauty is part of "telling China's story well" and China's plan to cultivate its soft power.<sup>225</sup>

Future China as an Idealized Location and the "China is the Future" Narrative. The films in this category emphasize China's supposed prowess in science and infrastructure. Set in the near future, the underlying soft-power message in these films is that China is set to continue its advancement along these axes well into the far future. The implication is that this progress is due to the CCP's leadership. The depiction in these films is in contrast with



Chinese-funded films' depictions of the West in the future, which is presented as being on the decline.<sup>226</sup>

- Set in 2044, *Looper* (2012) told the story of a hitman named Joe who lived and worked in Kansas City.<sup>227</sup> Establishing shots of the city were bleak. Homeless people huddled together in abandoned buildings, and derelict vehicles were strewn about the streets. Although Joe was paid in silver bullion for successful jobs, he routinely cashed it out for yuan, the currency of the PRC. At one point early in the film, Joe met a time traveler who advised him to retire in the PRC, literally saying, "I'm from the future . . . you should go to China." Joe followed his advice after saving enough money. In contrast with Kansas City, the future Shanghai was portrayed as a much more desirable locale.
- The plot of *The Martian* hinged on superior Chinese technology and engineering skills being leveraged to rescue an American astronaut.<sup>228</sup>
- *Now You See Me 2* (2016) told the story of a group of magicians who traveled to Macau to uncover a conspiracy.<sup>229</sup> Establishing shots of the city at night showed an impressive array of neon lights covering most buildings. One scene in which the group traveled to a laboratory with a large supercomputer reinforced the message that China is technologically advanced.
- *Skyscraper* (2018) similarly showed China's technological prowess in Hong Kong. The film's plot dealt with a security consultant that was hired to assess a new building in the city called the Pearl.<sup>230</sup> Lauded as being the most technologically advanced building on earth, it was built to be indestructible.
- *Over the Moon* (2020) placed a great deal of emphasis on China's technological advancement. The protagonist Fei Fei was inspired to build a homemade spaceship after hearing about China's space program.<sup>231</sup> She finalized ideas for her design after seeing Shanghai's bullet train being constructed.

Around 2012, CCP officials began to use the phrase "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind" to describe the vision they had for China's post-National Rejuvenation foreign policy.<sup>232</sup> This included a more active role in international institutions, "play[ing] its part as a major country and tak[ing] an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system."<sup>233</sup> The depictions of China in this subcategory likely contribute to that goal by making the PRC's ascension to hegemony seem inevitable. The juxtaposition of ultramodern cities and technological advancements feed into a theme of

inevitability or, as stated in *Looper*, that “China is the future.”<sup>234</sup> Not only isolated to film, the theme of Chinese inevitability is also seen in other propaganda put out by the PRC.<sup>235</sup>

### **Good Government: The Competence of Chinese Government Officials**

Another trend that emerged was the idealized depiction of Chinese government officials, especially those associated with the police force or military. Unlike the character of Long Zhu in the film *Wish Dragon*, these officials are depicted as living up to the Confucian ideal of providing security to the civilian population.

- A key subplot in *Man of Tai Chi* revolved around a detective who was attempting to uncover the antagonist’s underground fighting ring.<sup>236</sup> At the risk of her own life, the detective alerted Hong Kong’s police department about a large gathering of criminals and donors in the nick of time, effectively snuffing out the illicit network.
- Similarly, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* featured several scenes with the PRC’s government springing into action to deal with an alien threat.<sup>237</sup> These depictions of senior CCP officials contrasted sharply with depictions of American officials in the same film. While the Chinese officials were calm, collected, and decisive, the bumbling American officials were at a loss as to how to deal with the threat.
- *Skyscraper*, like *Man of Tai Chi*, featured hero detectives who were working parallel to the antagonist.<sup>238</sup> Although the lead detective mistakenly believed the protagonist to be responsible for starting a fire in the titular skyscraper, he realized his mistake in the end of the third act in time to bring the antagonist to justice.

The idealized portrayals of Chinese officials in Chinese-funded films are most likely intended to counteract what the PRC sees as unfairly harsh depictions in international media. Stories about the CCP’s abuses of power are commonplace; they include accounts of genocide, sexual assault, and corruption.<sup>239</sup>

The themes in this section covered subjects ranging from the depiction of Chinese characters, to the beauty of China’s landscapes, to the characterization of Chinese government officials. The themes correlate generally with what Chinese state media consider “Telling Good Chinese Stories” that contribute to the PRC’s cultivation of soft power.<sup>240</sup> This, coupled with the fact that these coherent themes appear in a relatively narrow band of films (as it pertains to rating and genre), suggests that the CCP has leveraged the financial networks in Hollywood described above (“Structure of the Propaganda

