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Exploring Chinese audience's responses toward American film representations of Chinese culture and people

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EXPLORING CHINESE AUDIENCE'S RESPONSES
TOWARD AMERICAN FILM REPRESENTATIONS
OF CHINESE CULTURE AND PEOPLE

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Communication Division

Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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This project, created by

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under the guidance of a faculty committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on the Chinese audience responses to Chinese media representations in American films. The goal of this project is to create a white paper that can be present to American film producers or potential movie investors who want to earn a bigger market share in China. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted among college students, addressing four research questions. Findings revealed that the participants in the focus group were able to identify and acknowledge the Chinese media representation and stereotypes in American feature films. Furthermore, most of the participants were positive towards Chinese elements incorporations and were capable of recognizing the motivations for doing so within the political economy of movie production. The participants were more active and insightful in elaborating on their ideas. Participants expressed their expectations and hopes for the future American films. They are willing to see more Chinese elements in the movies. However, the contents and the ways the Chinese elements and culture are portrayed deserve prudent considerations.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I remember watching the movie *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016) in an American theater. When the famous Chinese actress Yang Ying, also known as Angelababy, appeared as the “hero” to save the main characters, I heard whispers from other Chinese audience members about her awkward appearance in the American film, as well as all the obvious guerilla advertising of Chinese products in the film. As a sequel to the first film, *Independence Day: Resurgence* is clearly an American science fiction movie, yet the appearance of a Chinese character surprised the audience.

Satchel (2017) describes how the political economy of filmmaking is a strong factor that affects the film production and distribution (p. 65). The term “political economy of filmmaking” refers to how the production and distribution of a film is influenced by market pressures, mass culture, and political or legal forces (p. 65). Movie production at the feature film level is not, unfortunately, strictly about telling a story, but many other competitive pressures bear influence. As the competition grows fiercer in the movie industry, American filmmakers need to draw bigger audiences in order to increase profits. Therefore, having the screenwriter tell a story that contains accurate depictions of Chinese people and culture will help in attracting Chinese audiences to movie screenings of American feature films in China.

Because of strengthened cooperation between the United States and Chinese governments and the film industry, the increasing number of Chinese investments overseas, and the expanding market of Chinese movie viewers in the past decade, more and more filmmakers have turned toward the Chinese market, hoping to gain a bigger market share in China (Lederer & Brownlow, 2016, p.15; *Wall Street Journal*, 2016). In response to a World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute regarding films, China reached an agreement with the US in 2012, which allows 14 more premium format movies (IMAX, 3D) to the Chinese market, and allows an increase of box office share of American studios from 13% to 25% (Waxman, 2012). Thus, American filmmakers have incorporated more Chinese culture in terms of characters, stories, and traits into American movies than ever before, in the hopes of appealing to Chinese audiences in order to gain market share and earn profits.

In addition to governmental cooperation, industry associations in both countries have forged their own agreements. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) signed an agreement with China Film Group Corporation, the only organization that has the right to import movies to China, at the end of 2015. This agreement, entitled “Agreement on Cooperation in Importation and Distribution of Revenue-Sharing Films” (or “分行影片进口发行合作协议“ in Chinese), outlined the main points of how the US and China will work together to enhance a more open environment for the film industry

(Dresden, 2015). As stated in the agreement: “US rights holders will receive 25% of net revenue without any additional withholding for taxes or marketing expenses”; and “US rights holders will be able to audit Chinese distributors, sub-distributors, and exhibitors with regard to ticket sales and revenue” (Dresden). Both points guaranteed some rights of American movie producers related to revenue and distribution in China. The agreement also demonstrated the possibility of gradually relaxing the strict quota limits on importing revenue sharing movies, and is signaling a desire and openness to more American movies being imported into and screened in China.

Aside from the political agreement, huge investments from China are going into the American film industry. In 2016, chairman of the Chinese-based Dalian Wanda Group was in talks about buying a stake with some of the major American films production companies, and successfully signed contracts with one of the “Big Six” companies in Hollywood, Legendary Entertainment, making them one of the biggest film companies in the world (Faughnder & Pierson, 2016; Tan, 2016). Dalian Wanda wants to learn more about how American film companies operate so as to strengthen the local skills and technology of filmmaking in China. With this economic control, Legendary Entertainment provides a competitive advantage for American film producers who want to cooperate with Chinese companies. It also makes it easier for American films to enter the Chinese market because of their cooperative relation with Chinese based companies.

In addition to the governmental and industry agreements and Chinese investment, the most important and attractive reason is the Chinese market. The *Wall Street Journal* (2016) reported that China has become the world's second biggest market for movies with \$3.7 billion USD¹ box-office revenue in the first six months of 2016. Even though the US still ranked first and reached \$5.56 billion USD in the same period, the Chinese market is vital for filmmakers wanting higher profits (*Wall Street Journal*). According to another annual movie market report released in 2017 (*1905.com*, 2017), Chinese box-office revenue hit \$6.5 billion USD in 2016, continuing its sixteenth year of continuous growth. The number of movie visits by Chinese audiences surpassed North American audiences for the first time, growing to 1.37 billion times in 2016. In short, the Chinese market for films is ripe for expanding profits, with no sign that it will slow in the near future.

As the biggest single export market for American films, the Chinese market is very important for the US film industry (Mumford, 2017). According *1905.com*, which is the largest Chinese movie content provider in China and is a subsidiary of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television Program Channel, among the 364 movies screened in 2016 in China, 97 movies were imported from other countries through different ways of imports. Fifty-three of 97 movies were American

¹ Multiply USD by 7 to reach approximate Yuan (Chinese currency).

movies accounting for 84.63% of the total gross. Among the 86 movies that each received \$100 million in box-office revenues in 2016, 41 were imported.

In 2016, China took over the US's position as the country with the most movie screens. According to MPAA's "Theatrical Market Statistics 2015" report (2015), China was the largest international box office outside of the North America area, accounting for 17.7% (\$6.8 billion) of the global box office in 2015, followed by the UK with a total of \$1.9 billion. Among the top 100 grossing movies in 2016, the Chinese market played vital roles in whole ticket sales. For instance, the movie *Zootopia* (2016) hit \$1 billion worldwide with \$200 million in box office sales in China, accounting for 20% of the total gross of that feature film (Box Office Mojo, 2016). *Now You See Me 2* (2016), a movie that did not have as much popularity in the American market, but achieved 80% of its total gross overseas where the Chinese market took up nearly 29% of its sales, adding more than \$97 million in ticket sales to *Now You See Me 2*'s revenues (Box Office Mojo). The Chinese box office is expected to reach \$10.3 billion in 2017 and may hit \$15 billion in 2020 (Castillo, 2016), depending on COVID of course now. This fast growing movie market in China offers a greater chance of more profits for filmmakers. Thus, more and more Hollywood filmmakers will continue to incorporate Chinese culture in order to increase their share in the Chinese market.

The prosperous Chinese film industry is becoming the focus of movie producers from all over the world. Compared to its tremendous growth, the paths to quickly integrate into the Chinese market have not been so smooth. The Chinese film industry has its own characteristics that are different from the US, which require movie producers to recognize and understand the characteristics and take corresponding measures.

This paper will review research on media representation as conceptualized by Stuart Hall, the history of stereotypes of Chinese people and Asians in American films, and audience reception theory (Martin, 2007) as a guide for research design. In general, the study aims to uncover what kinds of representations of Chinese people in American films Chinese audiences see, how Chinese audiences respond to those representations, and how Chinese audiences want to see Chinese people being represented as in the movies. Formal research questions are presented in their own chapter following the literature review. Methodology for the study and a brief comment on foreseeable outcomes will be presented after the research questions chapter. The project will then transition to the findings concerning the four research questions and a discussion of the two major themes emanating from the findings, which are Chinese audience responses and external influences on Chinese media representations. In the final chapter, a white paper covering the main ideas of this research is presented, offering five recommendations for American movie producers.

CHAPTER TWO

System Analysis of the Film Industry in China

The tremendous growth of the Chinese film market has drawn widespread attention to this market. Yet, in contrast to the financial stimuli and even with increased government and industry cooperation, some Chinese rules and policies, especially strict state censorship regulation, constrain the goal of American movie producers to sell more movie tickets in China. The Chinese film industry is also affected by the Chinese culture that it has inherited for decades. In order to provide a more complete understanding of the Chinese film industry, a system analysis of the political, legal, and cultural aspects of the Chinese film industry was conducted.

Mianzi (face)

China is a country with a rich history. The culture, for thousands of years, has been deeply imprinted in people's lives and behaviors. There is a very important concept of "face," which plays a significant role in Chinese culture at all levels. Face or face-work, also known as *mianzi* in Chinese, is "the positive public image you seek to establish in social interactions" (Redmond, 2015). Goffman (1955) defined face "as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact (p. 213)." In Chinese culture, face is regarded as

“the primary concern in social interactions” (Oetzel et al., 2001). Face affects Chinese people on every level because it is:

...[A]n inevitable and unavoidable aspect of interpersonal encounters, connections, and relationships in almost every aspect of social life in China, ranging from informal personal interactions to the most ordered and formal elements of organizational and institutional relationships.” (Qi, 2011, p. 281)

Chinese people are living in a way that is “struggling for a balanced and harmonious meaning in their lifecycle owing to their concern for *mianzi*” (Tang, 2014). In order to maintain their face, prestige, and respect from others, Chinese people are making great efforts, even unconsciously.

Mianzi can be viewed as a tool that “helps individuals achieve the balance between personal desire and social morality.” On the one hand, Chinese people need to work hard or achieve some complements to gain their face. Face in Chinese culture is not only about personal achievements, but also community recognition (Pan, 2012). If a person’s efforts are recognized by society, they will gain a positive social image and gradually establish their social status and prestige. On the other hand, due to the concerns of maintaining face, Chinese people tend to talk and behave in an unassertive and unaggressive manner and do not like direct ways of speaking. The Chinese idea of face is based on collectivism so that they focus more on establishing a peaceful and comfortable

relationship within the group. Chinese people are more willing to keep each other's dignity and face. Therefore, the idea of face serves as a moderator between social harmony and personal social status.

The idea of face exists in all cultures, but the interpretations vary in different contexts of culture (Servaes, 2016). Both Chinese and American people pay attention to the idea of face; however, the differences in culture, values, and use of language result in distinct understandings of face among Chinese and American people. Chinese people are more concerned about other's face, whereas people from individualistic cultures show more concern for themselves (Oetzel et al., 2001). For instance, when receiving compliments, Americans will readily accept by saying "thank you" rather than reject them with self-deprecation like Chinese people usually do (Pan, 2012). Yet, self-deprecation does not mean that Chinese people do not agree with those compliments. Instead, Chinese people will consider self-deprecation as a way of respecting others in interpersonal connections. Due to the influence of face, Chinese people's expressions may not show their real purpose just by looking at the words. It is possible that audiences will choose to talk and comment on the movies from perspectives that are different from their real feelings (Pan, 2012).

As an important part of Chinese culture, the Chinese film industry is affected by the idea of face in every way. It is possible that the Chinese government tends to utilize a

strict censorship system to minimize or eliminate the negative portrayals of Chinese people and China. Furthermore, filmmakers should take the face of Chinese audiences into consideration in the process of movie production since improper representations of Chinese elements might be counterproductive. To recognize, understand, and respect the values of Chinese culture is a very important step for film producers.

Guanxi (connection)

Apart from *mianzi*, *guanxi* is also one of the most prominent characteristics in Chinese culture. Similar to face, *guanxi* exists as an inseparable part of Chinese culture and is critical for both people and organizations. While *mianzi* focuses on face-work, *guanxi* refers to connections between people or organizations (Buckley et al., 2006; Chen & Chen, 2004). *Guanxi* is to “draw on a web of connections to secure favors in personal and organizational relations” (Park & Luo, 2001). Literally, though, *guanxi* means relationship and connections. In the context of interpersonal communication and social intercourse, *guanxi* also contains mutual obligations, assurances, and understandings (Park & Luo, 2001; Provis, 2008).

In China, establishing healthy and good relationships is vital for conducting business. Good relationships help reduce uncertainty between two parties and therefore make cooperation easier. For foreign investors, *guanxi* provides “informal ways to reduce environmental uncertainty and opportunistic behavior” (Buckley et al., 2006, p.276).

Regarding the Chinese film industry, it is possible for those movie producers who have good relationships and a broad personal network to have a greater chance of being permitted to screen their films. *Guanxi* might not be the decisive factor in business decisions but should be taken seriously, as it will affect the flow of resources.

Maintaining a good and healthy *guanxi* with the audience is also critical because they are the ones that will pay for the tickets.

Mianzi and *guanxi* are not separate from each other but are intertwined in the cycle of interpersonal and social communications (Servaes, 2016). “They operate on a reciprocal basis, i.e., all parties of a business relationship must show respect to, and save *mianzi* for, each other” (Buckley et al., 2006, p.276). Chinese people communicate and interact with each other under the influence of *mianzi* and *guanxi*, as does Chinese society as a whole. By learning about the concepts of *mianzi* and *guanxi*, American film producers are able to have a better understanding of the Chinese film industry regarding audience responses and preferences. Film producers should be aware of these cultural characteristics and take them into consideration in the process of movie production.

Film Censorship System

The Chinese film censorship system has been known for years. It is also one of the most important ways of government intervention in the production and distribution of

movies in China. For film censorship, many countries, such as the United States and Europe, have adopted a classification system so that films can be categorized for a proper audience group (Wu, 2014). For example, the classification system established by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) divides movies into G (general audience), PG (parental guidance suggested), PG-13 (parents strongly cautioned), R (restricted), and NC-17 (adults only). Taiwan and Hong Kong also implement film classification systems that are similar to the US.

In contrast, Chinese censorship follows the rule of "censorship without classification" (Wu, 2014). Unlike the US, China does not have a film classification system. "There is no film classification system in our country, and it adopts a film censorship system that requires censorship before distribution, screening, import, or export" (Yao & Tan, 2017, p.3). The responsibilities of the system are to:

...manage film administrative affairs; guide and supervise film production, distribution, and screening; organize the review of film content; guide and coordinate major national film activities; undertake foreign cooperation in production, international cooperation and exchange of input and output films, etc." (China Film Administration)

In short, the censorship system has the right to ban any films or contents that are unsuitable for release. Every film will be reviewed by the film examination committee.

The personnel composition of the committee is diverse. Committee members come from all walks of life and are appointed by the government. The committee is responsible for film review and has the right to decide whether the film will be screened or not.

An important point to be mentioned is that because of strict government censorship; there are content restrictions on every movie permitted into the Chinese market. For example, Chinese people should not be depicted as villains in the movie; there should be no excessive violence or sexual nudity in the film. So as to increase the leverage of entering the Chinese market, filmmakers now are choosing to go through a “self-censorship” process and to incorporate Chinese cultures, stories, and characters, often as the protagonist like in *Independence Day: Resurgence*. Therefore, a lot of the films need re-editing of the objected contents in order to gain release permissions. It is one of the reasons that Chinese people and China have been depicted in a more positive way than previously in the twentieth century.

China has a long history of having films be at the service of politics. The Chinese government has been using film as a tool to promote its soft power for decades (Yang, 2016). The idea of “soft power” refers to the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Winkler & Nye, 2005, p.268). In contrast to hard power, which includes the economic, military, and technological strength of a country, soft power focuses on culture, political values, and foreign policy (Winkler &

Nye). The development of China's soft power is vital because it helps to strengthen the export capacity of Chinese culture, as well as Chinese people's confidence in Chinese culture. Furthermore, it is considered as a valid way to maintain social stability. The advancement of the Chinese film industry brings people with better content, values, and orientations to the industry. In order to "strengthen the party's centralized and unified leadership over news and publication, and to better utilize the special and important role of film in propaganda and ideology, culture and entertainment" (Shi & Huang, 2018), a state censorship system was created.

The formation of the film censorship system has a long history. When the Republic of China was founded, Kuo Ming Tang (the ruling party of the country from 1912 to 1949), first introduced film censorship in the form of legislation. The regulations restricted content seen as harmful to the social stability, "indecent," or "insulting to China" (Wu, 2014).

From the foundation of The People's Republic of China (PRC) (1949) to the decade of the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976), film has always been regarded as an important propaganda tool. After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, following what was understood in the Soviet Union concerning the relationship between the state and film industry, the Communist Party of China (CPC) decided to establish the film censorship system. Movies that contained anti-Communist, anti-Soviet, or anti-human rights content,

as well as films that were considered to propagate imperialism or promoted pornographic content, were forbidden during the time (Hu & Yao, 1989). The situation reached its peak in the 1960s. During the period of the Cultural Revolution, movies were “designed” to spread political thoughts that were identical to the party ideology and were regarded “as propaganda for Mao’s instructions and slogans” (Chen, 1994, p. 27). Furthermore, the strict governmental control over films resulted in a very low number of Chinese films produced in the 1960s.

In the late 1970s, the Chinese government started its so-called “reform and opening” policies. In those decades, more diversity was allowed in the films, but the economic reforms did not eliminate film’s role as a propaganda tool in the process (Yang, 2016). In 1988, the film management department released film censorship regulations, and that is the starting point of the legal formation of the Chinese film censorship system.

With China’s entry into the WTO in 2001, the Chinese government began to make huge investments in the culture industry, recognizing the importance of developing the film industry (Yang, 2016). As a result, the regulation was drafted and released. The current censorship system was created based on the “Regulations on the Administrative of Movies,” issued in 2001. The administration was renamed as State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) in 2013 (formerly the State

Administration of Radio, Film, and Television). In March 2018, the SAPPRFT was abolished.

Now, films are reviewed by the China Film Administration (CFA) within the Publicity Department. The press and publication management responsibilities and film management responsibilities are transferred from the State Council to the Publicity Department. The change of institutions shows that the Chinese government is paying more attention to the control over films (Ran, 2019).

The current film management regulations and film censorship regulations have gone through a long period of film practice and improvement, but they have been criticized. For example, the Chinese censorship system is complicated and diverse because the standards are very vague, and interpretations are determined by the review agency. Although the “Regulations on the Administrative of Movies” stipulated ten prohibitions, there are no hard-and-fast rules. The ambiguity of censorship standards has made it more difficult to satisfy the censors’ taste. Every theme and scene could be judged as indecent, no matter how patriotic it is. For example, the opacity of film censorship, the credibility of censors, the wide scope of censorship, the cumbersome censorship procedures, and the unspecific censorship standards have become the focus of controversy (Gu, 2010). State censorship has a strong impact on the Chinese film industry because every single film needs to go through the censorship system before

being shown to audiences, both domestic and international. Not only are American film producers facing pressure from this, but Chinese filmmakers are also finding their way to successfully pass the censorship process.

The existence of the censorship system has been a significant concern for all movie producers because there are no clear guidelines they can follow in the production process. The decisions are made by the CFA and the film examination committee. There are numerous cases of movies being forbidden in the Chinese market or filmmakers having to re-produce certain scenes due to censorship system decisions. However, censorship exists in almost every country in all kinds of forms. For example, the movie *Protégé* (2007) was cut by only 5 seconds in Mainland China, while it was cut by one minute in Hong Kong, two minutes in Singapore, and ten minutes in Malaysia (Chen, 2013). The Chinese government is not a singular case of a government having such control over the culture industry. Movie producers have to adjust to the system and find ways to “co-exist” with it so that they can survive in the movie market.

Movie Quota

The desire for American films to be screened in China is on the increase; however, the Chinese government only allows a certain number; its movie import quota is about 60 or so movies per year. There are three major ways American and other

foreign movies (not including movies produced in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) can be allowed to be screened in China.

Figure 1



Source: Macquarie Research, February 2017

The first way is called a “revenue-sharing” film. The government allows 34 movies each year to enter the Chinese market through this method, including 20 films in regular format and 14 in 3D or IMAX format (Castillo, 2016; Caswell et al., 2016; Macquarie, 2017). This potential policy would provide more opportunities for American feature films to be exported to China. Among the 34 movies allowed into the Chinese market, US companies only retain 25% of the revenue received in China (Caswell et al.). This number, 34, is actually an increase over previous quotas in this category as, during the recent trade talks between America and China, President Donald Trump and President Xi

Jinping reached an agreement to increase the number of movies allowed into China each year (Mumford, 2017).

