

Film narratives as public relations in Hollywood–China soft power rivalry

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ABSTRACT

Background: Film has been playing more of the role as a symbolic tool for public relations to externalize countries’ soft power and nationalism in such geo-political competition among major countries in world communication. **Purpose:** This study aims to analyse how these filmic narratives function as public relations texts within the sphere of soft power competition between Hollywood and Chinese cinema through an analysis of both the ideological meaning and cultural significance constructed around these personalities, figures, and ideas on a global scale. **Methods:** Drawing on the qualitative comparative case study methodology and a media political economy model, this study examines theme narratives of certain Hollywood and Chinese films that depict representations of national identity and geopolitical interests along three dimensions; (a) literary narrative, (b) censorship laws, and (c) capitalist structure of media. **Results:** I find that Hollywood films promote a narrative of global leadership, technological advancement and liberal values in the context of what I call “entertainment capitalism”, while Chinese movies emphasize nationalism, state ideology and reinterpreting history under conditions of “state capitalism” with severe media regulation. **Conclusion:** In both cases, film narratives work as symbolic public relations rather than institutional ones that frame these forms of soft-power competition between Hollywood and China **Implications:** The study emphasizes the value of storytelling in film that changes as the experiential space is utilized for public diplomacy; here, it promises contributions to theorization in film studies, cultural diplomacy and international communication research.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy; film narratives; media political economy; public relations; soft power

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INTRODUCTION

Soft Power is the governments' ability to convince other countries through its popular culture, political values and policies rather than using force Non-Economic Factors (Nye, 2017). In the age of globalization, film has become one of the best soft-power strategies since it can pass messages with emotions and surpass borders to some extent.

The value of soft power is ever more prominent. It enables countries to project themselves as a power and as an influence in the world through cultural, diplomatic and education links. For instance, India uses its vast cultural heritage and Buddhism to develop networks for promoting its image in Northeast Asia, which indicates that culture can be seen as a resource of soft power (Adhikari & Saha, 2023). Additionally, investment in diplomatic capacity, as through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, correlates positively with greater soft power; resource rich nations can better project their interests and values globally if they invest more in these institutions (Garza-Giron & Schiavon, 2019).

The shifting landscape of global challenges such as pandemics, climate change and conflicts on the soft power front requires rethinking about these policies in terms of a solidarity-rather than force-based approach. By enabling nations to reach out to foreign publics and modify their attitudes, in turn enhancing the legitimacy and influence of a country in international relations, the practice of public

diplomacy has emerged as an important tool for exercising soft power.

In the case of King Abdullah, it can be observed how Saudi Arabia started investing in soft power as a foreign policy tool, having 'cultural diplomacy', or using culture of nations to attract and popularize their image internationally (R Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019). Likewise, China's initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Confucius Institute show how well cultural interaction may affect public opinion (Stevic, 2022). Turkey's focus on cultural diplomacy during the 2000s also emphasizes how nations could overcome prejudice and establish strong foreign connections without resorting to military might (YAĞCI, 2022). Ultimately, soft power helps nations to reach their diplomatic objectives by appeal and persuasion, therefore promoting mutual understanding on the world scene.

These examples show that soft power and cultural diplomacy are based on communication processes to construct meanings, identities and perceptions to convey specific goals, objectives and messages. Communication processes in the global political arena are increasingly mediated and dominated by mass media and cultural products, which enable states to reach global audiences more effectively and sustainably. The media has become an important arena of contestation where soft power is articulated, negotiated and debated.

Film is one of the media that has come about because of advances in technology. It may be

used as soft power by a country to propagate its culture and ideas around the world. The power of film comes from the way it combines sound, story, and pictures in a way that can deeply and meaningfully affect the audience, changing the way they think and feel. The movie industry is changing more and more from theaters to streaming services (Ramadhani et al., 2023). The collaborative nature of filmmaking activities, which always involves many parties from different cultural backgrounds and disciplines, is an advantage that makes films a medium for showcasing a nation's cultural heritage, technological advancements, and social values. In addition to theaters, which are beginning to decline, film festivals have emerged as significant venues for showcasing cinematic works (Arindi et al., 2023). Cinema serves to strengthen diplomatic relations, attract investors and tourists, and enhance a country's global position. Cultural exchange programs and media organization activities also play an important role in strengthening soft power (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014).