Organization”) to disseminate propaganda to American audiences and that it has been doing so for years.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Chinese film companies are legally bound to meet the demands of the government of the PRC.<sup>241</sup> As demonstrated above (“Structure of the Propaganda Organization”), the current paradigm between the PRC and Hollywood gives the CCP a direct line to disseminate propaganda to American audiences. The coherence and repetition of themes with soft-power implications in Chinese-funded American films analyzed in the section titled “Special Techniques to Maximize Effect” implies that this dissemination is already under way.<sup>242</sup> Improving worldwide audiences’ perceptions of China is key to its soft-power strategy and an important part of achieving National Rejuvenation.<sup>243</sup> It is imperative that decision makers within the US government mitigate Chinese influence in the American entertainment industry as part of the government’s overall strategy in the renewed era of great-power competition.<sup>244</sup>

One way to mitigate Chinese influence in the American entertainment industry is to put Chinese-funded American films into a larger geopolitical context. While some members of the target audience may notice that the opening credits include production companies whose logos have Chinese characters, they may not realize the connection that these studios have with the government of China. A clear disclaimer during the opening credits advising the audience that the film they are about to watch was funded in part by a company with connections to the CCP would achieve this in a simple, effective manner.

This method has already been used on various social media sites to label Russian state-funded media. Experiments conducted by social scientists at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy (Harvard Kennedy School) showed that labels can be effective in mitigating the effects of propaganda, but only if they are displayed in a way that is easily noticeable and digestible by the target audience.<sup>245</sup> Displaying a disclaimer prior to the screening of a film for an extended period (at least 60 seconds) would allow the audience to read it in full.

The second mitigation measure involves slightly changing and passing legislation introduced by the Senator Ted Cruz of Texas. the proposed Stopping Censorship, Restoring Integrity, and Protecting Talkies (SCRIPT) Act would limit the amount of “financial or technical assistance” provided for American films that are to be screened in China.<sup>246</sup> In particular, the bill would make it so that the US president would be the authority to approve funding or technical assistance if film studios provide details about prior collaboration with

PRC government officials and pledge to forego future collaboration. While this bill is an important step in the right direction due to its recognition of the problem set, it should widen the aperture in terms of enforcement. Simply withholding federal funding or technical assistance is situational to the point that it would likely not have an adequate impact. Imposing additional fines based on a percentage of profits earned in the China market or otherwise levying tariffs on Sino-American co-productions as foreign products would place costs on film studios, thereby making them reevaluate their relationships with the PRC.

Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota has introduced legislation to establish a Foreign Malign Influence Response Center nested within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Still pending, this proposed organization would include analysts whose primary mission would be to “[analyze] and [integrate] all intelligence possessed or acquired by the United States Government pertaining to foreign malign influence.”<sup>247</sup> The legislation goes on to define “foreign malign influence” as “any hostile effort undertaken by, at the direction of, or on behalf of or with the substantial support of, the government of a covered foreign country with the objective of influencing . . . the public opinion within the United States.”<sup>248</sup> The activities described in this paper appear to fit the definition posited by Senator Klobuchar. Passing this legislation would create the mechanism needed to illuminate the PRC’s ongoing influence activities and inform decision makers on how to mitigate it.

Finally, there are opportunities for further research in this area. The films analyzed for this paper primarily addressed the PRC’s soft-power ambitions, but these only accounted for 33 films out of a total of 147. A survey of the rest of the films would likely uncover other consistent themes that are not necessarily related to the PRC but may be tied to other Chinese propaganda goals. Furthermore, the scope of this paper extended only to the American entertainment industry. The Central Propaganda Department is a vast bureaucracy pursuing ongoing activities across global markets.<sup>249</sup> There is ample room for service members in the Psychological Operations or Influence Operations career fields to map Chinese influence networks in their respective Geographic Combatant Commands.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
KMT	Kuo Min Tang (Nationalist Party)
MPA	Motion Picture Association
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television
SNA	social network analysis
WTO	World Trade Organization