The second way is called “flat-fee,” which means a Chinese company can buy out the right of distribution (Macquarie, 2017). Unlike the “revenue-sharing” model, filmmakers will not share revenues of the movie, so the Chinese company retains all box office revenues. The number of films allowed to enter China in this way is not fixed but remains consistent at 30 or so each year. This is seen as a supplement to the first model in order to satisfy the strong desires of Chinese moviegoers for foreign-produced films. Movies imported this way are generally not blockbusters, so film producers can still earn some money, albeit less than with the first model.

A third way to enter the Chinese market is to co-produce a film with a Chinese company, making the film not wholly foreign-produced (Caswell et al., 2016). In short, it is a “co-production” (Macquarie, 2017). With this approach, the film won’t be regarded as a foreign film, so it does not need to go through the import process. In other words, films produced this way will be labeled as Chinese movies but be screened as foreign films, and those movies can enjoy the same treatments as Chinese films. However, there are some additional requirements for co-produced films to be screened. These include having at least one Chinese main character, which is another reason why more and more American movies now include Chinese actors/actresses, although some don’t seamlessly

fit into the narrative (Caswell et al.), such as *Transformer: Age of Extinction* (2014) and *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016). The Chinese company must also provide at least one third of the total investment. The movie also needs to be filmed primarily, if not entirely, in China.

While foreign films are subject to quantitative restrictions in entering the Chinese market, they also face a very strict film censorship system, which has a great influence on both Chinese and American films.

The Film Law

There are several departmental rules and regulations of movies adopted after PRC's foundation in 1949. However, China has not had an official law enacted concerning the film industry for decades. After 14 years of continuous deliberation, the Chinese government officially passed a law in 2016, entitled "Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China" (hereinafter referred to as "The Film Law"), in order to provide a clear legal basis for the Chinese film industry. The Film Law was enacted "for the purposes of promoting the sound and thriving development of the film industry, advocating the socialist core values, regulating the film market order, and enriching the spiritual and cultural life of the people" (The Film Law, Chapter 1, Article 1).

The Film Law provides a strong guarantee for all aspects of the development of China's film industry. First, it simplified administrative approval procedures and provides clear management standards for film administration at all levels (Li, 2017). Second, this law stipulates that the annual time for the cinema to show domestic movies must not be less than two-thirds of the total annual movie time, which protects local films from a legal perspective (Liu & Zhao, 2017).

The Film Law also focuses on helping and protecting the local film production and screening by increasing the flexibility on film censorship, allowing local government to go through the censorship process. These rights belonged to SAPPRFT before the Film Law was enacted. Now, most of the rights, including the review of films, the filing of film scripts, and the approval of film festivals, have been delegated to the local governments (Liu & Zhao, 2017). The Film Law even sets up a “re-examination” mechanism for film review to deal with disputes. If one film failed in the examination review, and the producers had disagreements, the filmmakers are allowed to apply for another review session. Furthermore, the law regulates the professional ethics of people working in the film industry, stipulates penalties for several kinds of related violations, and encourages the screening of non-profit advertisements before movies.

The Film Law provides more opportunity for Chinese filmmakers for local film creation. It delivers a clear point that the Chinese government is paying more attention to

the local film industry and is supporting and encouraging Chinese companies to make investments in authentic Chinese films. It is viewed as a stimulus to promote and encourage the development of the Chinese film industry, one with ambitions to rival Hollywood.

The Film Law promotes the exchange of Chinese and foreign films, providing more possibilities for the development of film art. It is also conducive to the cooperation and exchange of domestic and foreign films. The Film Law allows and encourages foreign companies and investments to enter the Chinese market with legal conditions. Pure foreign investments and foreign persons are still not allowed to produce movies in China. However, co-production is encouraged, and the film will be regarded as a domestic film, which makes it easier for it to be screened in Chinese theaters. However, it also brings pressure to the local film companies because it will speed up the “survival of the fittest” in the Chinese film market. Those foreign companies that seek cooperation usually have strong financial resources and a strong production team. With fiercer competition, only the companies with better content and investment will survive in the Chinese market. The Film Law will serve as a filter of the Chinese local film market, eliminating the weaker competitors.

It is believed that the Film Law will bring more possibilities to the Chinese film industry. However, with these kinds of restrictions and the Chinese government explicitly

propping up its own film industry, foreign films, which are already facing a lot of pressure, will encounter more difficulties and competition in the Chinese market.

Summary

The rocketing growth of the Chinese market, increasing investments allocated to the American film industry, modifications to regulation restrictions, along with the traditional Chinese culture, have resulted in a complex but fertile environment for filmmakers related to opportunities to present more Chinese-related elements than in the past. Not only are the number of media representations of Chinese characters, settings, actors, and culture increasing, but the depictions and ways in which the Chinese are presented have also changed. Instead of roles showing them strictly as villains, Chinese characters are now portrayed in more diverse ways, e.g., as the protagonist or another important character in the unfolding narrative. While these representations, in some instances, have moved past older stereotypes that represent Chinese people or Asians as the *Yellow Peril* or the *Kung Fu master*, new stereotypes are emerging that portray Chinese people as “heroes” who are critical in problem-solving processes are becoming more popular in American films (e.g., *Independence Day: Resurgence*, 2016; *Now You See Me 2*, 2016).

Although the Chinese movie market has gradually become more open through government and industry cooperation and continued box office revenue growth, which

has facilitated an expansion of portrayals of Chinese people in American-produced films, little scholarly research has been conducted on the media representation of Chinese people in these films. In addition, very little to no research has been conducted on how Chinese audiences perceive these media representations. For movies that want to succeed in the Chinese market, Chinese audience feedback on the depictions of Chinese people is important. The quality of media representation can trigger or deactivate an audience's intention to watch the films, and even though the Chinese government reviews films for content, Chinese audience demands are still a significant factor in what movies are screened. Therefore, the purpose of this project is to explore the reactions and responses of Chinese audiences towards American feature film representations of Chinese people and Chinese culture, using a qualitative research approach. The aim is to allow Chinese audiences to evaluate the stereotypes as negative, positive, or a mix of both in some fashion. Its overall aim is to explore opportunities to develop guidance for American film productions seeking screening in China. While this study reviews the literature from a scholarly standpoint, its end goal is to develop a white paper with recommendations for American filmmakers based on Chinese audiences' responses in market research.

CHAPTER THREE

Literature Review

The project aims to provide a series of recommendations for American filmmakers for future film making for films aiming for the Chinese market and Chinese audiences. In order to explain why representations of Chinese in American films are important, Audience Reception Theory (ART) (Martin, 2007) will provide a theoretical and conceptual foundation for study design and data analysis as it clarifies the necessity and importance of hearing audience responses and reactions.

Therefore, the literature section will first discuss media representation in general and one of the outcomes of media representation—stereotype. Then it will provide an overview of the Chinese stereotypes which prevailed from the 20th century in American films. Following, ART will be in more detail.

Media Representation

Orgad (2012) defines representation as “the process of re-presenting, the process by which members of a culture use systems of signs to produce meaning” (p. 48). For example, colors themselves do not necessarily carry the meanings other than the color itself. However, the color red can represent fire, passion, love and war, and blue can represent calmness, intelligence, and sky. Broadly speaking, any kind of object can be seen as a form of representation regardless of its original meaning and function (Orgad, p.

45). As another example, “apple” became a representation of a successful technology company beyond its original meaning as a kind of fruit. Likewise, Disney used to be perceived primarily as the name of a company, but it has come to represent family, magic, love, and wonder. Representations, thus, produce meanings regardless of the original form and content.

In addition, representations also strengthen the difference between in-groups and out-groups. Satchel (2016) believes that representations function in two ways: “1) it establishes a way for individuals to align themselves within their social world, and 2) it provides codes for social exchange, to enable communication between members” (p. 30). “Media representations are the ways in which the media system portrays particular groups, communities, experiences, ideas, or topics from a particular ideological or value perspectives” (Tirocchi, 2014, p. 61). Rather than merely mirroring reality, media representation also serves to “re-present” or to actually create a new reality (Tirocchi, p. 61). Media representation, specifically, refers to content that “circulate[s] in the media space and carry symbolic content” (Orgad, 2012, p. 47). For example, media has presented alcoholic drinks as a component for having a mixer or a party, and soda usually stands for youth, energy, and vigor. Such connections are created through different forms of media representations.

Media representations differ from other representational objects in a way that its main goal is to produce meaning (Orgad, 2012). Not just simply reflecting the reality, media representation through forms like news, films, and television also creates “reality” by establishing a shared sense about people, institutions and society in particular ways (Fursich, 2010). Media representation in forms like news and films reproduce contents that have particular meanings, which are perceived as “reality” by audiences (Satchel, 2016, p. 20; Zhang, 2015, p. 4). What is portrayed in news or films do not perfectly present “truth,” but instead present a center point of value judgment. Therefore, messages delivered in media can have a strong influence on people’s self-perceptions, understandings, and perspectives on others (Kim, 2013).

Richardson (2010) asserts that popular cultural representations in media deserve critical attention because media is widely consumed (p. 2). Entertainment media such as films are a significant source in establishing people’s attitudes towards the outside world and shaping identities of both themselves and others (Larson, 2006, p. 13; Ramasubramanian, 2005, p. 245; Zhang, 2015). Films, “as one of the core feature of Western society, function as a means of reflecting on and creating” labels of different groups (Parungao, 2005). For instance, Ramasubramanian (2005) writes on the portrayals of India in western films. Because of the ignorance of out-group knowledge, the films perpetuate stereotypes in terms of national identities and ethnic groups. As a result, India

“was consistently portrayed as backward, uncivilized, savage, and traditional”

(Ramasubramanian, p. 243). Here we see how media representations produce meaning which establish a shared sense of the world, even if the shared sense is flawed.

Hall (1997b) believed that media representation was powerful for its capability of attaching meaning to images instead of leaving space for interpretations. Intentionally or not, the representations shown in media are able to attach very limited meaning to the images because of the limitations on time and form. It will confine audience's understanding towards particular groups. Erjavec (2001) mentions the directive function of media in attaching meaning to marginal groups as follows: Marginal groups—and among them ethnic minority groups—will never be selected as newsworthy unless they do or say something that fits the stereotype (Harley, 1982), which is defined as the representation and categorization of personalities according to their social function. A great deal of complex information on social group can be condense into the stereotypical presentation and categorization (p. 702-703).

Erjavec (2001) used the case of Slovenia to exemplify the function of distorted media representation. Erjavec (2001) analyzed discriminating news reports against Roma in eastern Europe. The results revealed that the massive news report which portrayed Roman as negative enhanced the discrimination against Romans. With repetitive deliveries of certain types of images, media representation leads to creating fixed images

of Roma—they are aggressive and bad. Erjavec (2001) expressed “how the thematic and form structures of the news report work to legitimate and naturalize discrimination against the Roma” (p. 699), while Roma and Roman were actually not as bad as those representations.

Other studies have been conducted on media representation and the impact of media representation on the represented group. Annunziato (2011) conducted research on *The Amanda Knox Case: The Representation of Italy in American Media Coverage*. The case was about the murder of a British student name Meredith Kercher in Italy in 2009. The Italian jury convicted American student Amanda Knox, who was a good friend of Meredith Kercher, of murdering Ms. Kercher. Annunziato revealed that American new media reports after the verdict devalued Italy by presenting Italy as a villainous country. The negative media coverage in the US reinforced a stereotypical understanding of Italy among Americans, although it was a flawed and incorrect understanding.

In research by Denov (2012) concerning child soldiers, connections were shown between media representation and the categorical themes of child soldiers as dangerous, hapless, and heroic (p. 281). The researcher pointed out that the news media film even tended to oversimplify the images of child soldiers, which did not provide a realistic picture (Denov, p. 281). Instead, child soldiers were struggling to live in an ambiguous

and paradoxical way, which could not be simply depicted as extremes in being dangerous, hapless, or heroic.

Media representation not only impacts how certain people are perceived, but it can also be used for political propaganda. Mawdsley (2008) conducted research on the media representation of China in British broadcasts from 2000 to mid-2007 due to the economic and political rise of China and its relationship with African countries. Mawdsley found that the representations of China in British media served to meet the British needs of geopolitical protection because China was portrayed as “‘guzzling,’ ‘aggressive,’ an ‘economic juggernaut,’ ‘insatiably,’ ‘thirsty,’ for oils and minerals, and ‘voraciously’ capitalist” (Mawdsley, p. 521). The repetitive negative portrayals positioned the Chinese as a threat to the British. The British audiences were only able to receive the negative information and representation of Chinese people like this so that their understandings towards this ethnic group became negative, which could have extended into national resentments because their safety was in danger. When the relationship between meaning and images become fixed, it perpetuates stereotypes. (Chaisson, 2000, p. 1). In this way, media representation can be utilized to influence various aspects of society due to its function of attaching meanings to objects.

Over a period of time, we tend to accumulate the fragmented information and messages we receive from those media representations about social groups

(Ramasubramanian, 2005, p. 244). As we think of those groups, the scenes and characters usually pop up first, which become our perceptions. When people access information that are inaccurate, incomplete, or unilateral, there comes some negative consequences.

Stereotype or stereotyping is one of the most prominent outcomes of biased media representation; therefore, it will be the focus of the following section.

Stereotype

Stereotyping is an integral part of media representation (Satchel, 2016, p. 32).

Hall defines stereotype as a means to “get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity” (Hall, 1997b, p. 258). A stereotype specifies the most prominent characteristics about objects. When discussing stereotypes and their effects on racialization in movies, Satchel (2016) pointed out that stereotypes function as justifications of in-groups’ privileges and out-groups’ burdens, which exceed its function as reflectors of reality (p. 31). Larson (2006) pointed out that stereotypes have strong symbolic power and control that some scholars prefer to call them “controlling images” (p. 17). One example is the images of black people established by the media as a dangerous, criminal, and less intelligent ethnic group (Ramasubramanian, 2005, p. 244). Ramasubramanian (2005) states that African people in Western films were

stereotypically portrayed as savage cannibals, while the westerners were the center of the story (p. 246). Such images exacerbate the problem of racism but have no basis in fact. Yet the media representation amplified the dark sides of this particular racial conflict, but failed to clarify the fact that those characteristics may exist in any group regardless of skin colors. As such, stereotypes emerge because they portray simple, vivid, easily grasped meanings of African peoples, and in this case, are not only errant, but also harmful to social relations.

As a result, stereotypes through media, whether it be news, entertainment, film, television, or other kinds of mass communication, can become the way we see the world. That is, as people watch more and more portrayals of a group, culture, or institution in the many different forms of media, people come to believe the stereotype as the reality. In thinking of other people and groups in solely stereotypical ways when they have no other information about them leads to those “pictures in our heads,” as Lippmann (1922) called it, that seldom reflect “reality” (Chen, 2006; Zhang, 2015, p. 4). Eichner (2014) supported this idea by stating that “people respond to media texts cognitively, emotionally, habitually and ritually, and integrate them practically and habitually in their daily life” (p. 72) without additional reflection or cognitive work. Novelist Adichie (2009) stated that “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the single story”.

According to research on 100 of the top-grossing films in 2013, only 4.4 % of the 3,932 speaking characters are Asian. The number one racial composition of character is white (74.1%), followed by black (14.1%) and Hispanic (4.9%) (Smith et al., 2014).

There are very limited resources allocated to Asian culture, let alone Chinese. To make matters worse, not only do racial minorities in American media remain rather invisible, but also media depiction of them is highly stereotyped. Even though audiences can now access various outlets of representations, the sustained stereotyped images maintain their powerful influence over audiences as well as the ethnic groups depicted in media.

American media have been stereotyping minorities groups, including Chinese and Asian, “by excluding them from coverage or by offering a limited range of representations” (Fursich, 2010, p.116). As a result, the American audience will perceive Chinese people and culture based on those scarce sources and biased representations, which can eventually create a stereotype within the society.

Since we are talking about stereotypes, it is very important and necessary to know how the stereotypes were established and reinforced. The focus of this study is on Chinese media representation in American feature films, and that is why we now turn to look at the stereotypes that were created over the years in American films related to Chinese and Asian depictions.

Chinese/Asian Stereotypes in American Films

Studies regarding media representation of Chinese people specifically are scarce because media representation of Asian and Asian Americans in films and televisions typically lacks distinctive national origins or an understanding of the diversity of Asian cultures and countries (Larson, 2006, p .68; Parungao, 2005; Zhang, 2015). Rather than looking specifically at Chinese, most research focuses on general ideas such as Asian or Asian American stereotypes in American films. There is no clear boundary between the images that portray Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, making the depictions vague and inaccurate. With the overgeneralizing of Asian cultures, Asian characters depicted in American feature films are based on Western understandings, and consequently are portraying Chinese stereotypes to American audiences (Zhang, 2015).

The history of media representation can be roughly divided into two eras. There was alienation between Western and Eastern countries because of geography, ideologies, and culture in the early 20th century. Therefore, media representations in American films during this time were mainly negative. As time moved, due to the changes of political and diplomatic relationship in the 1970s between the US and China, more and more Chinese elements were allowed and welcomed. From that time, more diverse representations of Asian cultures and Asian characters began to emerge in films and across genres.

Although research is limited, there are a few studies that specifically talk about Chinese media representation in recent years. Hollywood films have a very long history of portrayals of Chinese people and culture since the early 20th century (Marchetti et al., 2003). Chen (2006) examined Chinese media representation from 1910 to 2005 and identified seven themes about Chinese characters in early American films. Although some themes do focus on the positive side, which portray Chinese as hardworking, most are negative, such as “Yellow Peril,” “the exotic Chinese woman,” and “Chinatown as a place of absolute evil.” In addition, Wang (2012) explored Chinese women’s portrayals in American feature films by analyzing four films in the 20th century. In Wang’s analysis, Chinese women were characterized as sexual workers or somehow sexually related throughout the 20th century, like “China Dolls.” Parungao (2005) looked at Chinese representations in Hollywood throughout history, revealing the stereotypes of Chinese from economic and political perspectives, which provides very solid background information for further study. The next section will uncover the stereotypes that were presented in the past years with examples and what have changed or remain the same during the time.

Chinese/Asian Stereotypes Created in Early American Films (1910s-1970s)

In early American films, five typical stereotypes and representations of Chinese and Asian in American films emerge: Yellow Face, Yellow Peril, Dragon Lady, China Dolls, and Kung Fu Master. Brief descriptions of each of these follows.

Yellow face

Yellow Face was a popular trend in Hollywood in the 20th century. Yellow Face represents the skin color of Asians, and the term is used to refer to the fact that white actors and actresses are cast to play Asian roles:

[W]earing heavy white make-up as a base and exaggerated black make-up around the eyes, sometimes actually taping the eyes back to change their shape, using an accent imagined to ‘sound Asian,’ speaking words from a script that either sound vaguely like someone speaking an Asian language or that are distorted English or simply gibberish. (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 46)

It is, unfortunately, common practice to have Caucasian actors and actresses play Asian characters with heavy makeup and strong accents (Dong et al., 2008). Mickey Rooney's performance as Mr. Yunioshi in the classic 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) is a perfect example in this case. Mickey, a white American male actor, played a Japanese man with a loud voice, strong accent, and ugly appearance. *The Good Earth* (1937) tells a story about a Chinese community, but the all main characters were played by white Caucasian male actors. There is a tremendous lack of Asians telling their own

stories in older films, and the situation continues even in modern society. For example, in *Doctor Strange* (2016), the character “Ancient One,” who is a powerful sorcerer born in Tibet and also the mentor of Doctor Strange, was played by a white actor, Tilda Swinton. Although the character is not exactly a Chinese-based image, its strong Asian traits are a manifestation of the Yellow Face stereotype in Hollywood. The recently released *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) featured Scarlett Johansson is another example. Johansson played the role of a Japanese super hero, which was regarded as whitewashing—i.e., Yellow Face—the Asian character (Broderick & Mizoroki, 2016; Cho, 2017). By having white actors play Asian characters, these distorted depictions reveal an inferiority of Chinese and other Asians to the dominant white race in American feature films.