In this study, public relations are not interpreted as an institutional practice that is common in organisational communication strategies. However, public relations are interpreted and conceptualised as a symbolic and narrative process through media texts, especially films, for example how films build national images and spread ideological values or even shape international public perceptions. In the context of soft power and

cultural diplomacy, film narratives function as public relations by communicating meaning, legitimising political identities, and influencing global audiences through representation, rather than through direct persuasion or campaigns driven by an institutional policy.

One example of how the ability of film to communicate cultural values and principles can enhance a country's soft power is the strategy of the South Korean film industry, particularly the Korean Wave (Hallyu). This strengthens its cultural influence globally and transforms the country from a receiver to a cultural exporter. In another example, India's diverse cultural heritage, which has been underexploited, turns out to have great potential to develop into soft power through the film industry, showcasing its cultural richness and democratic principles. Cultural products such as films shape perceptions and enhance global influence, according to China's involvement in soft power diplomacy (Chandra & Sinha, 2024). The United States, with its dominance in the film industry, demonstrates how international audiences can be influenced by cultural products. This fulfils American principles and values without requiring repressive actions (Semati & Sotirin, 1999).

Film has soft power and cultural diplomacy that can influence a country's image and public opinion worldwide. Hollywood films also play an important role in shaping public perception; a study comparing the soft power of the United States and China in Brazil found that films can

positively influence public perception, although there are certainly negative impacts as well (Wu, 2023). As they have promoted American values and improved its national image still further, despite occasional side effects China's soft power is even larger than the USA's because it supports global opinion. Moreover, in a survey comparing US-China soft power in Brazil, it was found that the movies will bring about a certain amount of positive influence but difference depending upon circumstances (Guan et al., 2023). The use of national image propaganda films in China shows how the country can strategically use cinema to portray a peaceful and friendly image; however, there are challenges to achieving this potential (Tian & Zhang, 2022). This shows the important role of films in global public relations, because besides serving as entertainment, they also function as useful communication tools for creating national images and cultural dominance.

At the very least, Hollywood films have played an important role in shaping the world's view of the United States since the early 20th century, reinforcing the image of the country with values of democracy, freedom, military sophistication, and technological advancement. These values have a significant impact on the cultural and ideological narratives used in Hollywood film themes. American propaganda in cinema during World War II greatly helped spread the ideas of United States democracy. They also used art and media strategies to strengthen national identity and support the

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war. Hollywood's stories about the American military's strength and heroic valor have become characteristic of the world-saving heroes, reinforcing the image of America as a superpower. Films like *Top Gun* (1986, 2022), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *Captain America* (MCU) depict the United States as a world leader in various global conflicts or as a global police force maintaining international justice and stability. In addition to seeking financial profit from film production, Hollywood has also become a medium for cultural diplomacy and the strengthening of global soft power as part of entertainment capitalism.

While Hollywood relies on entertainment capitalism and global distribution to circulate its narratives, other national film industries adopt different political-economic models to advance their soft power objectives, leading to contrasting narrative strategies in global cinema.

China has established a robust film industry in recent decades to rival Hollywood's dominance by targeting audiences at home and abroad. The Chinese film industry is even more state-controlled than Hollywood, and the government has been intimately involved in production, distribution and censorship. This is part of an agenda to raise China's soft power all over the world with culture, political principles and international policies as the key resources (Pan, 2022). Film subsidies are part of a basket of policies that support Chinese film and

reflect the preferences in policy practice (hence ideology) of China's state, which do not always ensure international competitiveness (X. Zhou, 2020). China continues to engage in cultural diplomacy. One example is China Global Television Network (CGTN), which aims to promote national values and enhance China's image in the world (Zhu, 2022). Chinese films such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), and *Operation Red Sea* (2018) depict China as an independent, strong country ready to challenge the West.