# Appendix B

## Structure of the Propaganda Organization: Subnetworks

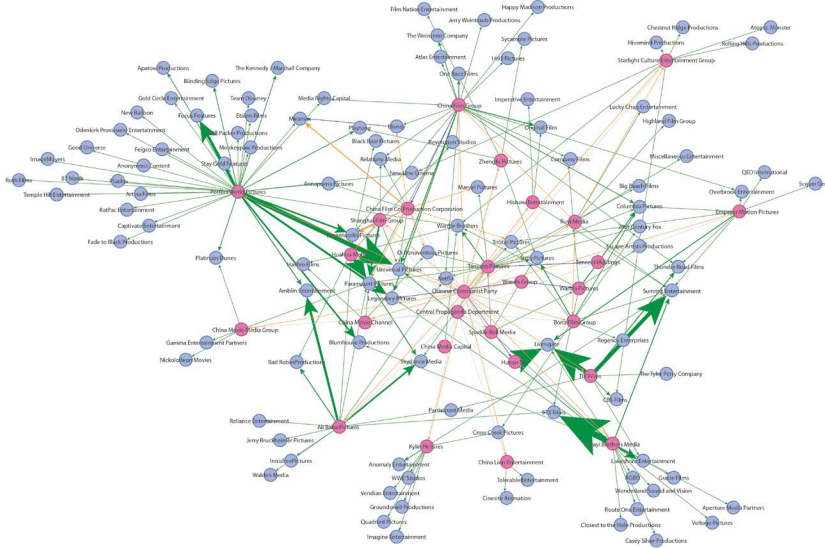


Figure 1. The overall propaganda organization

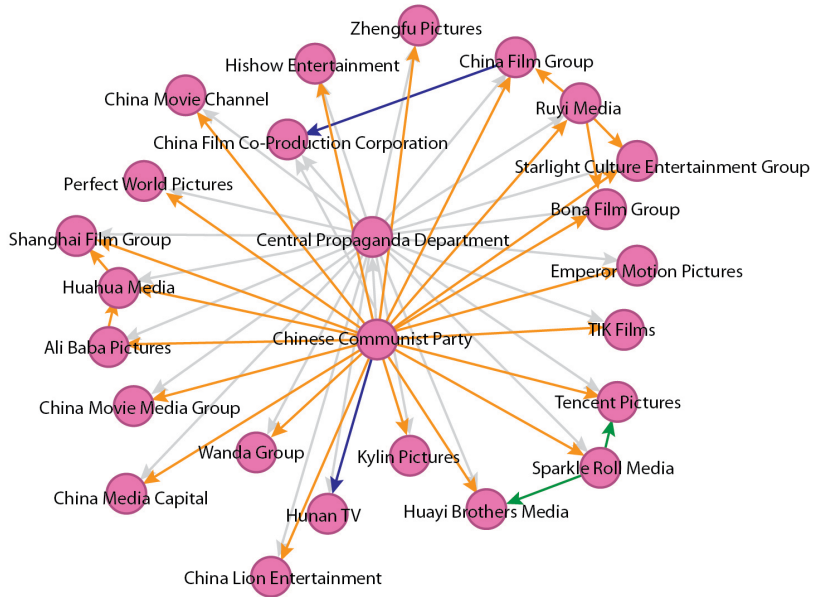
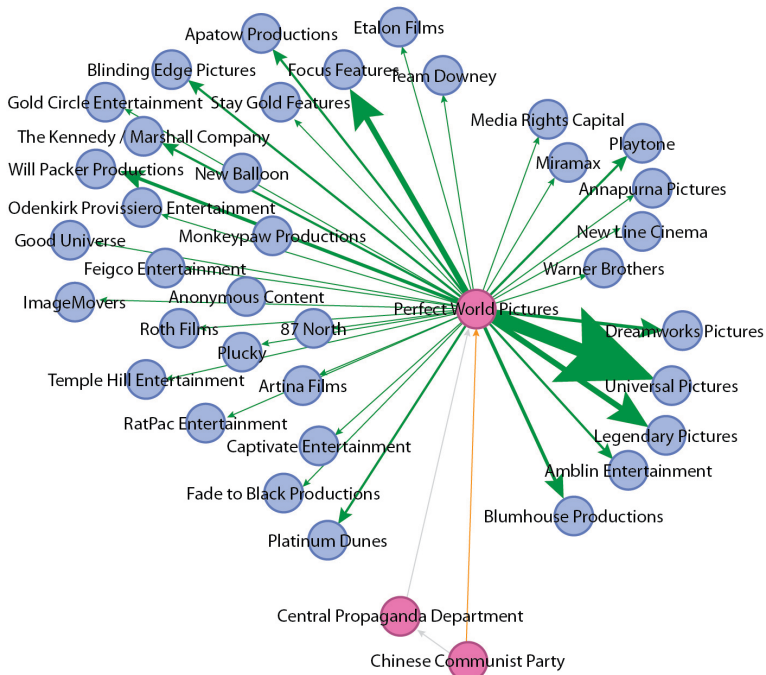
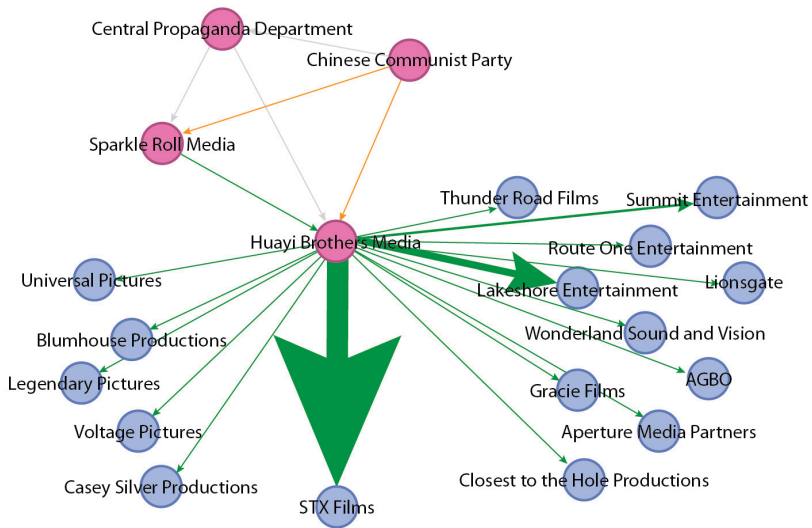