Yellow peril

One of the most noticeable early depictions of Asian and Asian Americans is Yellow Peril. The term “Yellow Peril,” derived from Europe, is “rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe” (Marchetti, 1993, p. 2). The “yellow peril combines racist terrors of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East” (Marchetti, p. 2). In the late 19th century, with large migrations of Asian labor from Asia to America for railroad construction, those movements were viewed by the dominant Euro-American society as a peril to a white Christian nation (Hamamoto, 1994,

p. 1; Kim, 2013). The Anti-Asian sentiments were encapsulated by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1892 (Parungao, 2005). Thus, Chinese in movies are either portrayed as low-level laborers who engage in service labor, like a server, or represented as villains who threaten social order (Parungao). Further, in earlier movies from the 20th century, it is always a white character who was portrayed as a savior protagonist figure, coming to Asia to save the nation and people because it was their “manifest destiny” to lead inferior races toward the path of moral, political, and economic development (Dong et al., 2008; Hamamoto, 1994, p. 1). As a result, Chinese characters and people were depicted as exotic people who were a threat to the dominant group, often as either antagonists or, at best, obstacles to the white protagonist savior’s narrative destiny; in other words, a “Yellow Peril.” Asians are stereotyped as mysterious, invading and threatening, and in *Yellow Peril*, as a group of people who are dangerous to society (Alvarez, 2009, p. 427).

The Fu Manchu figure is a prime example of Yellow Peril. This portrayal of a Chinese supervillain is one of the most negative film images of the Chinese, featured prominently in early American films and media from 1913 to 1959. It was first featured in novels and then extended into the formats of comic books, radio, television, and films. Fu Manchu made its debut in America in movie *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929) in 1929, and the character was played by Warner Oland (another example for Yellow Face) who is later well-known for another Asian character, Charlie Chan (Mayer, 2014).

“[The novel] turned Fu Manchu into a household name and distributed the stereotype of Chinese torture, mercilessness, craftiness, and villainy across half the world” (Greene, p. 54).

Due to World War II, the Japanese were also portrayed in US cinema as evil (Kim, 2013). According to research on Hollywood war movies between 1937 to 1945, the numbers of Japanese related movies had a substantial growth during that time, and most of the depictions are negative (Shull & Wilt, 1996, p. 295; Wang, 2006, p. 65). The Yellow Peril representation of Asians produces and re-produces negative stereotype, often being the villains in stories (Dong et al, 2008).

Dragon Lady

Another pre-dominant stereotype is the “Dragon Lady,” which views Asian women as “inherently scheming, untrustworthy, and back-stabbing” (Media Action Network for Asian American, 2016). Anna May Wong, a well-known Chinese-American actress back in the 20th century, played a masculine female character in the movie *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), which was the emergence of “dragon lady” (Wang, 2012, p. 86). In the movie, though deeply in love with the white male character, her character planned to kill him (Wang, 2012). After this role, Anna May Wong carried out numerous roles in Hollywood movies as the deceitful Chinese woman, perpetuating the stereotype of “dragon lady”. She was criticized for her repetitive appearances as the bad

Chinese woman. However, Wong herself was not comfortable with the stereotype she portrayed. Unfortunately, those were the only roles she was offered. In an interview with *Los Angeles Times* in the 1930s, Wong said:

I was so tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that the screen Chinese is nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain--murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that. How should we be, with a civilization that's so many times older than that of the West? We have our own virtues. We have our rigid code of behavior, of honor. Why do they never show these on the screen? Why should we always scheme, rob, kill? I got so weary of it all--of the scenarist's concept of Chinese characters. You remember 'Fu Manchu'? 'Daughter of the Dragon'? So wicked. (Sakamoto, 1987)

The trend continues today. In *Iron Fist* (2017), for instance, the character Madame Gao is another example of Dragon Lady. She is a ruthless Chinese lady and deals in the illegal drug trade in the Netflix drama. This character is so crafty and evil that Madame Gao is described as the “master of manipulation” and the “crime boss.” The stereotyped images of Asian female not only brought problems to actresses like Anna May Wong in terms of her ability to land roles, but also to all Asian women as a whole. Asian women could be either evil and conniving, or they

had to be sexually submissive objects, which is the next stereotype that emerged in early American films.

China Dolls

Another stereotypical portrayal of Asian women is the loyal and submissive “China Doll” in American media representations. The “China Doll” emerged after World War II and has continued for a long time (Larson, 2006, p. 70). The “China Doll,” also sometimes known as a “geisha,” depicts Asian women as sexually available and obedient for male characters (Larson). Characters like Suzie Wong have left strong impressions among audiences. Nancy Kwan, who was a famous Chinese American actress, played the character Suzie Wong in the movie *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). Suzie was a prostitute who worked at the red-light district in Hong Kong to support her baby (Hagedorn, 1994). Although the movie tells a romantic story between an English male writer and an Asian woman, the image of Suzie was not a favorable one. Suzie may find love, but only as the tragic, sexually available, gender submissive woman whose value and worth comes from pleasing the desire of males, especially white males. The sex worker image connection to the China doll stereotype hasn’t changed much, and its influence on Chinese stereotype remains today (Wang, 2012). *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) was based on a story from 1929 during World War II. The main character, Sayuri, is a geisha played by Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi. Although a geisha is not considered the

same as a prostitute because their jobs are to please male customers with music, dance, or singing, Sayuri does engage in a sexual relationship with a customer in the movie, which is considered inappropriate. “In the movies, ‘good’ Asian women are childlike, submissive, silent and eager of sex,” Hagedorn explains, and Suzie Wang and Sayuri exemplify that.

Kung Fu Master

Due to the Civil Rights movement, the Chinese gained more acceptance in mainstream media beginning in the 1970s (Parungao, 2005). One of the most remarkable feature films to portray Asians is *Enter the Dragon* (1973), when Bruce Lee first presented Chinese Kung Fu and martial arts to American audiences, portraying Chinese as not always oppressive and submissive, but also as strong, violent protagonists. Being the person who first introduced Kung Fu to the public, Lee was a landmark for the American film industry. Thanks to him, the portrayal of Kung Fu spread positively in the American film and martial arts market. As Kung Fu became more mainstream, however, the Kung Fu Master stereotype gave way to the Yellow Face stereotype. The “Kung Fu masters,” characters were taken by other white actors such as David Carradine, in *Kung Fu* (1972) after it gained popularity. Still, the Kung Fu Master stereotype did help broaden both Asian women and men’s ability to play more protagonist roles in

Hollywood films beginning in the 2000s, shifting slightly away from the Yellow Peril-type roles (Wang, 2012).

Chinese male characters in the late 20th and early 21th century were presented as physically strong men with “yellow prowess” who fight against villains who were “Kung Fu masters” but with less intelligence (Zhu, 2013, p. 415). For example, Jackie Chan became popular in the late 1990s when more works presenting martial arts were produced. The representative works of Jackie Chan, such as *Police Story 3: Super Cop* (1992) and *Rush Hour* (1998), portray the masculine side of Asian males and established the stereotype of “Kung Fu master” as strong and brave, yet aloof and full of inner turmoil. While this representation increased exposure of Chinese people and Chinese culture, those “masters” were constantly “mocked with implicit racist jokes or explicit racial stereotypes embedded in the narrative of many American film texts” (Sun, 2003, p. 659; Zhu, p. 404). Indeed, while still the protagonist, the modern portrayal of this role still confines and characterizes Chinese as less intelligent and clown-like. For instance, Jackie Chan often makes silly movements and speaks “Chinglish” in order to be funny (Zhu, p. 415).

Media representation of Chinese/Asian in new era

While dividing an “old” and “new” era is arbitrary and somewhat problematic, it serves an important function to outline where Chinese and Asian media stereotypes have

come from. It is also important to recognize the persistence of older stereotypes even in modern film production. Given this, there has been a shift in Chinese media representation in American feature films. Compared to the images established in early American movies, the media representation of Chinese people and Chinese culture has changed since the 1970s (Zhu, 2013).

Unlike depictions in earlier eras, more recent Hollywood movies portray Chinese in a more positive way where the characters are “virtuous, industrious, and trustworthy” (Shah, 2003, p. 5). Chinese characters are depicted as more successful and hardworking in American films compared to other races (Larson, 2006, p. 72). Films, both independent and commercial, have been perpetuating more positive images of Asian and Asian American (Larson). In recent years, a new trend began to grow in the American film industry that people are constantly seeing Chinese-ness in films. Rather than being depicted only as villains, inferior labor forces, sexual workers, or “Kung Fu masters” with less intelligence, Chinese in American films are portrayed in more diverse ways.

For example, *Joy Luck Club* (1993), a commercial production, tells the warm and insightful stories of four Chinese women and their families, and highlighted the humanized side of Chinese communities. In *Mulan* (1998), Mulan was depicted as a positive representation of Chinese females. Although she experiences sexism within Chinese society, she fights back against the social norm and demonstrates her courage as

a female figure. In the *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) movie series, Chinese characters are established in a more heroic direction. In *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016), a Chinese actress named Yang Ying, also known as Angelababy, played a fighter pilot who saved the life of the main characters. The movie *Now You See Me 2* (2016) invited a very famous Chinese singer, Jay Chou, to act as one of the members of the secret organization called “Eye” that oversees “the Four Horseman.” He was also invited to write the soundtrack for an international marketing campaign. In *The Great Wall* (2017), Chinese people not only take up most parts of the story but also behave in flexible and heroic manners serving multiple roles, even though the protagonists are both white men.

Since those movies are largely targeting the Chinese market and Chinese audiences, the shift in media representation will impact Chinese audiences’ perspective on American films in general. It is evident that the number of revenue-sharing films, flat-fee films, and co-production films are growing. The trend to get into the Chinese market is very clear. It is of strong importance to do research on Chinese audiences’ responses.

Because of changes in political strategies of the Chinese government and increasingly interconnected economic ties between China and the US, American films tend to explore diverse aspects of Chinese culture (Chen, 2006), as described above. Yet, even with this increased openness, some of the older stereotyped media representations still persist (Wang, 2012). For instance, the stereotype of appearance still persists, which

can be seen in the movies *Atlas* (2012) and *Doctor Strange*, where people invite non-Asian actors/actresses to play the roles of Chinese with yellow skin color.

Rightly or wrongly, media representations are widely transmitted. For American audiences, those stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood films have a strong impact on how Asians are perceived overall. On the other hand, the trend that the Chinese are portrayed less negatively in movies will also affect audiences' self-perceptions as Chinese. The feelings and perceptions of themselves after watching them being represented in the films are very important. However, their reaction has barely been studied.

Audiences play an important role in the process of information delivery and interpretation of media and films. Being exposed to stereotyped images, audiences may respond differently due to their personal stances. Among many theories that focus on audience, audience reception theory provides a solid fundament to explain why it is important to study audience's responses.

Audience Reception Theory

Audience Reception Theory (ART) concerns the audiences' role as the decoder in the communication process. The idea of ART comes from Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" process. In this model, Hall suggests looking at communication from five different aspects, which are production, circulation, distribution, consumption,

and reproduction (Hall, 1997a, p. 508). The “relative autonomy” of each stage allows possibilities of “distortions” or “misunderstandings” (Hall, 1997a, p. 510). Hall (1997a) noted that:

...the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degree of symmetry, that is the degree of understanding and misunderstanding in the communicative exchanges depend on the degrees of symmetry/ asymmetry established between the position of the ‘personifications’, encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. (p. 510)

What Hall means is that there exists some hindrances and barriers that intervene in the accurate transmission of information. “Audiences are presented with messages which are decoded and interpreted in diverse ways depending on an individual’s cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences” (Liu & Cao, 2014, p. 315). That is to say, when decoding the messages, audiences typically take subjective factors into consideration, albeit unconsciously. Therefore, audiences have different understandings as well as distinctive degrees of emotional involvement in their decoding processes of encoded information as they take different positions and make different interpretations, implying a possibility of miscommunication between encoder and decoder (Martin, 2007). In short, decoding is complex and is influenced by a wide range of factors.

Hall has three hypothetical positions that audiences can possibly take based on their status, namely a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional position. The dominant position is the ideal position for perfect and transparent communication, where the audiences and producers share symmetrical cultural understanding, while the other two positions can be influenced by audiences' individual experiences (Hall, 1997a, p. 516; Martin, 2007). Audiences are able to decode message within the dominant context but with the possibility of understanding the message more personally in the negotiated position. In the oppositional position, audiences will decode both the intended and unintended message, and this can lead to a total deviation between the intended understandings and audience understandings. In the negotiated position, audiences can understand the message generally, yet they are not willing to accept the message completely, which can be seen as a compromise between accepting and rejecting. The different status a person takes alone will lead to totally different ways of interpreting the same messages.

These audience receptions are mediated by individual positions, as David Morley's research reveals how audiences will take different positions based on individual backgrounds (Wood, 1983, p. 109-110). For instance, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) conducted research on the situation comedy *All in the Family*. Their research found that viewers with prejudiced attitudes admired the father, who associated with racial bigotry,

more than his son, who advocated a more progressive attitude. Cooper (2003) studied another situation comedy called *Will and Grace*, a show that portrayed the experience of Will, a gay protagonist, and Jack, a supporting gay role who was clumsy, bumbling, and flamboyant, alongside two heterosexual women. He recruited five groups of heterosexual college students to watch an episode (one group did two episodes) of the show. Findings revealed a difference on how the main character was perceived between frequent viewers and infrequent viewers. The infrequent viewers were more likely to see the actor as humorous than the frequent viewers because the avid viewer may have the ability to “see both side of Jack’s trickster personality” (Cooper, p. 529). Cooper’s research supported ART by providing practical evidence that connect frequency of drama watching with the interpretation distinctions. In short, people who are frequent viewers are better able to understand the character.

Wogan (2006) investigated audience reception with a film which tells a story of Australian gold miners, *First Contract*. This study supported the assumption that very slight differences among audiences in terms of age, culture, time, or even the location of campuses led to a total distinctive interpretation of the same film content. Wogan’s study broadened ART by showing that not only individual differences, but also physical variations like location and time will also affect audiences’ interpretation of media representations.

As a primary means of promoting information and knowledge of other people from other places, movies and films are major ways for Americans to form the idea of who the Chinese are and what they stand for. For many of the films produced in America, the story and character design are mostly based on Western understandings of Chinese culture. What is interpreted by Chinese audiences themselves can be different from what is depicted as Chinese in American movies and what is intended by the filmmakers and script producers. The intention to attract more Chinese audiences to cinema might not work as film producers expect.

Following ART, therefore, Chinese audiences have responses to Chinese representations just like what I heard in the movie theater during *Independence Day: Resurgence*. Even though there is numerous research regarding Chinese media representations throughout history, mainly in the 20th century, very few explore recent trends in the American film industry, as well as audience responses towards those portrayals. Because of the increasing number of films from America aimed at the Chinese market, how Chinese audiences react to those media representations of Chinese in American movies is worth exploring.

CHAPTER FOUR

Research Questions

Based on ART, audiences will take different positions when receiving messages, which are oppositional, negotiated, and dominant position. ART indicates that it is possible that audiences will be able to engage with the content's production process due to the positions taken (Martin, 2007), which means movie audiences will have some impact on movie production. Therefore, based on ART, the research is designed to study Chinese audiences and their responses towards Chinese media representations in American films, which are the two main respects in ART. Following the theory, in order to observe direct and detailed audiences' responses, and to provide space for audiences to elaborate their thoughts, a semi-structured qualitative search method was chosen. The research might be modelled after Kavoori's (1999) research, which also used focus groups to study audience reception. Seeing how Chinese audiences likely have different positions than their American counterparts in response to American movies, some recommendations will be put forward which can possibly have some influence on American movie production.

It is suggested here that there are big differences between how Americans view Chinese and how Chinese see themselves. What is portrayed in American movies may be different or the same with how Chinese define themselves. Chinese audiences may take

different positions when receiving messages in American films, depending on their personal backgrounds and experiences. While it is necessary to study how Chinese have been portrayed, it is also important to explore, as potential consumers in one of the biggest movie markets, what Chinese audiences' responses towards the new trend in American film industry are, what Chinese audiences' positions are in receiving those messages, and how those positions will affect the movie industry. The shift in media representation will impact Chinese audiences' perspective on American films. The trend that the Chinese are less villainous in movies will also affect audiences' self-perceptions as Chinese. For those who are studying abroad, the media representations will influence their life as the "real" Chinese in American society. The altered media representation of Chinese people may offer a different influence on the market itself as well. Therefore, this project will examine Chinese audience's reactions to Chinese media representations in American feature film by answering the following questions:

RQ1: What stereotypes do Chinese audiences see in American feature films?

RQ2: How do Chinese audiences respond to the stereotypes in American feature films?

RQ3: What are Chinese audience's responses to and interpretations of media representations of Chinese characters and Chinese culture in American feature films?

RQ4: What are Chinese audiences' perspectives of how Chinese elements are involved in American feature films?

Outcomes—White Paper Recommendations

The end goal product for this project is a white paper report, which could be presented to American feature film producers interested in producing films that will be screened in China, thus falling under one of the three possible paths to movie screening in China (see above). Given this, the white paper will be in English and be succinct and to the point. The white paper will be presented electronically online with more concise and targeted language. Recommendations will be addressed based on the findings of this study. While the white paper based on this project will not intend to be and is not exhaustive, it provides a research-based starting point for American film producers interested in producing films that will be screened in China.

CHAPTER FIVE

Methods

This project examined the responses and reactions of Chinese audiences towards American feature film representation of Chinese people and culture through a qualitative research design. The primary method used in this study to collect data was a semi-structured focus group. A semi-structured focus group uses a guide with questions that must be answered, but it allows space for probing questions (Harrell & Bradley, 2009, p. 27). The primary aim of a semi-structured focus group is to describe and understand meanings and interpretations of a select group of people in order to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants of the group (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). This method was chosen because it offered participants space where they were able to lead the discussion and then form their own conclusions through promptings of the facilitator. IRB was granted approval under Protocol ID 17-05-558 on August 28, 2018.

The focus groups were conducted in two stages for this study. The reason for dividing focus groups into two stages was to provide a process for movie selection and to minimize researcher bias. Since the theoretical approach is ART, it is important to maximize audience involvement in the data collection process, including decisions which movies Chinese audiences should consider for further discussion related to Chinese

media representation in American feature films. Millward (1995) suggests that researchers provide maximum space for content discussed while maintaining necessary minimum control over questions and issues (another reason why a semi-structured focus group is an ideal data collection method). Therefore, two stages of focus groups, with the selection of movie clips in the first stage, and a more in-depth discussion of Chinese media representation and stereotypes in the second stage, was utilized. There was one focus group for each stage for a total of two focus groups.

Focus Groups

Both focus groups were conducted in October 2018. As the study was interested in incipiently Chinese voices and perspectives, participants' time abroad should not exceed a total of six months (in the United States in particular), so participants with short vacations or school exchange programs outside of China were still eligible.

Undergraduate students at Chinese universities were the primary audience that was recruited. One reason to choose undergraduate students is because they are a large part of the box office success in China. According to a survey released in 2014 ("Brand & Entertainment..."), out of the entire Chinese population, Chinese moviegoers consisted primarily of people ages 19 to 35. More than 80% of frequent moviegoers, which are defined as people who go to cinema over 12 times a year, are between 19-35 years old in China. What's more, as the research points out, is that 92% of Chinese moviegoers have

college/junior education level or above. Batchelor (2019) mentioned in the article that people with higher educational level are more capable of observing and forming their own ideas. Thus, educational experiences enable undergraduates to have the capacity of understanding media representation and expressing their responses. Undergraduate college students fall under the category of frequent moviegoers with enough educational background to express their reactions.

The location of the focus groups was based on the same research on age distribution, revealing that Hangzhou is one of the top 10 movie-going cities in China (hoWide, 2019). In 2014, it was also one of the three fastest growing cities for movie-going populations in China, and it is nearby where the researcher lives. Hangzhou, therefore, combines geographic accessibility, a thriving movie viewing market, and an abundance of undergraduate aged students, making it an ideal place to recruit and host focus groups.