Academic discourse in media studies, political communication, and international relations includes research that examines film as a tool for public relations and soft power. Studies on film as a tool for communicating public relations and soft power are considered a multifaceted process that interacts with media, political communication, and international relations. As Nye's concept of soft power is film as a medium for spreading cultural values. Film functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy to shape public perception and national identity. One real proof is the Hollywood film that has gone global (Henry & Saini, 2024).

It is important to understand cultural diplomacy and the capacity of film to socialize cultural values and national beliefs throughout the world. Hollywood, as a leader in the global film industry with high creativity, has implemented this to spread the principles of democracy and capitalism throughout the world. This is also supported by the political economy

of the media, which shows Hollywood's global dominance through its creative production and control over global distribution networks (Uste & Aydin, 2023). Not only Hollywood, almost every country uses cultural diplomacy to build national image and conduct public diplomacy. Films are used as a propaganda tool to support China's national image. China wants to present a peaceful and open image, reflecting the use of film as a public diplomacy strategy. Studies of the Chinese film industry demonstrate how government censors, nationalist propaganda and international investment might be used to bolster a country's soft power. China shows that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses the entertainment industry to create a national identity and reduce the influence of Western culture (Brady, 2008).

Research on film as a medium of soft power and cultural diplomacy has been widely conducted in media and communication studies. Existing studies have examined how films contribute to national image construction, ideology dissemination, and cultural influence in an international context. However, there are still some gaps. Firstly, most previous studies have analysed Hollywood and Chinese cinema separately, with limited comparisons. Second, while China's censorship policies have been widely discussed, few have explored how these regulations influence narratives in Hollywood films to penetrate the Chinese market or how censorship functions as a narrative constraint in global cinema. Third, research on media

capitalism has largely focused on production, investment and market expansion, while the implications of Chinese investment in Hollywood for narrative representation and symbolic power remain unexplored. Fourth, while many research centres on film production, little attention has been paid to how the global distribution and circulation of film narratives affect the construction of soft power discourses. Based on these gaps, this study focuses on film narratives as a symbolic form of public relations that operates through representation and meaning making rather than institutional communication strategies.

Media capitalism and censorship rules dramatically affect Hollywood's and China's competitiveness using film as a public relations tool. This brings special challenges for both sectors. Protectionism and liberalization interact intricately to shape the Chinese film scene. Filmmakers try to boost competitiveness by means of government policies and rules being avoided (Moon & Yin, 2020). The Chinese government's thorough engagement in cultural control is making this regulatory environment increasingly difficult. This is shown by the suppression of non-normative gender representations on the digital platform economy, which is a part of a more general endeavor to control cultural narratives in the age of digital capitalism (Wang & Bao, 2023). Moreover, the growth of China's entertainment industry which includes the Script Homicide sector showcases how even under strict government control,

cultural artifacts may be employed as means of social belief distribution like feminism (Y. Zhou et al., 2023).

Hollywood must face the challenge of following strict rules set by the Chinese government if it is to keep the biggest movie market in the world. The change of *The Ancient One* in *Doctor Strange* (2016), originally shown as a Tibetan monk in the comics, but reinterpreted as Celtic to avoid diplomatic conflicts with China, is a real example of this trend. Moreover, in the first *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022 teaser), Tom Cruise's jacket lacked the Taiwanese flag to guarantee the movie's China release.

In the soft power competition between Hollywood and China this paper reflects the film narrative on public relation as symbol. This study is concerned with the processes through which media capitalism and censorship affect narrative representation in film production and distribution, not with agency PR tactics. It also considers film as a type of cultural diplomacy, within wider geopolitical trends. This article employs a comparative case study approach, media political economy perspectives and critically reflects how the competition between China and the US in global cinema is not merely one of inter-industry rivalry but comprises struggles over driving narratives, shaping national image building/regeneration and asserting soft power discourses. In this sense, the study adds to a more nuanced scholarly understanding of film

narratives as transnational public relations that moulds representations and battles for power in international communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research design with a comparative case study approach to analyse how film narratives function as a symbolic form of public relations in the context of soft power competition between Hollywood and China. This approach is particularly relevant in contemporary global communication studies, where media texts increasingly operate as strategic instruments of influence beyond traditional diplomatic channels. Rather than analysing institutional public relations strategies, this study focuses on film narratives as cultural texts that convey national images, ideological values and geopolitical meanings to a global audience.