Figure 2. The CCP-aligned central hub network

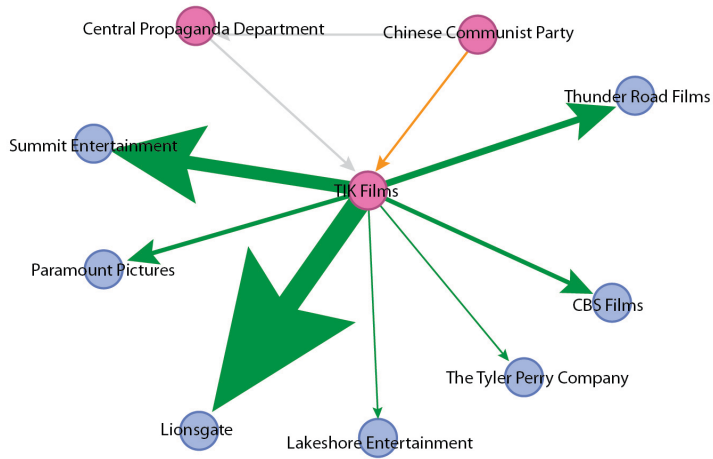




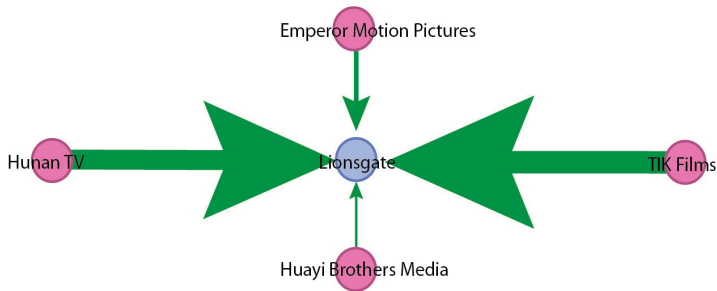
**Figure 3. The Perfect World Pictures financial tie subnetwork**



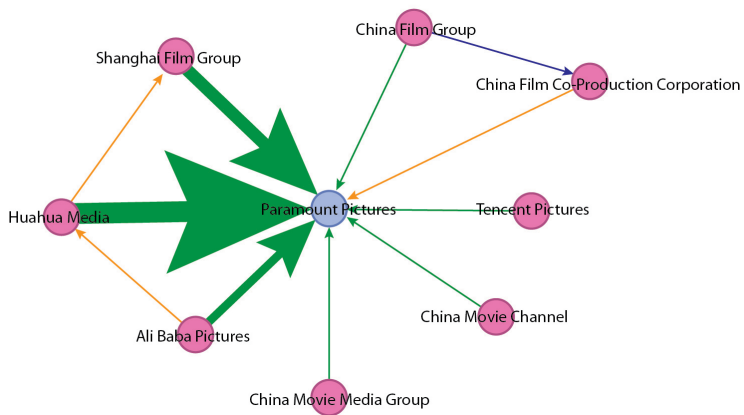
**Figure 4. The Huayi Brothers Media financial tie subnetwork**



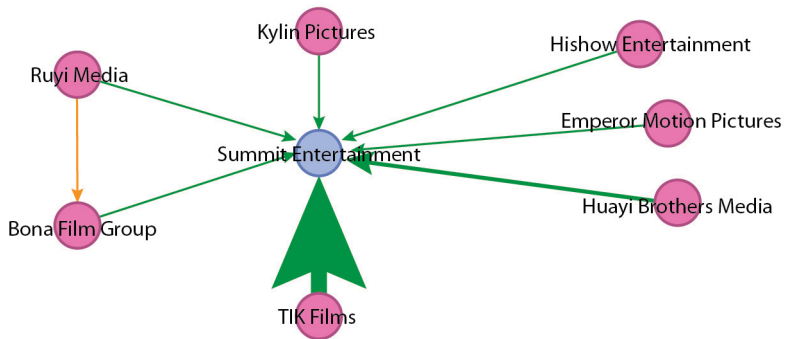
**Figure 5. The TIK films financial tie subnetwork**



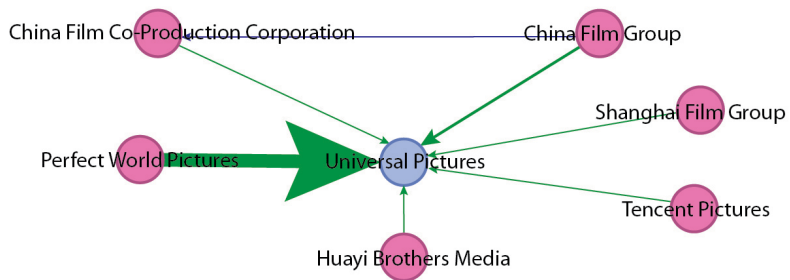
**Figure 6. American investment recipient: Lionsgate**