The method of recruitment was primarily through social media. The researcher posted on mainstream Chinese social media, namely WeChat, Weibo, and Douban. WeChat is a Chinese messaging social media app, similar to Facebook messenger in the West. Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website where people can share the latest information and news, similar to Twitter in the West. Douban is a Chinese social networking website where users are able to collect or share information, also similar to

Facebook in the West. The IRB approved recruitment post (see Appendix G) was sent out in Chinese on August 29, 2018. The first reply was received two days after the post. It took about one month to complete the recruitment process. There was a total of 25 replies to the recruitment post. Pre-test surveys were sent out to each reply, and 18 were sent back. Among the 18 replies, three candidates were excluded because their stays in the US were too long. Therefore, a total of 15 participants were selected for both focus groups.

Based on researcher and participant availability, participants were divided into two groups. A group of nine people were assigned for the first focus group, and a group of six were assigned for the second focus group. Participants were asked to complete a consent form (see Appendix D), which was translated into Chinese (see Appendix E), and that reminded them that the focus groups would be audio-recorded. Food and drink were provided during the focus groups. Mandarin was the spoken language used, and based on the audio recordings, was translated into English by the researcher into written transcripts.

First Focus Group

The first focus group was conducted on October 9, 2018 in a classroom at Zhejiang University of Technology in Hangzhou. During this first focus group, the researcher asked questions that narrowed the selection of films for the second stage (see

Appendix A). The applicants were required to complete the same pre-test survey (see Appendix F), which collected their demographic information.

The first focus group had nine participants, two males and seven females. All participants were between 20 and 23 years of age. All were university students, with 78% of the participants from Zhejiang University of Technology, and 22% from Zhejiang Gongshang University (also in Hangzhou). Seven were in their second year, while one was in their third year, and two were in their fourth year. They had different majors, with nearly 44% of the participants majoring in English, and 22% of the participants majoring in advertising. The other three participants majored in architecture, advertising, and computer science, respectively.

All participants had lived in China since they were born. One of them was applying to study abroad after graduation which did not contradict with the criteria. Based on the pre-test survey, no participant had been to the United States. As for frequency of watching films, they all regarded watching films as daily activities, and most would go the theater every two months. Fifty-six percent of the participants declared that they went to the cinema more than six times each year. In regard to the genres of American movies they liked to watch, 89% of the participants mentioned science-fiction films followed by action (67%), romance (44%), animation (44%), drama (33%), and horror (11%). Apart from their movie preferences, they were also asked about

their general impression of Chinese media representation in American feature films.

Forty-four percent of the participants chose “Don’t know” for the question with one positive (11%), two neutral (22%), and two negative (22%). Demographic information is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: *Demographics of the First Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Birthplace	Education	Universities	Majors
P- 1	F	21	Chongqing	Junior	ZJGSU	English
P- 2	F	23	Shanghai	Senior	ZJUT	Architecture
P- 3	F	21	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	English
P- 4	M	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Marketing
P- 5	M	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Computer Science
P- 6	F	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	English
P- 7	F	21	Shanghai	Sophomore	ZJUT	Advertising
P- 8	F	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Marketing
P- 9	F	22	Zhejiang	Senior	ZJGSU	English

Note. This table shows basic demographic information of the participants in the first focus group. See more information in Table 2.

Table 2: *Demographics of the First Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Stays in the US	Frequency of watching films (per year)	The genres of American movies that the participant would like to watch	Overall impression of Chinese media representation
P- 1	F	21	No	5-6	Action, Romance, Sci-fi	Don’t know

P- 2	F	23	No	More than 6	Drama, Animation	Don't know
P- 3	F	21	No	5-6	Drama, Action, Sci-fi	Neutral
P- 4	M	20	No	More than 6	Action, Sci-fi, Drama	Negative
P- 5	M	20	No	5-6	Animation, Action, Sci-fi	Don't know
P- 6	F	20	No	5-6	Animation, Sci-fi, Romance	Positive
P- 7	F	21	No	More than 6	Romance, Drama, Horror, Sci-fi	Negative
P- 8	F	20	No	More than 6	Action, Sci-fi, Animation	Don't know
P- 9	F	22	No	More than 6	Romance, Sci-fi, Action	Neutral

Note. This table shows detailed information asked in pre-test survey, which helps to have a better idea of who were recruited in the first focus group.

During the focus group, the participants discussed their recent experiences of viewing movies along with their responses and opinions towards American movies that have been screened in the Chinese market. The first focus group resulted in a list of three American feature films that served as a stimulus for the second stage. Responses to the focus group were compiled based on relevance to the corresponding research questions into separate themes in the next section.

Second Focus Group

The second stage was conducted on October 21, 2018, also in a classroom at Zhejiang University of Technology. The second stage of the focus group was conducted

12 days after the first focus group so that the participants would have enough time to watch the three films selected by the first focus group. The second focus group involved six participants with all female undergraduate college students. They were recruited at the same time as the first stage but were not involved in the first focus group discussion. The participants were informed of the selected films immediately after the first focus group finished and were asked to view those films prior to the second focus group. Like the first focus group, they were asked to complete a pre-test survey (see Appendix F) before the discussion.

The participants were college students between 20 to 23 years of age. There were two in their second year, two in their third year, and two in their fourth year. All participants were from Zhejiang University of Technology. They had different majors with 33.3% majoring in English. The others majored in education, advertising, marketing, and broadcasting.

As for frequency of watching films, they all regarded watching films as daily activities, and they would go to the theater about every two months. Eighty-three percent of the participants declared that they went to the cinema more than six times each year. In regard to the genres of American movies they would like to watch, 100% of the participants mentioned science-fiction films followed by romance (33%), crime (33%), drama (33%), animation (16.7%), and action (16.7%). Apart from their movie-going

style, they were also asked about their general impression of Chinese media representation in American feature films. Fifty percent of the participants chose “positive” for the question with one (16.7%) neutral, one (16.7%) negative, and one (16.7%) “Don’t know”. Demographic information is presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: *Demographics of the Second Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Birthplace	Education	Universities	Majors
P- A	F	23	Zhejiang	Senior	ZJUT	English
P- B	F	21	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Education
P- C	F	21	Zhejiang	Junior	ZJUT	Advertising
P- D	F	22	Zhejiang	Senior	ZJUT	Broadcasting
P- E	F	21	Zhejiang	Junior	ZJUT	Marketing
P- F	F	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	English

Note. This table shows basic demographic information of the participants in the second focus group. See more information in Table 4.

Table 4: *Demographics of the Second Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Stays in the US	Frequency of watching films (per year)	The genres of American movies that the participant would like to watch	Overall impression of Chinese media representation
P- A	F	23	No	More than 6	Romance, Sci-fi	Positive
P- B	F	21	No	More than 6	Sci-fi, Drama, Crime	Positive
P- C	F	21	No	More than 6	Drama, Action, Sci-fi	Negative
P- D	F	22	No	More than 6	Sci-fi	Neutral
P- E	F	21	No	More than 6	Crime, Sci-fi	Positive

P- F	F	20	No	5-6	Sci-fi, Animation, Romance,	Don't know
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Note. This table shows detailed information asked in pre-test survey, which helps to have a better idea of who were recruited in the second focus group.

All participants shared their opinions and responses to the movies (about one hour) in a university classroom during the second stage. The second focus group was aimed at gathering audience receptions and responses to Chinese media representation in American feature films in the three films generated in the first focus group: *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *The Great Wall*, and *Dr. Strange*. Most of the questions asked during this focus group were open-ended, following Audience Reception Theory (Martin, 2007). The findings of the focus groups and study are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Findings

This chapter presents the findings. The first section details the results of the first focus group and how movies were selected. The remainder of the chapter outlines themes that directly address the four research questions that guided this study as drawn from comments from both focus groups, although primarily the second focus group:

RQ1: What stereotypes do Chinese audiences see in American feature films?

RQ2: How do Chinese audiences respond to the stereotypes in American feature films?

RQ3: What are Chinese audience's responses to and interpretations of media representations of Chinese characters and Chinese culture in American feature films?

RQ4: What are Chinese audiences' perspectives of how Chinese elements are involved in American feature films?

First Focus Group and Movie Selection

The aim of the first focus group was to generate a list of films that would be used as stimulus for the second focus group in order to answer the four research questions related to Chinese representation in American feature films. Movies selected for the second focus group needed to meet five criteria: First, the movies needed to be or have been screened in mainland China in the last five years so that participants had a chance to see the film either in the theater or at home. Second, it had to be an American feature film which falls under one of the three categories of imported films allowed in China: through revenue sharing, flat fee purchase of distribution rights, and/or co-produced with a Chinese company. Third, it needed to contain Chinese elements of culture and/or characters which can be easily identified by audience. Fourth, participants should be able to generate some perceptions regarding the topic, which means the Chinese elements must be prominent enough to be recognizable and able to be reflected on and responded to. Fifth, all the selected movies should be ranked in the top 25 movies of that year in the

Chinese market in terms of gross revenues; the source for these rankings was from *1905.com*.

The first two criteria are necessary to ensure that the film is both an American feature film, but also meets one of the three criteria to be screened in China. Moreover, the limitation on the release year ensures that participants will have more convenient access to the movies on the screen, online, or offline since the participants are college students. It was more feasible and likely for them to have watched films from the last five years rather than ten years. Because of the topic for this research, all of the movies selected contained Chinese elements that could be easily identified, the third criteria. For the fourth criteria, the elements needed to not only be identifiable, but also needed to be Chinese media representations that allowed them to reflect on and then form responses to. Participants in the first focus group revealed that not only Chinese people, Chinese language, and oriental appeared, but also a Chinese item or a Chinese style decoration could be identified easily in the movies. The fifth and final criterion helped to increase familiarity of the films, as well as helped narrow the list of possible films. Based on data released by Box Office Mojo, an online database which tracks box office revenues both domestically and internationally, a list of potential films (see Appendix A, Table 5) for this research was created. The first focus group selected from this list of 29 films.

The discussion during the first focus group began with questions about their most recent experiences of watching movies. P-1 mentioned the most recent experience of watching a Hong Kong crime film named *L Strom*. Another participant referred to a Chinese drama film called *Lost, found*, which tells a sad story about mothers looking for their lost daughters. Then the researcher and participants narrowed the conversation to American feature films that portray Chinese culture, characters, and actors. At this time, participants began to draw from the experiences of watching American feature films, naming a range of films for possible inclusion in this study.

The first focus group confirmed the ability for a Chinese audience to identify a single, momentary flash of Chinese merchandise or a walk-on role played by a Chinese person as Chinese media representation in American movies. P-5 mentioned one product placement of Chinese liquor that left a strong impression in *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) saying, “It was so awkward that I remembered it.” Other films mentioned by participants included *The Meg* (2018), where well-known Chinese actress Li Bingbing played a main role, *Memory of a Geisha* (2005), where Zhang Ziyi portrayed a Japanese geisha, and *Ready Player One*, in which a Chinese actor played an important role in the game.

Some other films were mentioned in the discussion but were excluded because they did not meet the five criteria. For example, *Memory of a Geisha* was not screened in

mainland China due to the concerns of anti-Japanese sentiment. Meanwhile, *Pacific Rim* (2013) was mentioned but not incorporated because it was screened more than five years ago. In the end, a list of 13 films that met the five criteria and were named by the focus group participants included:

1. *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016);
2. *Now you see me 2* (2016);
3. *The Great Wall* (2016);
4. *The Meg* (2018);
5. *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016);
6. *Doctor Strange* (2016);
7. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014);
8. *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* (2017);
9. *Ready Player One* (2018);
10. *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018);
11. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).

The films listed were all screened in China between 2014 to 2018. The first focus group also revealed that these movies included Chinese elements, that those elements could be identified by Chinese audiences, and that the films were in the top 25 in the

Chinese market for that year. Interestingly, the focus group named 11 out of the possible 29 films that met these five criteria.

The focus group then coalesced around three films that contained, to the participants, obvious Chinese media representations in terms of actors, backgrounds of stories, and characters presented. The three films were *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Doctor Strange*, and *The Great Wall*. P-3 commented that: “I think *Dr. Strange* also represented some Chinese culture. *Kung Fu Panda 3* and *The Great Wall* both tell the story on the basis of Chinese culture and background. They are the perfect example for this topic.” P-2 added:

I have watched most of the films mentioned in the discussion but I highly recommend *The Great Wall* because I think it is really interesting to have such a film in American film industry. It’s an American production [*The Great Wall* is a Chinese-American co-production] with a China based story.

This was followed by comments on *Dr. Strange* from P-6:

I vote for *Dr. Strange* because the character is mysterious and her appearance is quite oriental. I can see strong Chinese characteristics in that. And of course, because of its location, Tibet.” P-8 added, “It might be wrong but I see some ideas of Chinese Tai Ji in *Dr. Strange*. How they make the circle to transcend to another space.

The participants were asked to narrow the list to three movies that met the criteria, as three movies seemed the most feasible for the second focus group to screen prior to meeting. On the basis of both a vote and the comments offered, *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Doctor Strange*, and *The Great Wall* were agreed upon by the first focus group. These three movies were all screened in China in the last five years. *Doctor Strange* was a full American production. Both *Kung Fu Panda 3* and *The Great Wall* were co-produced by China and the US, which did not take up import quotas. To add more credibility, all of these films gained a substantial amount of gross revenues in the Chinese market, and all were high profile enough that participants were able to recall them without prompting from the facilitator. According to Box Office Mojo, *The Great Wall* grossed \$170 million USD from Chinese market. The movie placed eighth among all the movies screened in Mainland China for 2016. *Kung Fu Panda 3* grossed more than \$154 million USD in China during 2016, ranking ninth on the China yearly box office list. Although *Doctor Strange* achieved the least box office revenues among the three selected films, it still grossed \$109 million USD, ranking 18th place for 2016. Therefore, these three films met the five criteria for selection, and based on focus group consensus, were selected as the stimulus for the second group.

In addition to the movies, it should be noted that some TV series were also mentioned during the focus group, such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Marvel Agents of*

S.H.I.E.L.D. The participants identified the representations of Chinese culture in the forms of food, language, or values in TV series. For instance, Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* was obsessed with Kung Pao Chicken. He was mad at Leonard because he changed the Chinese restaurant without Sheldon's permission. Although TV series fall outside the scope of this study, they still serve as evidence that Chinese elements are common and present in US production studios. This bears consideration for future research projects.

Although the overall goal of the first focus group was to identify three films to serve as stimulus for the second focus group, the discussion also involved topics of Chinese representation and stereotypes in American feature films, so some of those comments may be included as part of the findings in relation to the four research questions of this study. The findings from the second focus group in response to the four research questions are presented next.

Results of Responses to Research Questions

This section provides the results of the focus groups' responses to the three American feature films. Although most of the responses come from the second focus group, where appropriate and relevant, comments and ideas from the first focus group are included. This section is organized via the research questions that guided this study. This research is based on a thematic analysis, which is an effective and flexible method for

qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To differentiate participants and to mask reporting of participants of the two focus groups, a coding scheme was utilized.

Participants from the first group were coded in numerical order (P-1), while participants from the second focus group were coded in alphabetic order (P-A).

RQ1: What Stereotypes Do Chinese Audiences See in American Feature Films?

This research question asked participants to identify stereotypes they observed in the three films, *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Dr. Strange*, and *The Great Wall*. Three themes emerged in response to research question one, which are appearance (which had two sub-themes), lifestyles, and intellectual and physical development.

Appearance

Appearance was one of the first stereotypes mentioned during the focus group discussions. Participants identified appearance features related to skin and hair color, and eye shape as stereotyped Chinese media representations in *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Dr. Strange*, and *The Great Wall*. Exemplars of each are provided.

Yellow skin and dark hair. During the focus groups, "yellow skin" or "yellow face" were mentioned five times as one of the Chinese stereotypes participants observed in the three films. In regards to *Dr. Strange*, and after being asked what stereotypes they saw in the movie, P-E commented: "Yellow faces and dark hair. Although The Ancient One doesn't have hair at all, she showed up with yellow skin wearing [a] Chinese style outfit."

P-A added, “In *Dr. Strange*, the appearance of the Master of course. The Ancient One carries a strong oriental feature.” Even though the actress is American, her appearance was presented in a stereotypical way.

When asked about typical Chinese media representations, P-B stated:

“Appearance? Yellow skin and black hair.” Even in the first focus group, P-1 said, “Asian characters have a very typical look. Small eyes, black hair, yellow skin tone, and nerdy head.” Based on participants’ responses, Chinese characters are associated with small eyes, black hair, and yellow skin, which is a stereotype in the films.

Eyes. The character The Ancient One, who carries strong Chinese features was brought up several times during the discussion about Chinese stereotypes in American films. Not only did her yellow skin stand out, but also her facial features like eyes were made to look Chinese in the film. P-E expanded through the character of The Ancient One, adding: “Especially her eyes and her face. Her eyes are made to look long on purpose.” It is mentioned in the literature review that it is common practice to have white actors wearing heavy makeup in order to play a Chinese character. This seems to be the case here. The skin color and eye shape were racial features that were exaggerated in American films and on American actors/actresses.

In addition to yellow skin, the shape of the eyes of Chinese characters was mentioned in the focus groups. For instance, in response to being asked about the Chinese

media representations in American films, P-A said, "The aesthetic standards for female are very fixed, just like the times back in the 1990s, [like] *Mulan*, [portrayed with a] phoenix eye with the single-fold eyelid." The term "phoenix eyes" refers to very long eyes, which looks like the eyes of the mythical phoenix. This participant was angry about such media representations affecting people in real lives, adding: "I once saw some western making fun of Chinese, I was very angry seeing those guys making their eyes small and ugly."

Lifestyles

Lifestyles stand for the typical ways of life of people. As the country with the biggest population in the world, Chinese lifestyles are quite diverse. However, akin to appearance, participants observed stereotypical media representations of Chinese lifestyles in American films.

In the movie *Kung Fu Panda 3*, there were various representations of Chinese lifestyles identified as stereotypes by participants. P-A explained that:

In *Kung Fu Panda 3*, the clothes they wear and the food they eat are all in Chinese fashion [style]. Signage is in Chinese. Po's favorite food is the bun. The use of the bamboo, temple, lifestyle is all Chinese.

The participant added: "However, towards values, I don't see that very clearly. The stereotypes lie more on a daily basis, some habits, lifestyle, or appearances."

Apart from the stereotypes presented in the films, P-C mentioned a stereotype about color, saying that: "I have watched movies and fashion shows, including the Victoria's Secret. I really couldn't stand it for narrowing our culture as simply red and green." P-B also observed this stereotype:

I remembered the time that I attended school dubbing contest. The movie we chose was *Kung Fu Panda*...For example, pandas represent China. And everything about panda is related to China. Red is China. Intense colors like green and red are china. Chinese are gentle and...yeah...Sometimes I think those representations lead to stereotypes.

Overall, according to participants, the films tended to overgeneralize a small portion of Chinese culture as China, like colors or animals, as representative of all Chinese lifestyles, the very definition of stereotype. The participants generally agreed that such generalization was unfair towards Chinese culture.

Intellectual and physical development

Another theme in response to RQ1 was the intellectual and physical development of Chinese. Intellectual and physical development here refers to the media representations of Chinese characters in American films related to education and physical fitness/development. This related to the character of a Kung Fu Master, which is one of the stereotypes that emerge in the early American films. Chinese male characters in the

late 20th and early 21th century were presented as physically strong men with “yellow prowess” who fight against villains who were “Kung Fu masters” but with less intelligence (Zhu, 2013, p. 415).

The images of *Kung Fu Panda 3* served to strengthen the idea that the Chinese were physically developed, most notably with expertise in martial arts, but possessed low intellectual development. As P-E stated: “For instance, in *Kung Fu Panda*, Po showed up as a simple-minded but physically developed character. He was very clumsy.” P-C also commented on the martial arts that *Kung Fu Panda 3* helped to promote the stereotype that Chinese all know about Kung Fu because the whole village seem to know Chinese Kung Fu. What’s more in the movie *The Great Wall*, “You can still see white supremacy in the movie. The leader of the army is not a Chinese person,” said P-A. This white supremacy was a positively connotative contrast to the pejorative Chinese clumsy image which strengthened the stereotype positioning the Chinese as racially and intellectually inferior but physically equal or superior because of martial arts expertise.