The object of this research is film narratives as symbolic PR texts, while the units of analysis include narrative themes, character portrayals, ideological framing, portrayals of nationalism, and portrayals of power and identity. These analytical categories allow for a deeper interpretation of how meaning is constructed, circulated, and normalized within cinematic discourse across different sociopolitical contexts. The cases selected for analysis consist of six films - four from Hollywood (*Top Gun* 1986, 2022), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *Captain America* (2011) and two from Chinese cinema (*Wolf Warrior 2*

(2017) and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021). These films were specifically selected based on three criteria: First, their explicit discussion of national identity and geopolitical narratives; Second, their wide distribution nationally and internationally, which demonstrates their relevance to soft power discourses; and Third, their frequent mention in academic and public debates on nationalism, military portrayals, and ideological messages in cinema.

Data collection was conducted through text and narrative analyses of the selected films, supported by document analyses of relevant scholarly literature and politics-related sources on censorship and media regulation. The study is not based on interviews, surveys or extensive industry reports, but rather treats film as a primary cultural text that articulates symbolic public relations. Selected examples of regulatory influence such as narrative modifications in *Doctor Strange* (2016) and symbolic changes in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) are used to illustrate narrative restrictions in context, rather than as stand-alone empirical data sets.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic narrative analysis, which identified recurring themes related to PR functions, including national image construction, ideological legitimacy, cultural diplomacy, and soft power representation. Next, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences between Hollywood and Chinese cinema in terms of how film narratives convey these symbolic PR functions.

To contextualise the narrative results, this research uses the media political economy framework, as articulated by Vincent Mosco, provides a lens to analyze how entertainment capitalism in Hollywood and state capitalism in China influence film narrative production and distribution. In Hollywood, the integration of media organisations into broader capitalist processes shapes cultural production, often reflecting hegemonic struggles that negotiate local and global narratives (Murdock & Golding, 2016). In this framework, political economy is not analysed as a PR practice, but rather as a structural context that influences the symbolic PR function of film narratives. To strengthen analytical validity, source triangulation was used by comparing the film analysis with existing scholarly literature, particularly theories on soft power (Nye, 2017) and propaganda and cultural governance (Brady, 2008). Through this approach, this study contributes to global communication research by explaining how film narratives function as symbolic public relations in soft power competition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter explores how film storylines work, as symbolic PRs in this soft power rivalry between Hollywood and China. Instead of viewing public relations as an institutional or managerial activity constrained to promotional or marketing purposes, this essay sets up public relations agendas as narrative and symbolic processes of nation-image making

through cinematic signification, ideological value reifying and international-perception moulding. The argument proceeds along four interrelated axes: film stories as symbolic public relations in Hollywood and Chinese cinema, media capitalism as a structural state that shapes the narrative logic of strategies, censorship policy as narrative constraint, and global distribution mechanism as means for circulation of soft power. In these dimensions, the section outlines how Hollywood and China deploy different narrative logics under political economic systems to vie over symbolic influence in global geopolitics.

Hollywood movies have served increasingly as symbolic public relations instruments for the United States, to be subsumed within broader strategy of cultural diplomacy and a global stake in influence. Via these mass distributed movies, Hollywood promotes those stories that support American soft power through upholding democratic values, individual freedom, technological excellence and moral

supremacy. The worldwide demand for Hollywood movies seen in the international box office revenues in certain countries (i.e., China and South Korea) is evidence of this appeal and power of persuasion. Rather than simple entertainment, these movies function as symbolic discourse of the normalization of American supremacy in global political and cultural spheres.

The film *Top Gun* (1986, 2022) represents a clear example of how cinematic narratives operate as symbolic public relations. As illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the film tells the story of Maverick, a talented young pilot in the United States Navy who undergoes elite military training at the Top Gun school. Beyond its personal storyline, the film showcases the military strength of the US Navy, particularly its advanced air combat capabilities, such as the F-14 Tomcat fighter jets, missile systems, radar technology, and sophisticated communication and navigation infrastructure. These representations function symbolically to



Source: Originalvintagemovieposters.com, 2025

Figure 1 Poster of *Top Gun* 1986



Source: Movie poster.org, 2025

Figure 2 Poster of *Top Gun: Maverick* 2022

enhance international trust in the technological and military superiority of the United States.