**Figure 7. American investment recipient: Paramount Pictures**



**Figure 8. American investment recipient: Summit Entertainment**



**Figure 9. American investment recipient: Universal Pictures**

## Appendix C

### **Filmographies (Tables) and Supplemental Graphs**

The films that were used to determine the Target Audience (see the section titled “Target Audience”) are included in this appendix. Pertinent information includes the film’s title, release date, rating, Chinese investor(s), and genre. If a film meets the criteria for further analysis as described in this paper’s methodology, three asterisks will precede the film’s title and its row will be highlighted in gray.

#### **Filmographies (Tables)**

**Table 1. American films produced with Chinese investment, 2003–2016**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Chinese Investor</b>	<b>Genre</b>
Kill Bill Volume 1	2003	R	China Film Co-Production Corporation	Martial Arts/Drama
***The Medallion	2003	PG-13	Emperor Motion Pictures	Martial Arts/Comedy
Mission: Impossible III	2006	PG-13	China Film Group	Action/Adventure
***The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor	2008	PG-13	Shanghai Film Group	Action/Adventure
***Forbidden Kingdom	2008	PG-13	Huayi Brothers Media	Action/Adventure
***Karate Kid	2010	PG	China Film Group	Drama/Family
***Looper	2012	R	China Film Co-Production Corporation	Sci-fi/Action
***Man of Tai Chi	2013	R	China Film Group/ Wanda Pictures	Martial Arts/Drama
Seventh Son	2014	PG-13	China Film Group	Fantasy/Action
***Transformers: Age of Extinction	2014	PG-13	China Movie Channel	Sci-fi/Action
John Wick	2014	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Action/Neo-noir
Pixels	2015	PG-13	China Film Group	Sci-fi/Action
The Last Witch Hunter	2015	PG-13	Hunan TV	Action/Fantasy
Furious 7	2015	PG-13	China Film Group	Thriller/Action
Sicario	2015	PG-13	Hunan TV	Thriller/Crime
Age of Adeline	2015	PG-13	Hunan TV	Romance/Fantasy
Southpaw	2015	R	Wanda Pictures	Drama/Sport
Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation	2015	PG-13	China Movie Channel/ Alibaba Pictures	Thriller/Action
***The Martian	2015	PG-13	Bona Film Group	Sci-fi/Drama
The Gift	2015	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Thriller/Mystery
Warcraft	2016	PG-13	Tencent Pictures, China Film Group, Huayi Brothers Media	Fantasy/Action

**Table 2. American films produced with Chinese Investment, 2016 (continued)**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Chinese Investor</b>	<b>Genre</b>
***Great Wall	2016	PG-13	China Film Group	Action/Adventure
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows	2016	PG-13	China Movie Media Group, Orange Sky Golden Harvest	Action/Adventure
Nocturnal Animals	2016	R	Perfect World Pictures	Thriller/Drama
***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny	2016	PG-13	China Film Group	Action/Adventure
***Kung Fu Panda 3	2016	PG	China Film Group	Martial Arts/Comedy
The Huntsman: Winter's War	2016	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Fantasy/Drama
Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising	2016	R	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy
Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping	2016	R	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy/Musical
Central Intelligence	2016	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Action/Comedy
***Birth of the Dragon	2016	PG-13	Kylin Pictures	Martial Arts/Drama
Jason Bourne	2016	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Action/Thriller
Bridget Jones' Baby	2016	R	Perfect World Pictures	Romance/Comedy
Almost Christmas	2016	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/Comedy
Allied	2016	R	Huahua Media	War/Romance
Star Trek Beyond	2016	PG-13	Huahua Media	Sci-Fi/Action
Jack Reacher: Never Go Back	2016	PG-13	Huahua Media, Shanghai Film Group	Action/Thriller
Billy Lynn's Long Half Time Walk	2016	R	Bona Film Group	War/Drama
Gods of Egypt	2016	PG-13	Hunan TV	Action/Adventure
***Now You See Me: The Second Act	2016	PG-13	Hunan TV	Adventure/Crime
***Skiptrace	2016	PG-13	Beijing Sparkle Roll Media Corporation	Action/Comedy
Lala Land	2016	PG-13	Hunan TV	Musical/Romance
Passengers	2016	PG-13	Wanda Pictures	Sci-fi/Romance
The Edge of Seventeen	2016	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Comedy/Drama
The Boy	2016	PG-13	Huayi Brothers Media	Horror/Thriller
Bad Moms	2016	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Comedy
Free State of Jones	2016	R	Huayi Brothers Media	War/Drama
***Rock Dog	2016	PG	Huayi Brothers Media	Family/Comedy