In regards to intellectual development, P-A identified the example of Chinese being good at math, saying: “The stereotype affects Chinese people. For example, being Chinese means your math is good.” P-B expanded upon this: “I think Chinese actors or actresses 20 years ago have limited exposure on the screen because they would not be assigned important roles. The roles assigned were similar, like nerds.” The intellectual

and physical development corresponds with literature that the Chinese are portrayed as physically developed and simple-minded like the Kung Fu Master both in the past and at present (Zhu, 2013, p. 415).

*RQ2: How Do Chinese Audiences Respond to
the Stereotypes in American Feature Films?*

While RQ1 aimed to list out stereotypes participants identified in the three American feature films, RQ2 sought to understand how and in what way Chinese audiences respond to and in particular distinguish or identify a stereotype. That is, how did Chinese audiences respond to those stereotypes listed in RQ1. Participants' responses revealed a consensus that such the media representations in *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Dr. Strange*, and *The Great Wall* promote misunderstandings and promulgate stereotypes.

Promoting misunderstandings and promulgating stereotypes

Most participants were able to notice the existence of stereotypes and distinguish stereotypes in the portrayals of Chinese characters and culture. However, the participants on the whole suggested that the stereotypes in American films promote misunderstandings. Again, the images of martial arts and Kung Fu Master were brought up in the focus groups. The image itself promulgates this stereotype as noted in *Kung Fu Panda 3*. P-C stated:

I have thoughts about martial arts as well. [I think] People have misunderstandings that everyone is Bruce Lee in China. They think that all Chinese people are able to leap onto the roofs and vault over walls. I understand that Bruce Lee is probably the first to show and present Chinese martial arts. But this image or media representation has led to misunderstandings about the vast Chinese population. Not every Chinese knows Kung Fu. And there are many other people knows Kung Fu whose names are not Bruce Lee. We can see this idea in *Kung Fu Panda*. There are too many characters that can play Kung Fu so that it left me an impression that every Chinese should know Kung Fu.

Additionally, P-E said: “I constantly talk with my friend [who is not Chinese]. I know there exist misunderstandings and stereotypes of Chinese people in American society.” Such misunderstandings are promulgated through American feature films.

When considering the stereotype of appearance, P-A pointed out that such media representations contribute to the image of phoenix eyes: “Mass media chooses girls with stereotypical ‘oriental eyes’ for programs and movies, which strengthens their views on Chinese. If more and more actresses like Fan Bingbing were invited, the images with phoenix eyes would be weakened.”

In relation to the social status of Chinese people, participants indicated that films in general tend to portray China or Chinese as rich just as P-A described:

I feel like the values that each movie transmitted are quite different. The film *2012* tells a story that happened in the area of Tibet, creating Noah's Ark, which is one of the provinces in China. There was a discussion about the reason to choose China as the creator of that giant ship. Some said that it is because the Chinese government is rich at the time. We can see as a joke, but still, it conveys some value behind it that Chinese are rich, known in Chinese as 'Tu Hao,' not from a good perspective.

Even though *2012* was not one of the three films that the focus group chose, the film still supported the idea that the Chinese and Chinese government were depicted as rich in the films. This comment demonstrated that stereotypes exist in other films and that biased media representations can promote misunderstandings and promulgate stereotypes.

RQ3: What Are the Chinese Audience's Responses to and Interpretations of Media Representations of Chinese Characters and Chinese Culture in American Feature Films?

Whereas RQ2 sought to better understand how participants distinguished and identified stereotypes, RQ3 captures personal opinions ("interpretations") in response to the identified stereotypes across the three movies: *The Great Wall*, *Dr. Strange*, and *Kung Fu Panda 3*. Three themes emerged in response to RQ3: positive, neutral, and negative.

Positive

When asked their feelings and opinions about Chinese media representations, most participants offered comments. Half of the participants from the second focus group responded positively. P-D was quite positive about what was presented in *Kung Fu Panda 3*, and explained as follows:

...*Kung Fu Panda 3* did represent Chinese culture in terms of environment, characters, personality, even language. I think it was a relatively successful one in representing Chinese culture... Seeing so many Chinese elements incorporated and merged in the film, I was very proud and excited.

Following P-D, P-B was also positive, offering: “The media representations in the three movies listed are positive I think.” P-B then gave some examples from the movies:

...*Kung Fu Panda 3*. Combined with some thoughts from *Dr. Strange*, the idea of Master was left in my mind. Both films have created the concept of the Master. It resonated with the Chinese culture that the elder is always wiser and respected. And there is a feeling that the movies are taking some thoughts from Taoism. And I think that was great, a great interpretation.

P-B shared the experience of watching *Dr. Strange* and made a comparison between roles in the early years and presently:

I think Chinese actors or actresses 20 years ago have limited exposure on the screen because they would not be assigned essential roles. The roles assigned were similar, like nerds. When I watched *Dr. Strange*, I was quite amazed at the character Ancient One. It is such an important role that she runs through the whole story. It demonstrates that their understandings of China are more diverse. I was delighted to see a character which carries strong Chinese characteristics in the universe of Marvel.

Although P-B did not enjoy *The Great Wall*, P-B did recognize this movie's efforts in altering Chinese stereotypes: "Americans are changing their stereotypes. Although *The Great Wall* is terrible, it was a good attempt."

P-C was also positive and proud of the current situation as well: "We [Chinese] have more voices globally. Our ideas and thoughts are worth spreading. The more Chinese elements are incorporated, the better we will be seen by the others. That's really good to know. I am very proud of that."

Negative

Although some audiences thought the media representations could be overall positive, there were also negative responses to the stereotyped media representations they identified in the three movies. P-A did not appreciate what was represented in American films, "I think the external side of our culture is well interpreted. Like the panda in *Kung*

Fu Panda 3. As for the internal part, it is scarcely presented, just like skimming over the surface.” Later in the conversation, P-A further uncovered the reasons for the negativity: “I once saw some western making fun of Chinese. I was very angry seeing those guys making their eyes small and ugly.”

The biased media representations would result in negative movie-going experiences. When asked about feelings in response to biased media representations, P-D said: “Well, sometimes I will be upset. Especially seeing scenes where Chinese are made fun. But those kinds of scenes decreased a lot I think. In the Chinese movie market at least.” Likewise, P-B stated: “I will be angry at first. After I calm down, I will be able to understand.” The biased media representations can, for these participants, lead to negative experience of what are presented in the film.

Neutral

While most participants offered positive or negative interpretations in response to media representations and stereotypes of Chinese characters and culture, some offered neutral interpretations. P-F explained: “It depends... There is more awkwardness in the existence of those Chinese elements. I don’t really know if I can categorize them as either negative or positive.” P-E also offered a neutral perspective:

Well, I do not have any thoughts on that. I see those media representations as merely attempts to know another culture no matter what is the main reason behind

that, making money or promotion strategy. Everything has two sides. There is no certainty for that.

And even though P-B offered a positive characterization as noted above, P-B also provided a balanced response:

In *Kung Fu Panda*, some good values and ideas were delivered in the movies.

However, most of it stays on a surface level. I would agree with the part that those representations are one aspect of Chinese culture. But I do not like it if people oversimplify Chinese culture or people to only some stereotypes.

RQ4: What Are Chinese Audiences' Perspectives on

How Chinese Elements Are Involved in American Feature Films?

RQ 4 probed audiences' understandings and perspectives of the media production economy or process of Chinese media representations in American feature films. These answers were more analytical in nature as participants offered their knowledge and understanding of the motivations and process that lead American production companies to employ stereotypes of Chinese characters and culture. Based on participant responses, five themes emerged: money-driven, limitations of cultural access, cultural communication attempts, over-thinking, and politics.

Money-driven

In response to being asked about reasons for stereotyped Chinese media representations in American films, P-F was the first to mention money. P-F continued to elaborate, “I think because a lot of the American producers aim at making money. It is extremely weird to see Chinese elements incorporated in American films in those ways.” For example, the participants felt embarrassed to see Chinese elements in *The Great Wall*, and described the movie as “a typical individualistic heroism movie.” The participant attributed the emergence of Chinese elements in American films to profits. Then P-E expanded upon this idea:

One of the most observant reasons [for the producers to incorporate Chinese elements] is to make money. Other than that, I cannot think of any other purpose to have the movies be more exposed to the Chinese market. The ‘American-production’ tag somehow is already a sign for better quality. American movie industry is more mature and professional compared to Chinese.

The participants thought that the “American-production” combined with Chinese elements means more exposure for the movies.

As for gaining more exposure, P-A shifted the conversation to another aspect—the effect of celebrities:

I think American investors are trying to get more exposure. Therefore, more and more Chinese elements were seen on big screens. They tend to invite celebrities in order to have more exposure. Unfortunately, those celebrities usually do not have strong acting skills. Paying too much attention to exposure will result in a decrease in movie qualities. They should focus more on the quality and story itself... We have some excellent movies created in the Chinese market and I believe those movies will be big threats to the American movies imported into China.

P-3 believed that Chinese audiences were capable of explaining the reasons for those media representations, and ended the discussion with a Chinese term "接地气 (dì) 气(qì)" ("gee dee chee"), which means to be more native and to have more localness. Most participants agreed with what the Chinese term refers to and thought this was the main reason.

Limits of cultural access

Limits of cultural access refers to the idea that limited access to culture resulted in biased media representations. Based on this explanation, filmmakers had limited access to Chinese culture so there were stereotypical media representations in the films.

Analysis of responses revealed that the participants were critical of this kind of media

representation. They analyzed the reasons behind this phenomenon and tried to justify the American films choices. P-A offered:

Those understandings and receptions all come from media, either mass media or social media. They [Americans] have very limited access to China and our culture. The scale of Americans tourism towards China is limited as well compared with the number of Chinese traveling to the US. That's why their understandings of Chinese culture were settled.

P-F explained from a cultural perspective:

American culture advocates individualistic heroism...It indeed delivered ideas like the Chinese need a white savior [as in *the Great Wall*]. Some good Chinese movies can really shift those kinds of thoughts which I think should be screened globally for the other to know us better.

Both participants blamed the limited accessibility, and P-F put forward with a possible way to help promote Chinese culture. P-A further justified:

Well, those movies are from Hollywood. They would show a preference for their own values. More specifically, they will unconsciously tell the story in an American way. Just like you mentioned, in *the Great Wall*, you can still see white supremacy in the movie. The leader of the army is not Chinese. But we can still

see unity, perseverance, and cooperation in the story, which is encouraged in Chinese culture. It really depends.

P-A continued to explain that American feature films would encourage cross-cultural communication and even looked forward to future communication as time went on: “Let’s discuss why those biases would exist. Their [American audiences] access to Chinese culture are basically from media.”

Chinese audiences were able to see and understand the limits and possibilities in cross-cultural communications. They were willing to offer time and space for more frequent interactions.

Intercultural communication attempts

Rather than regarding the phenomenon as strictly a way of making money, some participants viewed the media representations as attempts to learn about another culture.

P-A responded:

There has been more communication between China and the US. We are very curious about each other’s cultures, especially for Americans. They begin to wonder what Chinese culture looks like. Therefore, they began to seek cooperation and collaboration with Chinese actors/actresses and directors.

Although attempts to learn more about Chinese culture are good, the limited access that Americans have result in Chinese stereotypes, as noted above. P-B supported

P-A's idea: "As far as I think, it is assumed that Orientals are mysterious. Asia is a place behind the veil, with uncertainty and mystery. So Americans would like to explore this marvelous continent."

P-F described intercultural communication as "a double-edged sword" in a way that it could possibly lead to misunderstandings and stereotypes. However, P-F explained, "we should view it with a rational mind. Someday, I hope as an audience, we can have more voice in creating contents. So that Chinese are able to show authentic Chinese story to the world." Likewise, P-E was positive about intercultural communication and thought it was "good to talk about those things. To hear different ideas and perspectives."

P-A was optimistic about the Chinese-American communications through movies:

Thanks to the development of social media and the Internet, communication is more frequent than ever. Their understandings will gradually grow. And it requires time. The representation will gradually be complete, and it is acceptable.

What's more, the Sino-American relationship only has a history of 30 years. There is still a long way to go.

Regardless of what is going on between the two countries, the communications between culture may be positive and welcome.

Over-thinking

Regardless of the valence of the representation, some participants thought it was unnecessary to overthink the reasons of Chinese media representations in American feature films. For example, even though P-F understood that limited access might lead biased media representations, P-F still responded: "For popcorn movies, there is no need to take them too seriously. After all, those movies are for entertainment." P-D stated it directly: "I only care about the movie itself rather than the media representations. That's too complicated. I sometimes even think it is unnecessary for us to overthink about their role or impacts." P-D added later in the discussion that "[m]edia is just a way of entertaining the audience. We should take it easy."

P-C suggested that "[w]e should not generalize the culture of other cultures. Even though the movie had stereotypes, the stereotypes, to some extent, represent some of the Chinese indeed. So we should not blame them for it, from a dispassionate standpoint."

Politics

Political factors were also mentioned as one of the factors in affecting Chinese media representations in American feature films. In response to the reasons for Chinese media representations in American films, P-A said:

I think it is more like answering a political question. I think it is because the overall competitiveness of China is growing so that more and more Chinese

elements are represented in American movies. We as Chinese have more voices than ever before.

P-D also viewed those media representations as a sign of Chinese competitiveness:

I was happy to see the exposure since it serves as evidence that China is more influential than before. Take *Kung Fu Panda* as an example. It incorporates a massive amount of Chinese culture and elements. It exemplifies that China is becoming stronger.

Therefore, participants agreed that the development in international prestige of China contributed to Chinese exposure in American films.

Meanwhile, P-E suggested the impact of "film censorship" in the discussion: "I didn't really see a lot of negative Chinese representations in the movies. Probably it is because those films passed the film censorship." This participant implied the role of the Chinese government as another important factor in the diverse Chinese media representations. The Chinese government has a strict censorship for importing films, via the ways of revenue-sharing, flat-fee, and co-production. Therefore, Chinese government played an important role in movie access control, which to some extent block Chinese audiences from negative Chinese media representations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Discussion

This study sought to understand how Chinese audiences respond to Chinese media representation in American feature films. This chapter will review and summarize the findings, discuss two major themes emerging from the findings, explain the significance of this study, and outline the limitations of the study. Furthermore, it will provide recommendations to improve Chinese media representation in American feature films, which will lead into the development of a white paper. Hopefully, these recommendations will aid American filmmakers in producing films with Chinese culture and character representation, including but not limited to casting, setting, and the production process.

Two broad themes emerged from this study. The first major theme, “Chinese audience responses,” relates to participants’ positive valence and their unexpected but insightful understandings towards the research questions. The second major theme is “External influences on Chinese media representations,” which relates to the causes and motives for why Chinese media representations emerge. Both themes align with and provide added evidence to audience reception theory (Martin, 2007) and also open up new considerations regarding audience reception.

Summary of Findings

The findings related to RQ1 (What stereotypes do Chinese audiences see in American feature films?) revealed audiences were able to identify several stereotypes in the films *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Dr. Strange*, and *The Great Wall*. The most prominent stereotypes participants identified included the physical portrayal of Chinese characters, such as yellow skin, dark hair, and small eyes. Participants also observed various cultural and lifestyle choices in the films, including that Chinese characters were frequently portrayed eating steamed buns, the predominance of the use of the color red, the stereotype that all Chinese people were good at math, and the portrayal of Chinese people as experts in martial arts.

In regards to RQ2 (How do Chinese audiences respond to the stereotypes in American feature films?), participants reached a consensus that the stereotypes promoted misunderstandings and promulgated stereotypes. For example, P-A commented that: “Mass media chooses girls with stereotypical ‘oriental eyes’ for programs and movies, which strengthens their views about Chinese people.” Such stereotypical media representations emphasize the ideas of Chinese people having phoenix eyes, which thus promotes misunderstandings and promulgating stereotypes.

In analyzing participants’ responses to RQ3 (What are the Chinese audience’s responses to and interpretations of media representations of Chinese characters and

Chinese culture in American feature films?), it was determined that the participants generally had positive attitudes towards Chinese media representation in American feature films. Although the participants believed that stereotypes do promulgate misunderstandings and biases, their responses framed the stereotypes as progress and contributions within the process of intercultural communication and exchange. For example, P-F described intercultural communication as a “double-edged sword” because misinformation and biased media representation will lead to stereotypes within the process of cultural interchange and sharing of different values and perspectives.

In their responses related to RQ4 (What are Chinese audiences' perspectives on how Chinese elements are involved in American feature films?), participants articulated a general understanding of the political economy that results in the creation of Chinese media representations in American films. In particular, government censorship was mentioned as one of the predominant factors affecting Chinese media representation in American films.

Participant responses revealed they possessed the capability to identify the differences between stereotypes and general media representations. Moreover, the majority of participants held positive attitudes towards representations of Chinese characters and culture in the media. The participants recognized the motivation for incorporating representations of Chinese people and culture in American films.

Understanding how Chinese audiences respond to media representations can hopefully provide guidelines for filmmakers of and investors in American feature films who want to earn a larger market share in China.

Theme 1: Chinese Audience Responses

The first major theme of the study that emerged was related to Chinese Audience Responses. This study is the first to my knowledge to specifically examine a Chinese audience and their responses to American feature films. Unlike what may have been viewed as another stereotype—that Chinese people, and by extension, Chinese audiences, are passive (Cai, 2018, p. 11)—the results show that the Chinese audience is actually rather active, intelligent, engaged, and articulate. If this study is an indication, Chinese audiences can recognize stereotypes of Chinese portrayals of culture and characters; understand the roles of the stereotypes within the film and as part of the political economy and production process; and identify the negative impacts of promulgating inaccurate perceptions of Chinese culture. For instance, P-A not only listed several aspects of the films' portrayal of Chinese characters and culture that were regarded as stereotypes, but also provided reasonable arguments for why such representations exist, such as the need for cultural communication and the advancement of a political economy that trades on stereotypes for film profits.

Participants demonstrated they were capable of distinguishing stereotypes from general media representations. During the focus group, participants mentioned many Chinese elements that were incorporated in the films, yet some were specifically noted with the label “stereotype.” For instance, P-5 described some Chinese product placements that were not identified as stereotypes. However, other media representations, like appearance traits and lifestyle choices, were tagged as stereotypes. Some features were seen as stereotypes because the media representations may result in a negative effect or bias. This kind of characterization is supported by Hall’s (1997) description of stereotypes as reducing the characteristics and complexities of a person into simplified traits. Stereotypes are everywhere and are automatically applied to members of the stereotyped group (Devine, 1989). Bordalo, Gennaioli, and Shleifer (2014) also argued, “While stereotypes allow for a quick and intuitive assessment of groups, they may also cause distorted judgment and biased behavior, such as discrimination and inter-group conflict” (p. 1). Although they highlight the differences between groups, stereotypes often result in misunderstandings and biases, as these participants noted. As a result of repetitive representations of stereotypical images of Chinese people, Chinese characters are designed to look like an “ideal” Chinese person rather than an authentic Chinese individual. For example, the participants in this study argued that not all Chinese people have small eyes, and not all Chinese should be good at math. However, in the films,

“Chineseness” is usually represented through stereotypical features (e.g., small eyes) and high levels of intelligence, such as the famous character, Fu Man Chu.

These discrepancies between the representations of Chinese characters in media and the attributes of actual Chinese people can be explained by audience reception theory (Martin, 2007). When Chinese audiences are decoding Chinese media representations, they may take a negotiated or oppositional position because they have a better knowledge of what Chinese characters should look like and how they should behave. Biased media representations present Chinese culture and people in stereotypical ways. Therefore, the media representations that Chinese audiences decode will be mostly regarded as stereotypes rather than general media representations. Furthermore, the responses to the same media representations within one focus group were sometimes divergent. When the audience responds to those representations, the messages are interpreted differently based on an individual audience member’s characteristics and experiences. Some may have experienced or witnessed racial discrimination due to being Chinese, so they may have responded with an oppositional position and offer considerable disagreement. This was seen when P-A described seeing people making fun of Chinese appearance; the participant also revealed negative attitudes towards the representation of Chinese people in American films. The negative attitudes reveal, in part, an oppositional interpretation. Other participants provided more positive and dominant interpretations in responding to

the question, such as P-D using the words “amazed,” “successful,” and “excited” in answering RQ3.