Top Gun has had effects beyond the box office. Released in 1986, it generated a surge of interest among young Americans to enlist in the US Air Force, becoming one of Hollywood's strongest endorsements of its own military. The second part in the series, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), carries on this work of symbolism by relocating into the current context of defense technologies and geopolitical situations.

Using emotional narrative and visual effects, the film creates a feeling of legitimacy for the United States as the powerful global authority on defense and security, rather than making specific policy suggestions.

An example of how Hollywood films can be used to reinforce and propagate U.S. foreign policy, particularly that during the War on Terror is illustrated in the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) as depicted in Figure 3. The Kathryn Bigelow-directed film depicts the killing of



Source: Mythicwall.com, 2025

Figure 3 Poster of *Zero Dark Thirty*

Osama bin Laden, embodied with American exceptionalism and in the context of a global war on terror. The depiction of this movie correlates with US foreign policy objectives and indeed speaks for the position of the United States in the Middle East, which has vied to dominate global oil resources containing.

Aside from being entertaining, the story of this movie has a political reason, that is, it will lead to the development of national and patriotic feelings. With a simple story of justice and revenge, this film serves as balm to collective wounds. In the portrayal of “enemy hard to understand” and upholding the view of “long-term war over terrorism”, *Zero Dark Thirty* represented US geopolitical focus. The United States, with its views and military relating to this. Here is a movie about spying and espionage. It features real, practical tactics in the War on Terror, and emphasizes the role of surveillance in combatting post- 9/11 threats. The movie in this case can sway public opinion, hopefully generating more support

for the US military intervention (which is exactly what happened when the movie came out). Thus, *Zero Dark Thirty* is a microcosm of how Hollywood can be used to exert soft power that supplements hard power for the purpose of protecting our national interests and dominating the globe.

Through these narrative constructions, Hollywood films function as symbolic public relations texts that promote images of technological superiority, moral leadership, and military legitimacy, reinforcing U.S. soft power through entertainment rather than explicit political messaging.

Figure 4, *Captain America* film is a representation of American national identity and as a cultural mediator. Steve Rogers is a prospective member of the US Army who is rejected by recruiters because of his small body. He volunteers to receive a secret serum and is transformed into a “super soldier.” Nicknamed Captain America and wearing a red, white, and blue costume with a matching star-striped



Source: Originalvintagemovieposter.com, 2025

Figure 4 Poster of *Captain America*

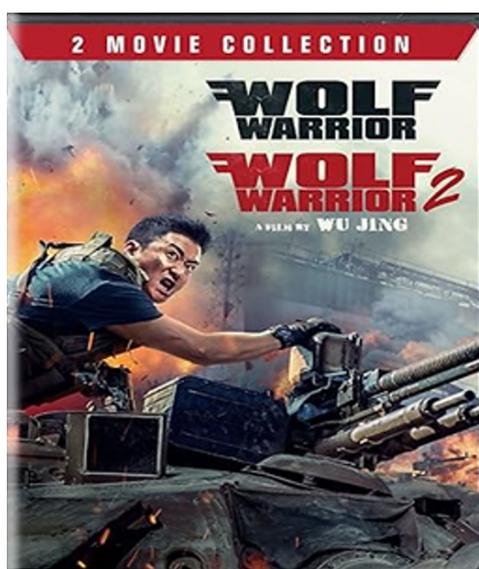
shield, Rogers joins the Army. The film shows the values that America has always wanted to show such as global leadership, democracy, and heroism in the hope that America will be perceived as a global leader and a model for other countries in the world. These cultural principles and values are a form of diplomacy in other countries with the aim of dominating without the need for physical activities such as war or other forms of intimidation. Diplomacy through the Captain America character embodies this goal and plays an important role in contemporary international relations because it facilitates dialogue and cultural exchange. The real impact will certainly contribute to America's positive reputation on the global stage.