**Table 3. American films produced with Chinese investment, 2017–2018**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Chinese Investor</b>	<b>Genre</b>
<i>***Kong: Skull Island</i>	2017	PG-13	Tencent Pictures	Action/Adventure
<i>Wonder Woman</i>	2017	PG-13	Tencent Pictures, Wanda Pictures	Action/Adventure
<i>The Mummy</i>	2017	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Action/Horror
<i>John Wick: Chapter 2</i>	2017	R	Hunan TV	Action/Neo-noir
<i>Fifty Shades Darker</i>	2017	R	Perfect World Pictures	Romance/Drama
<i>Phantom Thread</i>	2017	R	Perfect World Pictures	Romance/Drama
<i>Girls Trip</i>	2017	R	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy
<i>Victoria and Abdul</i>	2017	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/History
<i>Darkest Hour</i>	2017	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	War/Drama
<i>The Snowman</i>	2017	R	Perfect World Pictures	Mystery/Crime
<i>Pitch Perfect 3</i>	2017	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Musical/Comedy
<i>Ghost in the Shell</i>	2017	PG-13	Huahua Media, Shanghai Film Group	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Baywatch</i>	2017	R	Huahua Media, Shanghai Film Group	Comedy/Action
<i>XXX: Return of Xander Cage</i>	2017	PG-13	Huahua Media, Shanghai Film Group	Action/Adventure
<i>Transformers: The Last Knight</i>	2017	PG-13	Huahua Media	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Suburbicon</i>	2017	R	Huahua Media	Crime/Comedy
<i>The Greatest Showman</i>	2017	PG	Bona Film Group	Musical/Drama
<i>Marshall</i>	2017	PG-13	Starlight Culture Entertainment Group	Legal Drama
<i>***Power Rangers</i>	2017	PG-13	Hunan TV	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Smurfs: Lost Village</i>	2017	PG	Wanda Pictures	Family/Comedy
<i>Fate of the Furious</i>	2017	PG-13	China Film Group	Action/Adventure
<i>Molly's Game</i>	2017	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Drama/Crime
<i>The Byebye Man</i>	2017	PG-13	Huayi Brothers Media	Horror/Thriller
<i>A Bad Moms Christmas</i>	2017	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Action/Adventure
<i>Ready Player One</i>	2018	PG-13	Alibaba Pictures	Sci-fi/Adventure
<i>***The Meg</i>	2018	PG-13	China Film Co-Production Corporation	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Venom</i>	2018	PG-13	Tencent Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Bumblebee</i>	2018	PG-13	Tencent Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>***Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom</i>	2018	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Sci-fi/Action

**Table 4. American Films Produced with Chinese Investment, 2018 (continued)**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Chinese Investor</b>	<b>Genre</b>
<i>Night School</i>	2018	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy
<i>Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again</i>	2018	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Romantic Comedy
<i>Mile 22</i>	2018	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Action/Thriller
<i>I Feel Pretty</i>	2018	PG-13	Huayi Brothers Media	Comedy
<i>Adrift</i>	2018	PG-13	Huayi Brothers Media	Romance/Adventure
<i>Blackkkkiansman</i>	2018	R	Perfect World Pictures	Crime/Drama
<i>The First Purge</i>	2018	R	Perfect World Pictures	Horror/Action
<i>Welcome to Marwen</i>	2018	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/Fantasy
<i>First Man</i>	2018	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/History
<i>Boy Erased</i>	2018	R	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/Teen
<b>***Mortal Engines</b>	2018	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Us</i>	2018	R	Perfect World Pictures	Horror/Thriller
<b>***Crazy Rich Asians</b>	2018	PG-13	Starlight Culture Entertainment Group	Romantic Comedy/Drama
<i>Green Book</i>	2018	PG-13	Alibaba Pictures	Drama/Comedy
<i>Mission Impossible: Fallout</i>	2018	PG-13	Alibaba Pictures	Action/Thriller
<b>***Skyscraper</b>	2018	PG-13	Wanda Pictures	Action/Thriller
<i>Peppermint</i>	2018	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Action/Thriller
<i>Mary, Queen of Scots</i>	2018	R	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/History
<i>Terminal</i>	2018	NR	Ruyi Media	Crime/Thriller
<i>Johnny English Strikes Again</i>	2018	PG	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy/Adventure
<i>Robin Hood</i>	2018	PG-13	Emperor Motion Pictures	Action/Adventure
<i>Hunter Killer</i>	2018	R	Hishow Entertainment	Action/Thriller
<i>Next Gen</i>	2018	PG	Alibaba Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Fifty Shades Freed</i>	2018	R	Perfect World Pictures	Romance/Drama