Thus, these participants were not passive but were rather nuanced and intelligent in their ability to respond to portrayals of Chinese culture and characters in American feature films. This response supports the Audience Reception Theory, notably in how the participants took a dominant position in interpreting the question. They not only were able to identify Chinese-based stereotypes, but also recognized the motivations for doing so within the political economy of movie production. It is important for American filmmakers to realize that members of the Chinese audience are active and insightful in articulating their thoughts about the representation of Chinese people in their films, and this requires significant attention from filmmakers.

Moreover, the participants noticed that how Chinese characters have been portrayed in the media has changed over time. The characteristics of Chinese characters as depicted in more recent American feature films are noticeably different than those depicted in films from the early 20th century. Whereas in the early 20th century when Chinese characters were often depicted as clumsy, violent, or nerdy, Chinese characters in today’s films often reveal intelligence, caring, and resourcefulness. However, although certain Chinese stereotypes have changed over time, others still persist in the media. One prominent example is the stereotype of the “Kung Fu Master.” Although the specific

depiction of the martial arts master differs between early 20th century films to more recent films, the stereotype of “Kung Fu Master” still exists and continues to affect the way Chinese people and Chinese culture are represented. The character Po from *Kung Fu Panda* is a good example of that.

Theme 2: External Influences on Chinese Media Representations

During the focus group, participants indicated that cultural, political, and economic forces affect the way Chinese people are represented in American films. In general, the participants welcomed such incorporations in all forms as a way to promote intercultural communication and exchange. Some characterized these stereotypes and misunderstandings as a “tolerant fault” (P-A) in the process of cross-cultural exchange. However, instead of seeing the incorporations of Chinese elements as primarily attempts at intercultural communication and exchange, the participants were able to recognize other external influences that contributed to Chinese media representations. Notably, based on the participants’ responses, it was clear they held a general understanding of the political economy of Chinese media representations in American films and developed plausible explanations for justifications of those representations.

Mosco (2009) defines political economy as “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (p. 13). Satchel (2017) addressed the functioning in the realm

of films that there are complicated interactions among market pressure, investment, contents, and mass culture. (p. 82). As Satchel explains:

When movies earn more, studios tend to invest more in advertising and ensure distribution to more theaters. Film companies, therefore, spend lavishly to influence reviewers and create “buzz” with special screenings, receptions, and access to star interviews, press materials, and junkets. In turn, reviewers pay little attention to racial images in movies or they believe them to be inappropriate material for commentary. Low projected revenues from a limited audience dictate lower spending on production and marketing, which yields lower audience appeal—and lower revenues. This vicious cycle occurs among additional market and political pressures such as film reviews, casting decisions, distribution limitations, and the framing of media content. (Satchel, 2017, p. 72)

Thus, the process of movie production and distribution—the political economy—plays an important part in the process of movie production and in shaping the message and information.

In China, one important factor in the political economy of movie production that bears much influence on feature films screened in the country is Chinese government censorship, as Hendricks (2018) explains:

Since China is the world's largest film market, getting into it is a very competitive business. Movies that the censors don't like aren't going to get in, giving them tremendous power over what money-chasing Hollywood executives are going to make.

The Chinese government uses censorship as a filter to keep Chinese audiences away from what it believes are negative media representations of China. For example, in the film *World War Z* (2013), scenes were cut because China was described as the birth place of the zombie virus. Another example was seen in *Red Dawn* (2012), where the nationality of the brutal military officer was changed from China to South Korea by the film company even before the film censorship stage. This, which fits the Chinese political ideology, is possibly one of the explanations for why participants exhibited positive responses towards Chinese media representations in American feature films: Due to the government censorship of negative portrayals of Chinese characters, the majority, if not all, of their experiences with Chinese characters in American media could have been censored to offer more positive portrayals. This censorship mechanism results in American filmmakers representing Chinese culture in a more positive way in order to avoid the censorship of their work in China, especially if they want to screen their films in China. This has likely contributed in part to the shift in the roles Chinese characters have in American films—no longer “evil” characters, they are now the “hero.” Chinese

government censorship plays a role of information “selector,” which helps to shape the message to a more preferred version, at least in the government’s perspective.

Apart from government censorship, the term “celebrity effect” was mentioned in the focus group, which is a cultural perspective. Although characters were not drawn directly from the three films selected for the second focus group, celebrities with large fan bases in China, such as Kris Wu in *XXX: Return of Xander Cage* and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*, and Jay Chou in *Now You See Me 2*, are considered attractive to audiences and thus increase audiences’ motivation of paying for the tickets. However, based on participants’ responses, big stars are not as popular as envisioned. P-A commented on the celebrity effect in a negative way saying, “Paying too much attention on the ‘packaging’ will result in a decrease on quality. They should focus more on the quality and story itself.” Participants were realistic and rational in understanding the effect of celebrity, focusing more on the quality of movie production rather than “fame.” This supports participants’ ability to critically evaluate the political economy and motives behind representations as active and not passive audiences.

In addition, the traditional Chinese culture of *mianzi* and *guanxi* has been passed down for thousands of years, and it does have some impacts on the Chinese media representations. It is difficult for Chinese people to break away from the influence of *mianzi* and *guanxi* in mindset. The idea of *mianzi* and *guanxi* can be seen in the

participants' wordings, behaviors, even expressions during the focus group. When discussing Chinese media representations, very few participants chose to behave aggressively by challenging others' opinions because being aggressive will be regarded as not taking care of others' faces. Most of the participants chose a gentle way of wording by using non-aggressive expressions like "possible" and "assume." By doing so, people will think the speaker is polite and easy to get along with. Chinese people are also very concerned about maintaining a good relationship with others in the traditional Chinese sense. Therefore, very few participants used the word "no," even if they disagree with others' opinions. Being gentle in language and action will be regarded as an attempt to establish a good relationship. The *mianzi* and *guanxi* in the traditional Chinese culture are subtly affecting audiences' evaluation of the Chinese media representations in a way that people are trying to show their positive side. This will lead to some limitations at the time, which will be explained in the next section.

The participants also attributed the shift toward more positive stereotyped Chinese representations to the economic and political growth of China as a country, which has helped China gain a better reputation and prestige worldwide. In recent decades, China has been developing rapidly both economically and politically. Such a huge advancement provides enough confidence for the Chinese people to have their voices be respected in

various fields. In response, Hollywood is adapting to this re-writing their scripts to compete for a larger market share in China (Song, 2018, p.190).

Politics, law, and culture should be given attention when discussing Chinese media representations. It is difficult to separate one from another since those aspects are interrelated. One participant said that it was like answering a political question during the discussion of RQ4, which reflects that participants noticed the role and influence of political factors in the Chinese film industry. Others mentioned the influence of the celebrity effect, the idea of *mianzi* and *guanxi*, and other cultural aspects on the Chinese media representations. Although the Film Law was not directly mentioned by the participants, it does have impacts on the Chinese film market from a legal perspective. It brings more opportunities to the Chinese market and calls for higher requirements for foreign films. The Film Law will make the competition more intense, thereby affecting the development of the Chinese film market.

As mentioned in the second chapter, the Chinese film industry is influenced by the political, legal, and cultural perspectives in China. As explained, the participants recognized different dimensions of the external environment that may affect the way Chinese characters are represented in foreign media. This study captures and extends how a Chinese audience can identify and articulate well their responses to American feature films and partially demonstrates that a Chinese audience recognizes there are political,

cultural, legal, and economic forces that shape the messages and representations they see in the films. Chinese audiences are not passive and are rather astute and aware.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of the present study is the low number of participants and inability to achieve complete data saturation. As an exploratory attempt to understand Chinese audiences, a two-stage focus group design was conducted. Only one focus group (with two stages) was conducted. The second stage of the focus group only had female participants. It would be stronger if participants of both genders were involved. However, the aim of this research was to open up a discussion and explore Chinese audience responses rather than provide an exhaustive account of Chinese audience responses. Others are recommended to continue this fruitful line of inquiry. Thus, more focus groups and discussions ought to be conducted among Chinese audiences with both genders.

Furthermore, the age range of the focus group is limited. Although the age group represented here includes the demographic of the most frequent movie-goers, participants of different ages will likely have distinct perceptions and interpretations, such as older audiences may choose trendy American movies and exhibit no recognition of Chinese media representations in those films. Conclusions from this study, therefore, should be viewed as non-generalizable and treated as early and exploratory, recognizing their role in making recommendations for filmmakers and not in advancing any particular

theoretical or methodological goal. Still, this is the first study to my knowledge that specifically documents Chinese audience responses to American feature films.

Another limitation may be the participants of the study themselves. The study's conclusions were based on the Chinese participants' responses in the focus group. However, the participants may have biased perspectives about American movies. Just as the Audience Reception Theory implies that the audience may take different positions when decoding different information, it is possible participants may also have stereotypical views towards Americans, possibly prejudicing results in a biased way. Further, in the same way perceptions of bias may influence interpretations of media representations, so also do personal experiences (Martin, 2007). As noted above, a participant may have experienced racism and is unintentionally predisposed to interpreting stereotypes where only general media representations might be present.

Another limitation are the movies participants screened. The participants in the first focus group originally identified a list of 11 films that contained stereotyped Chinese media representations in the first focus group. Among the eleven films, three American feature films were selected through vote by the first focus group participants for the second stage of focus group. However, if different films had been selected, such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, mentioned in the first focus group, the results might be different. Characters and cultures presented in *Crazy Rich Asians* are very different from what we see in *The*

Great Wall or *Kung Fu Panda*; thus, participants may respond differently based on the group of movies screened.

Due to language limitations, the original focus groups were conducted in Mandarin. There may be discrepancies in translating Mandarin into English when the participants were using certain proverbs or idioms, thereby diluting results.

The results may also be affected by the Chinese sociological concept of “mianzi (face)” and “guanxi (connection),” which plays an important role in Chinese culture. The culture of face and connection is deeply embedded in Chinese culture so that participants may not behave this way on purpose. In this way, people in China tend to talk and behave in an unassertive and unaggressive manner, so no one will be offended. Participants’ responses in the focus group suggest they mostly hold positive attitudes towards the representation of Chinese characters in the films (RQ3). However, it is possible that the Chinese participants were influenced by face unconsciously and hoped to establish positive images of themselves, which led them to being less critical, even when the environment and process disaggregates identity from responses. The influence of face may have produced positively biased results rather than more honest ones.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, this research aimed to provide an opportunity for a Chinese audience to articulate their responses and thoughts about the representation of Chinese

people and culture in American feature films. The results point toward the notion that a Chinese audience is intelligent and insightful enough to articulate their opinions from different perspectives. The Chinese audience is, based on this study, active in understanding messages and also responding to them. Although this study examined the responses of only a small focus group, it is my hope that this preliminary investigation of a Chinese audience will inspire future research in this area and, more generally, attract more attention to the importance of hearing the Chinese voice.

The results from this study can be used as a supplement for current media representation and audience reception studies. Rather than criticism, it will engage in empirical data collection by directly asking and recording Chinese audiences about their responses to Chinese stereotypes in American feature films. This study differentiates Chinese from other Asian inclusive studies (Larson, 2006, p .68; Parungao, 2005; Zhang, 2015;) by only emphasizing Chinese media representation and Chinese audiences. This project not only studies the media representation of Chinese people and culture, but it also provides empirical and applied evidence based on Chinese audiences' responses, which can fill the gap of audience study in Chinese audiences focused research.

The result can also suggest, if any, possible changes in the American film industry, which can satisfy Chinese audiences' tastes and needs for proper representations in films, and attract more movie goers into cinema in China. The findings can provide

feedback to assist American film producers in future production so that movie content is in better accord with Chinese regulations, and can offer insight into what Chinese audiences might want to see and enhance market share and revenues.

Further, as to the specific role and purpose of this study, which is to use the findings to develop recommendations for American filmmakers of and investors in American feature films with media representations of Chinese culture, lifestyles, and people. The following is a series of five recommendations, which are detailed in Chapter 7 through a white paper targeted toward filmmakers and investors, emanating from this study.

1. Chinese media representations are welcome.

Chinese audience are generally positive towards a wide range of Chinese media representations, whether accurate and inaccurate. It is encouraged that American feature films incorporate not only more representations of Chinese culture and characters, but also a diversity—positive, negative, neutral, ancillary, central—of Chinese elements and cultural representations in American films. This may include media representations of Chinese people in all professions alongside the status quo and ways to depict the diversity of lifestyles, physical characteristics, opinions, and views of the most populated country in the world.

2. Chinese audiences need authentic "Chineseness."

Building from the first recommendation, participants in this study expressed a need for more “Chineseness.” If the story is China-based, inviting Chinese scriptwriters to join the production process will help to build a better understanding of more authentic Chinese culture and people. Therefore, the distance between stereotypes and the “ideal” Chinese media representations can be shortened. The second recommendation goes farther to unpack the desire for more accurate portrayals of Chinese history and culture. This process may include recruiting Chinese scriptwriters, Chinese directors, and Chinese producers, adding authentic “Chinese-ness” to the movie, as in *The Joy Luck Club*.

3. *Chinese audiences value content over casting*

Although Chinese audiences have a high tolerance for various Chinese representations, they have elevated tastes in casting. Half of the participants in the focus groups indicated they are not affected by box-office stars, suggesting that particular cast members are not reasons for viewing a certain movie. Audiences are rational and prudent in choosing which movie to watch with an understanding of the political economy inherent in movie production, especially related to government censorship, profit motives, and the (failing) appeal of celebrities. Relying too much on celebrities is not a wise choice. Chinese have high expectations and a critical eye with regard to American films. Therefore, a movie with an excellent storyline and post-production team is more likely to attract Chinese audience.

4. *“Our ideas and thoughts are worth spreading!”*

Colors, foods, and appearance are the typical ways of Chinese media representations as mentioned in the focus group. Yet, participants suggest that *Kung Fu Panda*’s success lie in the point that it also delivers Chinese values as well. The participant was drawing upon the need for continued cross-cultural sharing and communication, extolling that China has excellent values that are worth spreading, especially concerning morality and guidance. One good example is *The Great Wall* in which there are some positive Chinese values depicted, such as unity, perseverance, and cooperation, even though the story itself was not successful. The focus groups advocated that American producers should show a more profound understanding of Chinese culture in order to not only enhance market share in China, but to also inspire people worldwide.

5. *Chinese audiences are active and astute.*

Unlike what may have been viewed as another stereotype—that Chinese people, and Chinese audiences are passive (Cai, 2018)—the results show that the Chinese audience is actually rather active, intelligent, engaged, and articulate. Participants articulated that they would not be easily “cheated” by marketing strategies. The era that audiences will always pay for promotional gimmicks has passed. Audiences seem to care more about what they are really paying for. This indicates a response and well-formed

opinion and perspective about the movie's content, representation, narrative, and effects alongside a considered response of whether or not to attend a screening at all.

The recommendations are based on participants' responses. In the next chapter, a white paper will be presented to give a better idea of how this research will apply to the real industry. Hopefully, it will give some inspirations for filmmakers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

White Paper



Do You Know Chinese Audiences?

Five Recommendations
for American Film Producers

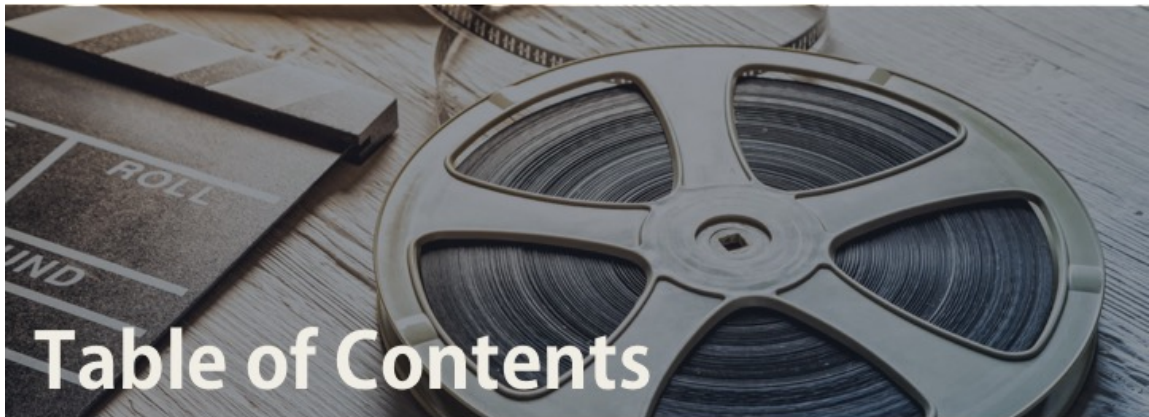


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Introduction

China boasts the second biggest box office worldwide. According to *Mtime* (2019), a Chinese movie and TV series online database, the Chinese movie market grossed 64.266 billion RMB in 2019, an increase of 5.4% since 2018. Among all the films screened in China, foreign movies comprised 35.9% of the market and grossed 23.091 billion RMB (equivalent to \$3.26 billion USD) last year. For instance, four Hollywood films earned more money in China than they did in the US, including *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw* (grossed \$199 million USD in China and \$174 billion USD in the US); *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (grossed \$129 million USD in China and \$111 million USD in the US); *Alita: Battle Angel* (grossed \$126 million USD in China and \$86 million USD in the US); *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (grossed \$48.48 million USD in China and \$39.19 million USD in the US).

As the largest single export market for American films, the Chinese movie market is significant for American film producers. The American film industry is clearly recognizing China's importance and is seeking to acquire a larger market share there. In response, American feature films are increasingly incorporating Chinese characters, stories, culture, and even product placements in an attempt to attract Chinese audiences.

Despite this tremendous growth and interest, scholars have conducted little empirical research on the Chinese movie viewing audience. In particular, Chinese audience responses to representations of Chinese people and culture in American feature films are lacking. The question is vital: *What do Chinese audiences think of the increased attention on Chinese elements in American feature films? Do they think incorporations of Chinese people and culture are accurate or too stereotypical?* This white paper describes the results from a research study involving focus groups of Chinese movie audiences in order to provide additional insight for American filmmakers, studios, and producers. The hope is that the results of this study enhance both American film producers understanding of the Chinese movie audience and enhance the viewing experience of Chinese movie audiences of American feature films.

This results of this study uncover the types of representations of Chinese in American films that Chinese audiences readily identify, how they respond to those representations, and how Chinese audiences want to see Chinese represented in movies. What follows are five recommendations for American film producers and potential investors who seek to incorporate Chinese people and culture films to be screened in China.



Methodology 1

The study employed a two-stage focus group. In the first stage, a Chinese audience selected movies from an extensive list (see Appendix A) in order to minimize researcher bias and maximize participant involvement. The original list included movies that had significant involvement by American movie producers/studios, were screened in China between 2014-2018, had Chinese elements that were readily identifiable, and were in the top 25 grossing movies in the Chinese market for the year it was screened. Participants in this first stage selected *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *The Great Wall*, and *Dr. Strange*. Each one met the criteria:

1. The three films all screened in China between 2014 to 2018.
2. *Doctor Strange* was a fully American production. Chinese and the US-based companies co-produced both *Kung Fu Panda 3* and *The Great Wall*, so they did not count towards import quotas¹.
3. Participants in the first stage were able to easily identify Chinese elements in these three movies.
4. All three films grossed highly in the Chinese market and were in the top 25 in the Chinese market for that year.

¹Import quotas: There are three major ways American and other foreign movies (not including movies produced in Hongkong, Macau, and Taiwan) can be allowed to be screened in China.



Source: Macquarie Research, February 2017



Methodology 2

The second stage involved a different set of participants and featured an in-depth discussion of Chinese media images and stereotypes of *Doctor Strange*, *Kung Fu Panda 3*, and *The Great Wall*. Four research questions guided this discussion: The focus group responded to four critical research questions:

RQ1

- What stereotypes do Chinese audiences see in American feature films?