Cultural diplomacy is an effort to promote the values, ideas, and culture of a country through hegemony with the aim of fostering familiarity between countries, which aims to build good relations between countries and the global community. The idea that cultural diplomacy influences international relations by increasing cultural competence and sensitivity is reinforced by the strategy of using cultural icons. In that sense, movie figures can be great ways to communicate politics and values of a country. The experiences of cultural diplomacy also demonstrate that cultural exchange and international cooperation are essential. Countries are coming to understand that culture can be just as important as military and economic might. And yet Hollywood has

for decades been conducting American cultural diplomacy, projecting its values out over the world. Captain America is a film cultural diplomacy. Yet, he represents more than the principles of democracy and patriotism born early as part of American history; he symbolizes a struggle shared by people everywhere in their fight for liberty and equality. Dressed in an easily identifiable uniform and other characteristics, Captain America has created a way to make the rest of the world feel good about Americans as he sends the "we're all breaking down walls" message that is easy for nationalities around the globe to receive. This movie makes the viewer think about what is important for him, as honor, courage to fight for everything that you believe in or holding dear, things that are indeed linked with every hope we have.

In a broader perspective, movies like *Top Gun*, *Zero Dark Thirty* or *Captain America* illustrate the capacity of Hollywood as an effective megaphone for symbolic public relations. By exploiting narrative, affect and spectacle, such texts materialize America's global image, consolidate popular backing for its foreign policies, and embed American values (democracy, liberty; military force) into the rhythms of world popular culture.

Hollywood may be the model of state entertainment capitalism, but China has taken a very different track. The Chinese government has complete control over the entire film sector and directly oversees it to ensure that all films support state interests as well as CCP policies.



Source: Amazon.com, 2025, 2025

Figure 5 Poster of *Wolf Warrior 2*

Figure 5 the *Wolf Warrior 2* film (2017) epitomizes the way that China uses media in the spreading of nationalist themed narratives in such applications as solidarity. So, this is supposedly China as the savior of the world for us to root on against some Western mercenaries. The narrative represents the phenomenon of “wolf warrior diplomacy,” a shorthand for China’s increasingly nationalist and assertive foreign policy that bears the same name as a popular Chinese film franchise. This style of diplomacy -- which was a ramping up, both in words and actions under the leadership of President Xi Jinping and has been on full-throttle since the COVID-19 pandemic is ticking off countries that were quietly tolerating China’s rise.

A significant influence on the domestic audience was made by the film *Wolf Warrior 2*, which yielded \$ 870 million to the treasury and broke the record as the highest-grossing film in the country. This film helped intensify national

pride and aggressive glory to its national weapon. In addition, this film is the background of another Chinese narrative, the so-called “wolf warrior cycle”, which reflects China’s willingness to be an active player in diplomacy and glorifies its nationalism. The film *Wolf Warrior 2* contributes to a significant increase in anti-Western sentiment in China spread by ordinary citizens on the social network. Around the world, we see the same image, but in a digital format: Chinese citizens and officials are actively and aggressively communicating with various countries, neglecting various diplomatic guidelines and rules. This increases the level of engagement, but the downside is the possible group harm which it may impose. Therefore, *Wolf Warrior 2* clearly shows how China’s film serves as a weapon of soft power. This film reflects and endorses the diplomatic initiative and endless nationalism of this world’s power. Another example, which can be choosing in support of the increasing priority of



Source: Impawards.com, 2025

Figure 6 Poster of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

the Chinese nation, is on Figure 6 *The Battle of Lake Changjin*. The film perfectly reflects the order to focus on national identity through the lens of alleged historical achievement. Thus, not only does the film highlight the ideology state – the heroism of the Chinese soldier – but it also presents the image of an attractive citizen as a national fact.

This film's marketing idea also reflects the high model: it appears so in its visual style; the way that it markets itself, and indeed its approach to storytelling, are all brimming with nationalist, patriotic principles and politics in fashion. This approach highlights the larger strategy behind China's export of populist film culture as a conduit for soft power, in which popular films are used to foster nationalism and identity. That shows that the message of nationalism struck with the public. The film's narrative, showing the Korean War as a national success against the "Century of Humiliation" backdrop, supports Beijing's intention to further promote

a nationalist campaign. For me, this movie is called the strength of China and the national honor it brings, though China made some misunderstands at first which led to his joining and fighting in Korea-Fire. It left some feeling proud of the Chinese military after they watched the movie. This is proof that movies can be an effective way of public communication to transform the public's perception toward their country.