**Table 5. American films produced with Chinese investment, 2018–2020**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Chinese Investor</b>	<b>Genre</b>
<i>***Pacific Rim: Uprising</i>	2018	PG-13	Wanda Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Happy Time Murders</i>	2018	R	Huayi Brothers Media	Comedy/Mystery
<i>Terminator: Dark Fate</i>	2019	R	Tencent Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Little</i>	2019	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy/Romance
<i>Glass</i>	2019	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Thriller/Drama
<i>Cats</i>	2019	PG	Perfect World Pictures	Musical/Fantasy
<i>Downton Abbey</i>	2019	PG	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/Romance
<i>Last Christmas</i>	2019	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Romance/Comedy
<i>Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark</i>	2019	PG-13	Tencent Pictures/Starlight Culture Entertainment Group	Horror/Thriller
<i>A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood</i>	2019	PG	Tencent Pictures	Drama
<i>Harriet</i>	2019	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/History
<i>Yesterday</i>	2019	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Musical/Romance
<i>***Godzilla: King of the Monsters</i>	2019	PG-13	Huahua Media	Sci-fi/Action
<i>A Dog's Way Home</i>	2019	PG	Bona Film Group	Family/Adventure
<i>Once Upon a Time in Hollywood</i>	2019	R	Bona Film Group	Comedy/Drama
<i>Ad Astra</i>	2019	PG-13	Bona Film Group	Sci-fi/Thriller
<i>***Midway</i>	2019	PG-13	Bona Film Group/Ruyi Media	War/Action
<i>A Dog's Journey</i>	2019	PG	Alibaba Pictures	Adventure/Comedy-Drama
<i>Gemini Man</i>	2019	PG-13	Alibaba Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Ugly Dolls</i>	2019	PG	Alibaba Pictures	Family/Musical
<i>21 Bridges</i>	2019	R	Alibaba Pictures	Thriller/Action
<i>***Abominable</i>	2019	PG	Pearl Studio	Family/Adventure
<i>Men in Black: International</i>	2019	PG-13	Tencent Pictures	Sci-fi/Action
<i>***Mulan</i>	2020	PG-13	China Film Group/China Film Co-Production Corporation	Action/Adventure

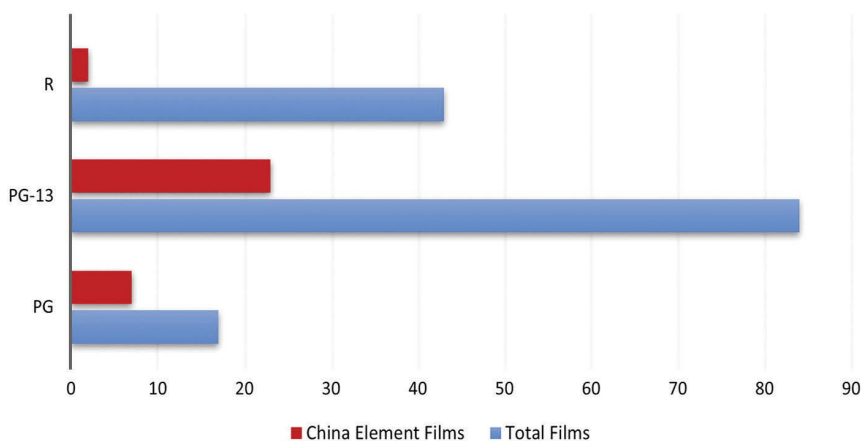


**Table 6. American films produced with Chinese investment, 2020 (continued)–2021**

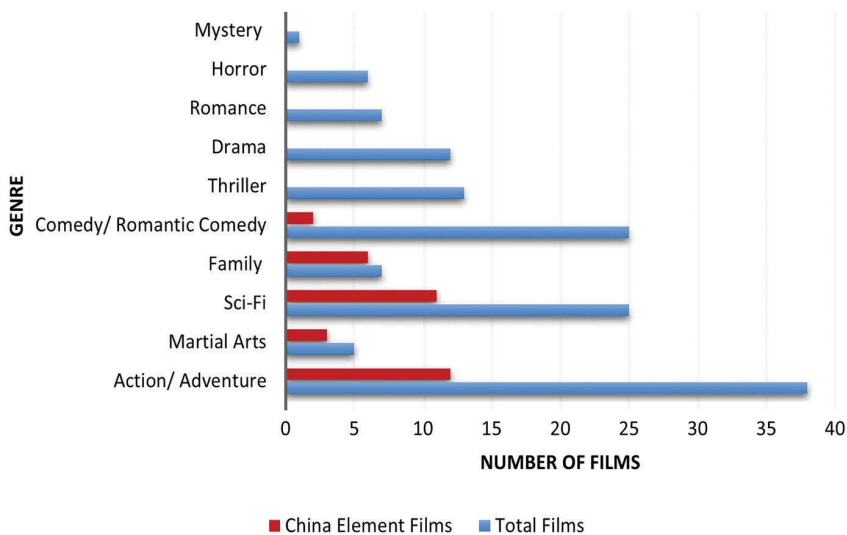
<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Chinese Investor</b>	<b>Genre</b>
<i>The High Note</i>	2020	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Romance/Musical
<i>The King of Staten Island</i>	2020	R	Perfect World Pictures	Comedy-Drama
<i>News of the World</i>	2020	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Drama/Action
<i>The Forever Purge</i>	2020	R	Perfect World Pictures	Horror/Action
<i>The Hunt</i>	2020	R	Perfect World Pictures	Thriller/Horror
<i>Old</i>	2020	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Thriller/Horror
<i>Dolittle</i>	2020	PG	Perfect World Pictures	Adventure/Comedy
<i>Bloodshot</i>	2020	PG-13	Bona Film Group	Action/Adventure
<i>Greyhound</i>	2020	PG-13	Zhengfu Pictures	Drama/Action
<i>Monster Hunter</i>	2020	PG-13	Tencent Pictures	Action
<i>Brahms: The Boy II</i>	2020	PG-13	Huayi Brothers Media	Thriller/Horror
*** <i>Over the Moon</i>	2020	PG	Pearl Studio	Family/Musical
*** <i>Wish Dragon</i>	2021	PG	Sparkle Roll Media/ Tencent Pictures	Comedy/Fantasy
<i>Malignant</i>	2021	R	Starlight Culture Entertainment Group	Thriller/Horror
*** <i>Rock Dog II: Rock Around the Park</i>	2021	NR	Huayi Brothers Media	Family/Musical
*** <i>Godzilla vs. Kong</i>	2021	PG-13	Legendary Entertainment	Sci-fi/Action
<i>Nobody</i>	2021	R	Perfect World Pictures	Thriller/Action
<i>Dear Evan Hansen</i>	2021	PG-13	Perfect World Pictures	Musical/Drama
<i>Extinct</i>	2021	NR	China Lion Entertainment	Comedy/Adventure
<i>Chaos Walking</i>	2021	PG-13	TIK Films	Sci-fi/Adventure