RQ2

- How do Chinese audiences respond to the stereotypes in American feature films?

RQ3

- What are Chinese audience's responses to and interpretations of media representations of Chinese characters and Chinese culture in American feature films?

RQ4

- What are Chinese audiences' perspectives of how Chinese elements are involved in American feature films?



Note 1: The number represents the box office that the movies made in Mainland China in the year of its release;

2: The ranking represents the movie's place on the China yearly box office list for that year.



Methodology 3

The focus groups were semi-structured. Participants were active in providing their answers to each question. All participants shared their opinions and responses to the movies. They did not have the same opinions, but all were open to differences of ideas in a productive manner. As the research took place in China, Mandarin was the spoken language. Transcripts were translated from the audio recordings into English.

The first focus group had nine participants, two males and seven females. All participants were university students between 20 and 23 years of age. They had lived in China since they were born. As for frequency of watching films, they all regarded watching films as daily activities, and most would go to the theater every two months.

The participants in the second focus group were college students between 20 and 23 years of age and who had never been to the US at the time of the research. Undergraduate college students are among the most frequent moviegoers in China and have the educational background to articulate their viewpoints. They all regarded watching films as a daily activity, and most went to the theater about every two months. Their favorite American movie genres varied. Demographic information is presented in Tables 1 and Table 2.

Table 1
Demographics of the First Focus Group

	Gender	Age	Stays in the US	Frequency of watching films (per year)	The genres of American movies that the participant would like to watch	Overall impression of Chinese media representation
P- 1	F	21	No	5-6	Action, Romance, Sci-fi	Don't know
P- 2	F	23	No	More than 6	Drama, Animation	Don't know
P- 3	F	21	No	5-6	Drama, Action, Sci-fi	Neutral
P- 4	M	20	No	More than 6	Action, Sci-fi, Drama	Negative
P- 5	M	20	No	5-6	Animation, Action, Sci-fi	Don't know
P- 6	F	20	No	5-6	Animation, Sci-fi, Romance	Positive
P- 7	F	21	No	More than 6	Romance, Drama, Horror, Sci-fi	Negative
P- 8	F	20	No	More than 6	Action, Sci-fi, Animation	Don't know
P- 9	F	22	No	More than 6	Romance, Sci-fi, Action	Neutral



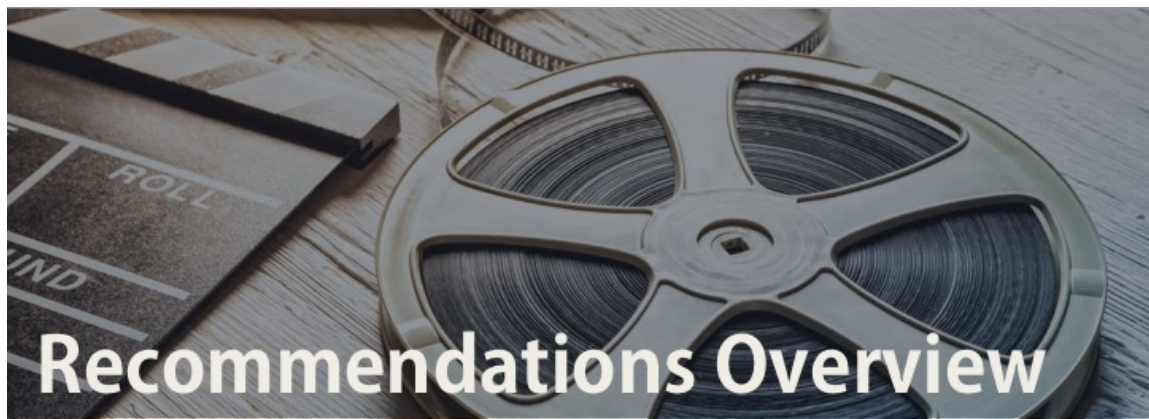
Table 2
Demographics of the Second Focus Group

	Gender	Age	Stays in the US	Frequency of watching films per year)	The genres of American movies that the participant would like to watch	Overall impression of Chinese media representation
P- A	F	23	No	More than 6	Romance, Sci-fi	Positive
P- B	F	21	No	More than 6	Sci-fi, Drama, Crime	Positive
P- C	F	21	No	More than 6	Drama, Action, Sci-fi	Negative
P- D	F	22	No	More than 6	Sci-fi	Neutral
P- E	F	21	No	More than 6	Crime, Sci-fi	Positive
P- F	F	20	No	5-6	Sci-fi, Animation, Romance,	Don't know

Note: This table shows detailed information asked in pre-test survey.

A thematic analysis was used to analyze the results of the focus groups, as it offers an effective and flexible method for qualitative research.





Overall, Chinese audiences are insightful and engaged in their responses to American feature films that carry Chinese media representations. Focus-group participants' comments revealed they could not only readily identify Chinese representation of culture and people, but also differences between stereotypes that mischaracterized Chinese culture and general media representations. Yet, the majority of participants were positive towards the representations of Chinese characters and culture in the American films. Further, Chinese participants could articulate the causes and effects related to the filmmaking production process of incorporating Chinese elements in American films. Participants also identified motivations (usually profit) for incorporating representations of Chinese people and culture in American feature films. Furthermore, they offered reasonable and thoughtful explanations for what they observed. Based on the results, five recommendations emerged that will help and inspire American film producers and potential investors in American feature films with Chinese representation.





Chinese media representations are welcome.

Chinese movie audience participants in this study held positive attitudes toward a wide range of Chinese media representations. They considered both positive and negative portrayals of Chinese characters and culture "reasonable," including Chinese stereotypes. In fact, they viewed such incorporations as "cultural communication attempts."

One participant told the focus group, "I love to see Chinese elements used in American movies. Although *The Great Wall* was terrible [as a movie and in accuracy of representation], it was a good attempt." Another participant welcomed Chinese media representation: "We have more voices globally... That's really good to know. I am very proud of that," explained participant C. Thus, the participants in this study appreciated Chinese media representations in all forms and even welcomed them. The focus groups regarded Chinese media representations in American movies as a sign of China's advancement as well.

However, the participants also pointed out that the representations of Chinese culture and people remain narrow and somewhat stereotypical from a Western standpoint. They pointed out that Chinese culture and people are multi-faceted and diverse. Not all Chinese know Kung Fu like Po in *Kung Fu Panda 3* or are good at math. Instead of portraying Chinese people as extremely rich, as in *Crazy Rich Asians*, or as nerds, the participants encouraged American feature films to incorporate additional and diverse Chinese elements and culture, offering a more well-rounded and accurate portrayal of Chinese culture and lifestyle. The focus groups yearned to see Chinese people of all professions and statuses incorporated vividly and more prominently in American cinema.

Overall, this research study indicates that Chinese representations in feature films are welcomed in all forms, but that a broadening of representations that are more accurate, diverse, and prominent are encouraged and desired. While the participants did not specifically denounce Western stereotypical portrayals of Chinese cultural and people, a more well-rounded, balanced approach is sought by Chinese movie audiences based on the participants in this study.



Chinese audience need authentic "Chineseness."

Building from the first recommendation, participants in this study expressed a need for more "Chineseness." When discussing *The Great Wall* regarding authentic "Chineseness," *The Great Wall* is set in early China during the reign of the Song Dynasty's Renzong Emperor in the 11th century. It is an American-Chinese co-production. An American wrote the script, and the film had a Chinese director. The plot features a Caucasian as an army leader rather than a Chinese. Although the cast comprises mostly Chinese actors/actresses, participants expressed a dissonance in watching a Chinese story led by Americans, especially given the historical period being portrayed. One participant commented, "They [American producers] show a preference for their values. They unconsciously tell the story in an American way. In *The Great Wall*, you see white supremacy. The leader of the army is not Chinese." Here, the *The Great Wall* has inaccurately portrayed the Song Dynasty in Chinese history, providing a white protagonist and re-writing history for an American audience and overlaying American values on Chinese history and culture.

Another participant exclaimed, "I hope, as an audience, that someday we [Chinese] can have more of a voice in creating content. Then, Chinese people can show authentic Chinese stories to the world." If a story is China-based, inviting Chinese scriptwriters to join the production process may build a better understanding of authentic Chinese cultures and people and shorten the distance between stereotypes and idealized representations. This process may include recruiting Chinese scriptwriters, Chinese directors, and Chinese producers, adding authentic "Chinese-ness" to the movie, as in *The Joy Luck Club*.

So, while recommendation #1 suggests Chinese movie audiences are welcoming of all kinds of portrayals – positive, negative, accurate, inaccurate – recommendation #2 goes farther to unpack the desire for more accurate portrayals of Chinese history and culture. That is, Chinese media portrayals are welcomed, but accuracy and fidelity is more welcomed.





Chinese audiences value content over casting.

Although Chinese audiences have a high tolerance for various Chinese representations, they have elevated tastes in casting. American producers like to cast Chinese celebrities to attract a larger Chinese audience. The focus group noted Kris Wu in *XXX: Return of Xander Cage* and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* and Jay Chou in *Now You See Me 2* in particular. The participants admitted that well-known Chinese actors contributed to the box office to some extent, but they believed that their celebrity effect is overrated. This is different than a US audience.¹

Half of the participants in the focus groups indicated they are not affected by box-office stars, suggesting that particular cast members are not reasons for viewing a certain movie. Most participants doubted the effectiveness of casting celebrities, suggesting that producers should focus more on accuracy and fidelity to culture than its marketing or superficial casting. As an alternative, one participant specifically highlighted American special effects, saying, “Stars won’t affect my willingness to see a movie, but American special effects are way better than in China. If a movie has American special effects, I’ll go see it.” Indeed, Hollywood blockbusters are popular in China, especially those with good post-production values like *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) (grossed \$300 million) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) (grossed a total of \$614 million in China and ranked first place in the top lifetime grosses list in China).

In a culture that values group over individual² and nationalism over individualism,³ these participants are more interested in a well-produced movie with accurate portrayals of Chinese culture than any particular celebrity or individual attraction. As opposed to a culture where celebrities often drive a feature film’s success⁴, the Chinese movie audience is more interested in the movie itself and how characters, cultural elements, special effects, and storylines provide a superior and interesting movie viewing experience. Thus, relying heavily on celebrity actors is unwise. Chinese audiences are rational and prudent in choosing which movie to watch. Therefore, a movie with an excellent storyline and good post-production team is highly likely to attract a Chinese audience. As the old Chinese idiom goes, “表 (biǎo) 里 (lǐ) 如 (rú) 一 (yī)” (from the inside out). Content matters!

¹Powell, J. (2019, February). Oscars 2019 - movie fans and the power of celebrity influence [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from <https://www.kantarmedia.com/uk/thinking-resources/blog/oscars-2019-movie-fans-and-the-power-of-celebrity-influence>.

²Costello, B. (2010, May 28). Group over individual. Retrieved from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-05/28/content_9902749.htm

³Steele, L. G., & Lynch, S. M. (2012). The pursuit of happiness in China: Individualism, collectivism, and subjective well-being during China’s economic and Social Transformation. *Social Indicators Research*, 114(2), 441-451. doi:10.1007/s11205-012-0154-1



“Our ideas and thoughts are worth spreading!”

When you think about China and Chinese culture, what pops into your mind? When it comes to media representations, Chinese people often appear with yellow skin and single eyelids, like the color red, and eating dumplings. Most of all, Chinese people like and are good at math. Does this depiction seem familiar? If so, it is because this is how many Chinese people are depicted, such as Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians* or Billi in *The Farewell*.

As noted above, these media representations are superficial and are stereotypes. They barely consider who Chinese people are, their preferences, lifestyles, and diversity. In contrast, participants agreed that *Kung Fu Panda*'s success in China was due to its delivery of Chinese values. Determination, perseverance, and hard work were foregrounded over superficial portrayals or celebrity casting. For example, Po in the *Kung Fu Panda* series was a lazy and clumsy panda at first. He was completely new to Kung Fu at first. Because of his determination, perseverance, and hard work, he was able to save the villagers, he succeeded in mastering the skills, and was victorious against the villains. This embodied Chinese collectivism as it was not about personal gain, but personal characteristics served others. On balance, one participant also acknowledged that there are some positive Chinese values depicted in *The Great Wall*, such as unity, perseverance, and cooperation, even though the story itself was not successful, and it turned on white supremacy more than embedded Chinese values.

“Our ideas and thoughts are worth spreading!” exclaimed one participant during the focus groups. The participant was drawing upon the need for continued cross-cultural sharing and communication, extolling that China has excellent values that are worth spreading, especially concerning morality and guidance. This is not to take away from American values, but participants rather wanted to see more balanced, accurate, and integrative depictions of Chinese values in movie production. The focus groups advocated that American producers show a more profound understanding of Chinese culture in order to not only enhance market share in China, but to also inspire people worldwide.





Chinese audiences are active and astute.

Unlike what may have been viewed as another stereotype—that Chinese people, and by extension, Chinese audiences, are passive⁵—the results show that the Chinese audience is actually rather active, intelligent, engaged, and articulate. Further, even though there were different voices and perspectives shared during the focus groups, participants actively elaborated on their own ideas and understanding while providing space and respect for others' viewpoints. Knowing they could be disagreed with, participants in the focus groups were still willing to share their thoughts and responses to the movies. Clearly, Chinese movie audiences are not passive nor agreeable, but are actually active and astute.

In this study, participants acknowledged and were aware of Chinese representations in American features and articulated an understanding of the political economy inherent in movie production, especially government censorship, profit motives, and the (failing) appeal of celebrities. Participant-A commented, “You know the one who pays the money get to make the decision.” when talking about the reasons for stereotypical Chinese media representations in American films. This was an astute observation, that American feature films are not neutral. Rather, not only are the products of an individualistic, Western culture, but they are also products of political and economic process driven largely by profit motive. Here, the participant pointed out the political economy in movie production that the investors are the ones who actually decide the production process.

Participant-D indicated, “My intentions [to watch the films] will depend on the scenario and the script. It doesn’t really matter who plays the role. I would like to watch the film only if it’s a good story. Celebrities don’t work for me.” These participants articulated that they would not be easily “cheated” by small tricks like celebrities or marketing. Instead, they have high expectations and a critical eye concerning American films. The era that the audience will always pay for promotional gimmicks has passed. Audiences seem to care more about what they are really paying for. This clearly indicates a well-formed response and perspective about the movie’s content, representation, narrative, and effects alongside a considered response of whether or not to attend a screening at all. Chinese audiences are definitely active and astute in their moviegoing experiences!

⁵Cai, S. (2017). *Television drama in contemporary China: Political, social and cultural phenomena*. London: ROUTLEDGE.



When it comes to decision-making, audiences usually have little power in the process of movie production. However, their responses matter because, ultimately, they buy the tickets. The formula is simple: interested audiences = higher revenues. China has a rapidly developing film market, and filmmakers need to be able to hear and respond to Chinese audiences in order to increase market share and revenues. Knowing more about audiences' thoughts and ideas will also help producers reach their exposure and profit goals, especially in a fast-changing market. This research report encourages filmmakers and scholars to turn their attention to better understanding Chinese audience responses to American feature films with Chinese representations. Constance Wu, who played the role of Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asian* once said "At the end of the day, the thing that drives people and moves people is truth and story and humanity... If you make sure all your work has depth, even if it's something fun and light like a rom-com, that's how you make good work" (Ho, 2018).

This research report offered five recommendations for American film producers and investors. These recommendations include:

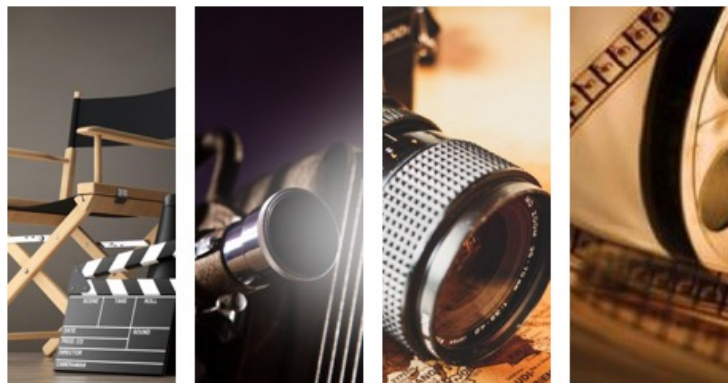
- 1) Chinese audiences value content over casting.
- 2) Chinese audiences need authentic "Chineseness."
- 3) Chinese audiences value content over casting.
- 4) "Our ideas and thoughts are worth spreading!"
- 5) Chinese audiences are active and astute.





Combined, these recommendations provide useful insights into the Chinese movie viewing audience and encourage more accurate portrayals of Chinese culture and people, recognizing the Chinese audience is active and astute, and continued cross-cultural exchange of ideas and values.

As an exploratory attempt to understand Chinese audiences, there is very limited data collected. More research is encouraged, especially on a broader range of gender and age. However, the aim of this research was to open up a discussion and explore Chinese audience responses rather than serve as an exhaustive account of Chinese audience responses. Conclusions from this study, therefore, should be viewed as non-generalizable and treated as early and exploratory, recognizing their role in making recommendations for filmmakers and not in advancing any particular theoretical or methodological goal. Still, this is the first study to my knowledge that specifically documents Chinese audience responses to American feature films.





Cai, S. (2017). *Television drama in contemporary China: Political, social and cultural phenomena*. London: Routledge.

Costello, B. (2010, May 28). Group over individual. Retrieved from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-05/28/content_9902749.htm

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Steele, L. G., & Lynch, S. M. (2012). The pursuit of happiness in China: Individualism, collectivism, and subjective well-being during China's economic and Social Transformation. *Social Indicators Research*, 114(2), 441-451. doi:10.1007/s11205-012-0154-1



List of films that fit into the criteria that Focus Group 1 could select from.

Title	Year	Country/ Region	Total Grossing	Way of Import
Transformers: Age of Extinction	2014	The United States/ China	\$320,000,000	revenue sharing
X-Men: Days of Future Past	2014	The United States	\$116,490,000	revenue sharing
The Amazing Spider-Man 2	2014	The United States	\$94,430,000	revenue sharing
Godzilla	2014	The United States	\$77,630,000	revenue sharing
The Expendables 3	2014	The United States/ China	\$72,870,000	flat-fee
Avengers: Age of Ultron	2015	The United States	\$240,110,000	revenue sharing
Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation	2015	The United States/ China	\$135,653,541	revenue sharing
Terminator: Genisys	2015	The United States	\$113,175,898	revenue sharing
The Martian	2015	The United States	\$94,932,731	revenue sharing
Big Hero 6	2015	The United States	\$83,765,749	revenue sharing
Zootopia	2016	The United States	\$235,591,257	revenue sharing
The Great Wall	2016	China/The United States/	\$170,962,106	co-production
Kung Fu Panda 3	2016	The United States/ China	\$154,304,371	co-production
Doctor Strange	2016	The United States	\$109,194,913	revenue sharing
Now You See Me 2	2016	The United States	\$97,115,220	flat-fee
Skiptrace	2016	The United States/ Hong Kong/ China	\$129,014,985	co-production
Warcraft	2016	The United States	\$213,541,452	revenue sharing
Captain America: Civil War	2016	The United States	\$97,115,220	revenue sharing



The Fate of the Furious	2017	The United States	\$392,807,017	revenue sharing
Kong: Skull Island	2017	The United States	\$168,188,002	revenue sharing
Resident Evil: The Final Chapter	2017	The United States/ Germany	\$159,548,686	flat-fee
Despicable Me 3	2017	The United States	\$158,171,566	revenue sharing
Spider-Man: Homecoming	2017	The United States	\$116,280,889	revenue sharing
xXx: The Return of Xander Cage	2017	The United States	\$213,541,452	revenue sharing
Skyscraper	2018	The United States	\$98,444,095	revenue sharing
The Meg	2018	The United States	\$153,033,208	revenue sharing
Ready Player One	2018	The United States	\$218,471,784	revenue sharing
Pacific Rim Uprising	2018	The United States	\$99,488,362	revenue sharing
Venom	2018	The United States	\$272,243,405	revenue sharing

Note: This is a list of American feature films that fulfill the five criteria of having been screened in mainland China in the last 5 years, being an American feature film, containing Chinese elements which can be easily identified by the audience, being able to provoke thinking, reflection and response, and placed on the top 25 movies of that year in the Chinese market, organized by year.

APPENDIX A

Tables

Table 1: *Demographics of the First Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Birthplace	Education	Universities	Majors
P- 1	F	21	Chongqing	Junior	ZJGSU	English
P- 2	F	23	Shanghai	Senior	ZJUT	Architecture
P- 3	F	21	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	English
P- 4	M	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Marketing
P- 5	M	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Computer Science
P- 6	F	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	English
P- 7	F	21	Shanghai	Sophomore	ZJUT	Advertising
P- 8	F	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Marketing
P- 9	F	22	Zhejiang	Senior	ZJGSU	English

Note. This table shows basic demographic information of the participants in the first focus group. See more information in Table 2.

Table 2: *Demographics of the First Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Stays in the US	Frequency of watching films (per year)	The genres of American movies that the participant would like to watch	Overall impression of Chinese media representation
P- 1	F	21	No	5-6	Action, Romance, Sci-fi	Don't know
P- 2	F	23	No	More than 6	Drama, Animation	Don't know
P- 3	F	21	No	5-6	Drama, Action, Sci-fi	Neutral
P- 4	M	20	No	More than 6	Action, Sci-fi, Drama	Negative
P- 5	M	20	No	5-6	Animation, Action, Sci-fi	Don't know
P- 6	F	20	No	5-6	Animation, Sci-fi, Romance	Positive
P- 7	F	21	No	More than 6	Romance, Drama, Horror, Sci-fi	Negative
P- 8	F	20	No	More than 6	Action, Sci-fi, Animation	Don't know
P- 9	F	22	No	More than 6	Romance, Sci-fi, Action	Neutral

Note. This table shows detailed information asked in pre-test survey, which helps to have a better idea of who were recruited in the first focus group.

Table 3: *Demographics of the Second Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Birthplace	Education	Universities	Majors
P- A	F	23	Zhejiang	Senior	ZJUT	English
P- B	F	21	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	Education
P- C	F	21	Zhejiang	Junior	ZJUT	Advertising
P- D	F	22	Zhejiang	Senior	ZJUT	Broadcasting
P- E	F	21	Zhejiang	Junior	ZJUT	Marketing
P- F	F	20	Zhejiang	Sophomore	ZJUT	English

Note. This table shows basic demographic information of the participants in the second focus group. See more information in Table 4.

Table 4: *Demographics of the Second Focus Group*

	Gender	Age	Stays in the US	Frequency of watching films (per year)	The genres of American movies that the participant would like to watch	Overall impression of Chinese media representation
P- A	F	23	No	More than 6	Romance, Sci-fi	Positive
P- B	F	21	No	More than 6	Sci-fi, Drama, Crime	Positive
P- C	F	21	No	More than 6	Drama, Action, Sci-fi	Negative
P- D	F	22	No	More than 6	Sci-fi	Neutral
P- E	F	21	No	More than 6	Crime, Sci-fi	Positive
P- F	F	20	No	5-6	Sci-fi, Animation, Romance,	Don't know

Note. This table shows detailed information asked in pre-test survey, which helps to have a better idea of who were recruited in the second focus group.

Table 5: *List of Films that fit into the criteria*

Title	Year	Country/ Region	Total Grossing	Way of Import
Transformers: Age of Extinction	2014	The United States/ China	\$320,000,000	revenue sharing
X-Men: Days of Future Past	2014	The United States	\$116,490,000	revenue sharing
The Amazing Spider-Man 2	2014	The United States	\$94,430,000	revenue sharing
Godzilla	2014	The United States	\$77,630,000	revenue sharing
The Expendables 3	2014	The United States/ China	\$72,870,000	flat-fee
Avengers: Age of Ultron	2015	The United States	\$240,110,000	revenue sharing
Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation	2015	The United States/ China	\$135,653,541	revenue sharing
Terminator: Genisys	2015	The United States	\$113,175,898	revenue sharing
The Martian	2015	The United States	\$94,932,731	revenue sharing
Big Hero 6	2015	The United States	\$83,765,749	revenue sharing
Zootopia	2016	The United States	\$235,591,257	revenue sharing
The Great Wall	2016	China/The United States/	\$170,962,106	co-production
Kung Fu Panda 3	2016	The United States/ China	\$154,304,371	co-production
Doctor Strange	2016	The United States	\$109,194,913	revenue sharing
Now You See Me 2	2016	The United States	\$97,115,220	flat-fee
Skiptrace	2016	The United States/ Hong Kong/ China	\$129,014,985	co-production
Warcraft	2016	The United States	\$213,541,452	revenue sharing
Captain America: Civil War	2016	The United States	\$97,115,220	revenue sharing
xXx: The Return of Xander Cage	2017	The United States	\$213,541,452	revenue sharing
The Fate of the Furious	2017	The United States	\$392,807,017	revenue sharing

Kong: Skull Island	2017	The United States	\$168,188,002	revenue sharing
Resident Evil: The Final Chapter	2017	The United States/ Germany	\$159,548,686	flat-fee
Despicable Me 3	2017	The United States	\$158,171,566	revenue sharing
Spider-Man: Homecoming	2017	The United States	\$116,280,889	revenue sharing
Skyscraper	2018	The United States	\$98,444,095	revenue sharing
The Meg	2018	The United States	\$153,033,208	revenue sharing
Ready Player One	2018	The United States	\$218,471,784	revenue sharing
Pacific Rim Uprising	2018	The United States	\$99,488,362	revenue sharing
Venom	2018	The United States	\$272,243,405	revenue sharing

Note. This is a list of American feature films that fulfill the five criteria of having been screened in mainland China in the last 5 years, being an American feature film, containing Chinese elements which can be easily identified by the audience, being able to provoke thinking, reflection and response, and placed on the top 25 movies of that year in the Chinese market, organized by year.

APPENDIX B

Protocol for the First Focus Group

Pre-discussion Information Collection

A pre-test survey will be provided for participants of the focus group to collect demographic information, such age, gender, hometown, level of education, and frequency of watching movies. After basic personal information, several open-ended questions will be given to test their pre-discussion knowledge of American media representation and stereotypes of Chinese people and culture.

Introduction (15 minutes)

Hi, everyone. Thank you very much for your participation in this project. I really appreciate your time and patience.

This project is in partial fulfillment for my master's degree. The purpose of this project is to gather Chinese audiences' responses and reactions toward the portrayals of Chinese culture and people in American feature films. All responses, as well as personal information in this focus group, will remain confidential. Please be aware that this focus group will be audio recorded in order to accurately capture your responses. However, only me and my faculty supervisor specified in the consent form will have access to all information. Documents and videotapes will be fully deleted without any backup copies

upon completion of the project. This focus group will be conducted in Chinese and then translated in to English for research purpose.

The focus group will unfold in the following way: we are going to start the discussion based on your recent experiences of watching films. Then we are going to narrow the conversation specifically on American feature films that portrays Chinese culture, characters, and actors, etc. In the end, we will generate a list of films based on the discussion that both meets criteria and can be used in the next stage of focus group.

The whole session will last for about one hour. Food and beverages will be served during the focus group, so please feel free to help yourself. Last but not least, please be aware that your participation is fully voluntary. If at any time you feel like taking a break or are not feeling comfortable during the process, you may leave or take a break.

Do you have any questions? If not, let's begin our discussion!

Discussion questions (45 minutes)

1. What films have you seen in the last years?
 - 1.1. Which ones are American feature films?
2. Which ones portrayed Chinese culture, characters, actors, etc.?
 - 2.1. Can you think of any movies that particularly portrayed Chinese culture and characters?
 - 2.1.1. Were they screened in China?

- 2.1.2. Were they American produced?
- 2.1.3. Can Chinese elements easily be easily identified?
- 2.1.4. Were Chinese elements a significant part of those movies?
- 2.2. How were they portrayed?
- 2.3. What did you think about how Chinese culture, character, etc. were portrayed in those films?
- 2.4. Which ones have impacted you most?
- 3. If you had to pick 3 films for another group to evaluate Chinese portrayals, which ones would you pick and why?

Conclusion

After this discussion, we have a list of films that I can use for another group, which is the second stage of the research. Thank you all again for coming today! Thanks for your patience and participation during the discussion.

APPENDIX C

Protocol for the Second Focus Group

Pre-discussion information collection

A pre-test survey will be provided for participants of the focus group to collect demographic information, such age, gender, hometown, level of education, and frequency of watching movies. After basic personal information, several open-ended questions will be given to test their pre-discussion knowledge of American media representation and stereotypes of Chinese people and culture.

Introduction (15 minutes)

Hi, everyone. Thank you very much for your participation in this project. I really appreciate your time and patience.

This project is in partial fulfillment for my master's degree. The purpose of this project is to gather Chinese audiences' responses and reactions toward the portrayals of Chinese culture and people in American feature films. All responses, as well as personal information in this focus group, will remain confidential. Please be aware that this focus group will be audio recorded in order to accurately capture your responses. However, only me and my faculty supervisor specified in the consent form will have access to all information. Documents and videotapes will be fully deleted without any backup copies

upon completion of the project. This focus group will be conducted in Chinese and then translated in to English for research purpose.

The focus group will unfold in the following way: I'm going to show you movie clips at the beginning, which will take about one and a half hours. After that, I will have some discussions based on the movie(s) you watch. I have some initial questions for you, but may also offer some probing and follow-up questions depending your responses.

The whole session will last for hours. Food and beverages will be served during the focus group, so please feel free to help yourself. Last but not least, please be aware that your participation is fully voluntary. If at any time you feel like taking a break or are not feeling comfortable during the process, you may leave or take a break.

Discussion questions (60 minutes)

1. What aspects of culture, in general, did you observe in the movie(s)?
 - 1.1 In particular, what races? Language? traditions? Food? Dress?
2. Did you notice the Chinese character(s)/ Chinese actor(s)/ Chinese culture in this movie?
 - 2.1 Do you identify them as Chinese?
 - 2.1.1 If yes, to what extent? If no, why not?
3. How do you feel about the Chinese character(s)/culture in this movies?
 - 3.1 How are they/it portrayed? Its appearance, attitudes, gestures, behaviors,

values...

3.2 What is the image of these characters? Is it negative or positive?

3.3 Do you think it represents Chinese people and Chinese culture? Why or why not? Be specific.

3.3.1 Does it, in your opinion, accurately reflect the values of Chinese culture? Why or why not?

3.4 In general, do you think the way the Chinese character(s) was portrayed is perpetuating a stereotype?

3.4.1 If so, what stereotype? Is it positive or negative?

3.4.2 If not, why not?

3.5 What do you think should be altered/ improved?

4. Why do you think Chinese culture and people are portrayed this way in the film?

4.1 How does this portrayal of Chinese character(s) compare to other American feature films in their portrayal of Chinese character (s)?

5. Did you notice any stereotypes in movie clips?

5.1 What is your personal reaction to Chinese stereotypes in movies?

5.2 Do you agree with the images built in movies? Do you think they are harmful to Chinese culture?

5.3 To Chinese identity? Do they give a false impression of Chinese culture?

- 5.4 Do you think stereotypes presented will have a negative/positive impact on your self-perceptions and on the perspectives of other about Chinese?
6. Do you have personal experiences of being understood because of stereotypes in American films? In what way, do you think should be corrected in the film?
7. If you were an American feature film director/ script writer, how would you portray Chinese culture and Chinese people in the movie? Explain.

Conclusion

1. After this discussion, how do you feel about media representations and stereotypes?
2. Ask questions or add comments if you would like to.
 - 2.1.1. Thank you all again for coming today! Thanks for your patience and participation during the discussion.

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Participant: _____

Principal Investigator: Yue Yu _____

Title of Project: Exploring Chinese Audiences Responses towards American Media Representations of Chinese Culture and People _____

1. _____, agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Yue Yu under the direction of Dr. Bert Ballard, Pepperdine University.

2. The overall purpose of this research is:

This focus group is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's thesis. The purpose of this project is to observe Chinese audiences' responses and reactions towards portrayals of Chinese culture and people in American feature films.

3. My participation will involve the following: I will be screen full or partial episodes and/or trailers of American feature films pre-selected by Principal Investigator. These films contain representations of Asian and Chinese culture and individuals. Following the film screening, I will be participating in a guided focus group where I will be offered the opportunity to express my responses and reactions towards the film(s)' representation of Asian and Chinese culture and people.

4. My participation in the study will last for three hours 2 hours for the film, 1 hour for the focus group. The study will be conducted in one of the classrooms at Zhejiang University of Technology or a private location, which is comfortable for all participants.

5. I understand that the possible benefits to myself or society from this research are: The study hopes to shed light on how Chinese audiences respond to the Chinese media representation under the new environment and to bring to light cultural bias and stereotypes in the portrayal of Chinese cultures. This project is going to address the problem specifically towards Chinese audiences rather than generally towards Asian. The

research can also bridge the gap between film industry and audience by providing pragmatic evidence directly from Chinese audiences.

6. I understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that might be associated with this research. These risks include:

Participants will be directed to watch movie clips that may portray Chinese in a way that participants may feel uncomfortable with;

Participants may be asked to share their personal feelings and experiences related to media representation, and may feel uncomfortable sharing them;

Participants may be confronted with different opinions within the group discussion from other participants;

7. I understand that my estimated expected recovery time after the experiment will be: n/a

8. I understand that I may choose not to participate in this research.

9. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate and/or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

10. I understand that the investigator(s) will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others.

11. I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Dr. Bert Ballard (bert.ballard@pepperdine.edu) if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I understand that I can contact Susan Helm, Chairperson of the Seaver College IRB, Pepperdine University, susan.helm@pepperdine.edu.

12. I will be informed of any significant new findings developed during the course of my participation in this research which may have a bearing on my willingness to continue in the study.

13. I understand that in the event of physical injury resulting from the research procedures in which I am to participate, no form of compensation is available. Medical treatment may be provided at my own expense or at the expense of my health care insurer which may or may not provide coverage. If I have questions, I should contact my insurer. I also understand that if there are any emotional concerns or issues raised because of my participation in this study, I can contact Pepperdine counseling

14. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form which I have read and understand. I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

15. I understand that the focus group will be audio recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator. I understand that any report of specific responses will involve the use of a pseudonym and that all identifying characteristics will be removed before being reported. I understand that all digital files of my voice will be deleted once the study is completed and findings are reported. I understand that just because the focus group is audio recorded does not overwrite #9 above.

Parent or legal guardian's signature on participant's behalf if participant is less than 18 years of age or not legally competent.

Date

Participant's Signature

Date

Witness

Date

I am aware and understand that this focus group will be audio recorded.

Participant's Signature

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.

Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX E

研究参与知情同意书

参与者 _____

首席研究员 _____

研究课题：探寻中国观众对于美国电影当中的中国文化及人物的媒体再现之反应

1. _____，同意参与俞越（Yue Yu）在佩伯代因大学的博特波拉德博士指导下的研究项目。

2. 此项研究的首要目的是：本次焦点小组是硕士学位论文的一部分。本项研究的目的是观察中国观众对于美国电影中对于中国文化及人物刻画反应和感受。

3. 我（作为参与者）将会参与以下活动：我将会观看整部或部份提前选择好的电影。这些电影包含亚洲和中国文化和人物。随后，我会参与有领导的焦点小组，届时我将有机会针对美国电影中对中国文化以及人物的媒体再现这一问题表达我的观点和看法。

4. 我的参与预计持续 3 小时，其中包括 2 小时观影时间和 1 小时讨论时间。这项研究将会在浙江工业大学的一间教室进行。

5. 我明白通过这项研究可能对我本人或社会的贡献会有以下几点：这项研究希望使人了解中国观众在新环境下对于中国元素媒体再现的回应，以及揭示美国

电影中对于中国文化刻画体现出的文化偏见和刻板印象。因此席此项课题着眼于中国观众，而非宽泛的针对亚洲观众。这项研究同时可以成为电影产业与观众的桥梁，向电影人提供中国观众的意见和想法。

6. 我明白这项研究存在一定风险，包括：参与者会被要求观看电影，其中可能包含一些会让参与者感到不舒适的描写与刻画；参与者可能会被要求分享个人的感受与经历，也许会因此感到不适；参与者会在小组讨论中面对来自其他参与者的不同的观点。

7. 我明白我在实验后预计需要恢复的时间为：不适用。

8. 我明白我可以选择不参与研究。

9. 我明白我的参与是自愿的，而且我可以在无惩罚的前提下，在研究活动过程中拒绝或者终止我的参与。

10. 我明白研究员会尽一切努力保护我的个人隐私，不让任何有关我个人的信息因为本项研究而暴露在公众视野下。

11. 我明白研究员很乐意回答有关本项研究的问题。我明白如果我有有关此项研究的问题，我可以联系佩伯代因大学的博特波拉德博士

(bert.ballard@pepperdine.edu)。如果我有关于研究参与者权力的疑问，我可以联系佩伯代因大学的苏珊海姆(susan.helm@pepperdine.edu)。

12. 如果研究课题中有重大发现，我将会被告知，这也许会成为我继续参与研究的动力。

13. 我明白因本项研究而产生的身体伤害，我不会得到补偿并且需要自费医疗。如果我有任何问题，我需要联系我的保险商。我明白如果我因此项研究而产生情感上的问题，我可以联系佩伯代因大学的心理咨询。

14. 我明白在此项研究中的回答都是符合我个人意志的。我收到并且阅读了知情同意书，因此我同意参与以上提及的研究课题。

15. 我明白焦点小组将会被录音并且翻译。任何有关特定回答信息都会使用笔名或替代名，所有特征信息将会被移除。我明白所有数码信息将会在研究结束后被删除。

家长或监护人签名（如果参与者未成
年）

参与者签名

日期

日期

见证人

日期

我知道本次焦点小组将会被录音。

参与者签名

我已经解释并明确研究进程的细则，所有参与者同意参与。我已经解释和回答相关问题，因此签名接受参与者的许可。

首席研究员

日期

APPENDIX F

Pre-test Survey

Please choose or fill in whatever applies to the question.

Name _____

(Please fill in what you prefer to be called during the focus group).

1. What is your gender?

A. Male	B. Female
---------	-----------
 2. What is your age? _____
 3. What is your university education level?

A. Freshman	B. Sophomore
C. Junior	D. Senior
 4. Where are you from? _____
 5. Have you ever been to the US?

A. Yes (Go to 5a)	B. No (Go to 6)
-------------------	-----------------
 - 5a. If so, how often and for how long? _____
 6. How long have you lived in China? _____
 7. Where are you attending university and what are you studying?
-
8. How often do you usually watch a movie in a movie theater or at home?

A. 1-2 times a year	B. 3-4 times a year
C. 5-6 times a year	D. more than 6 times a year
 9. Do you watch any kind of American movies?

A. Yes (Go to 9a)	B. No (Go to 10)
-------------------	------------------
 - 9a. What kind of American films do you watch?
-
10. In general, how do you describe the way that Chinese people are portrayed in American feature films?

A. Positively	B. Neutral
C. Negatively	D. Don't Know

APPENDIX G

Recruitment Post

Original Recruitment Post

招募若干杭州地区在校大学生

现需要以“美国电影中的中国媒体再现”为主题进行焦点小组讨论，亟需参与者。

要求如下：

年龄：在校大学生

性别：男女均可

参与者需要对电影有简单认识，并将看电影列为日常活动，如看过一些美国电影者更加。参与者需要具备简单的英语表达能力。

参与者会有报酬。

如想了解更多有关焦点小组的信息，请通过微信联系我。

English Transcription

Recruiting university students based in Hangzhou.

Participants needed for a focus group, regarding Chinese media representations in American feature films.

Requirement:

Age: College students

Gender: Both

Participants should have basic knowledge of movie. Regarding watching movies as daily activities. An ideal participant should have watched some American films. Participants should be capable speaking basic English.

There will be small incentives for participants.

If you would like to know more information, please contact me via WeChat.

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