## Supplemental Graphs

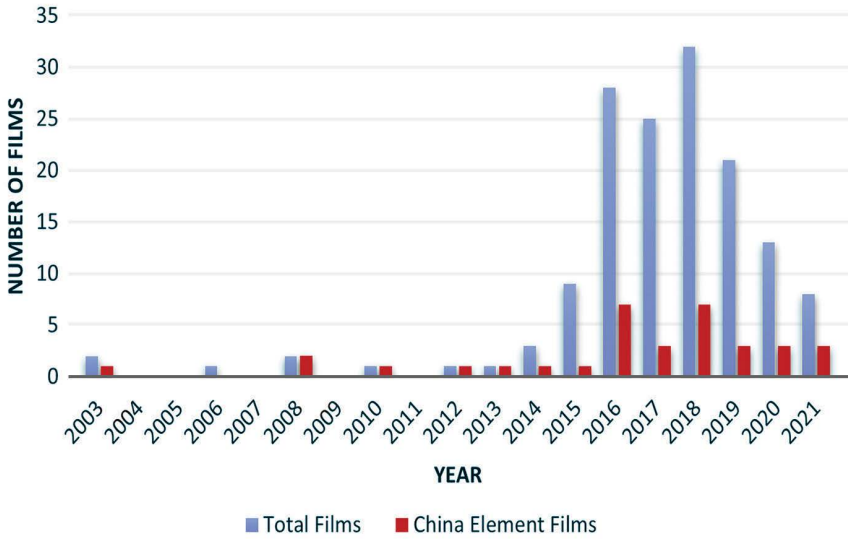
**Graph 1. Rating distribution of American films produced with Chinese investment since 2003**



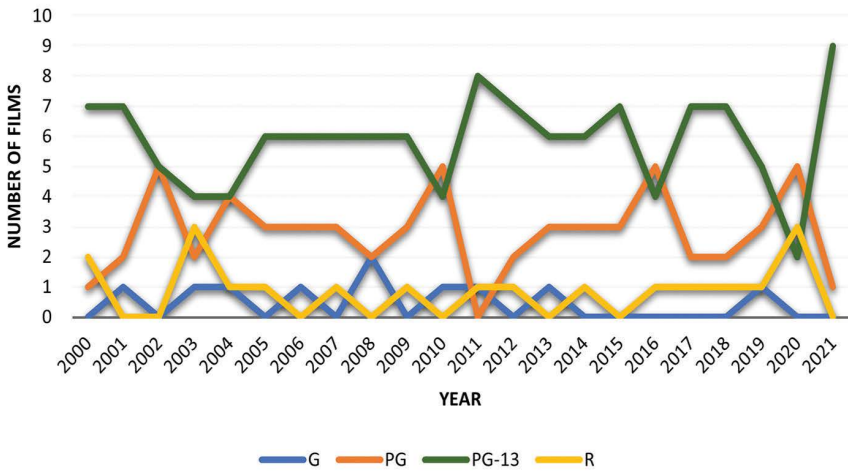
**Graph 2. Genre distribution of American films produced with Chinese investment since 2003**



**Graph 3. Release date distribution of American films produced with Chinese investment since 2003**



**Graph 4. Ratings of the top-ten highest-grossing films per year, 2000–2021**



**Graph 5. Genres of the top-ten highest-grossing films per year, 2000–2021**