Wolf Warrior 2 and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are two Chinese films that appeal to wildly effective propaganda to incite nationalism, painting a picture of the country as larger than life. Chinese, it is important in Chinese films for nationalism propaganda, and it enhances national spirit because of extremely-monopoly government on film industry. *Wolf Warrior 2*, which depicts a battle against Western mercenaries, is the product of China's increasingly combative and nationalistic posture on foreign policy under President Xi Jinping,

who called for what has come to be known as “wolf warrior diplomacy.” This is a movie that makes China the world power it once was and perhaps one day will become, but it also stirs anti-Western sentiments and adds further tension to an already tense globe. Concurrently, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* solidifies the history of the Korean War to rewrite itself and go further to enhance national pride as it narrates military victories and spirit. Both films dramatize the way of China uses cinema as a tool of soft power to sway domestic and international opinion. They also push a nationalist storyline that feeds into hawkish and confrontational western foreign policy. These movies show the way Chinese filmmakers use the narrative of representational form as a version of symbolic public relations: constructing nationalist discourse and legitimizing state ideology in a model of managed media production.

On a global scale, media capitalism plays as an underlying condition of possibility that conditions the workings of narrative in film as symbolic public relations. Entertainment capitalism rules over Hollywood in which its mode of production is controlled by the free market and audience demand globally (Hadida et al., 2021). To sustain reputation, and gain attention from audiences, this business requires image and public relations management, especially in the digital age where information can be passed around like a virus. Major studios like Disney, Warner Bros, and Universal can dominate the global market while

simultaneously spreading the soft power of the United States around the world because of this situation.

China’s state capitalism allows the government to control the film industry and ensure that only films supporting the ideology of nationalism are produced and distributed (Yuhui & Yongchun, 2020). The Chinese government also limits the number of Hollywood films that can be screened in Chinese cinemas each year. The goal of this policy is to maintain the domestic film industry and strengthen China’s cultural dominance in the domestic market. Although the film industry in Hollywood has a more transparent capitalist structure, corporate interests pursuing profit continue to exert influence. The film audience is depicted as consumers who only seek unlimited satisfaction and pleasure within the modern capitalist entertainment system.

On the contrary, there are very few opportunities for films that raise political issues and dare to criticize or challenge the capitalist system. The production of commercial films that align with market tastes and can generate profits is preferred by major studios over taking the risk of supporting films with controversial and strong political messages (Baker & McLaughlin, 2015). Considering the dominance of global media capitalism, PR strategies in the film industry are increasingly aimed at promoting brands, maintaining the popularity of actors and actresses, and maximizing profits rather than fostering public debate or social change (Hadida et al., 2021).

Media censorship plays a crucial role as a narrative constraint that shapes how films function as symbolic public relations within different political systems. In China, there are strict censorship regulations. Films that contradict the political goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are banned (Brady, 2008). Compelling Hollywood filmmakers to modify content to access the Chinese market. Examples include the alteration of the Tibetan monk character in *Doctor Strange* (2016) and the removal of the Taiwanese flag in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). These adjustments illustrate how censorship influences symbolic public relations at the narrative level, transforming creative decisions into geopolitical negotiations.

The United States also has content regulation, but an American censorship system is more decentralized and laissez-faire than China's. However, both are based upon deep-seated ideological values and govern how films work within the symbolic PR of their respective social or political systems.

Despite being a large freedom of expression country. Meanwhile, America has a somewhat complicated censorship structure as well. America is very strict and excessive with regards violence scenes/sexual content/harsh lines/item that not in social norms & controversial issue. But the American system of censorship is no less strict than China, though this system does also impose strong limitations especially representation of minority population and political issues, as well as abnormal

content from the mainstream culture. China, by contrast, has far more stringent censorship measures that stifle creativity and force changes to content's substance to adhere to national guidelines. These widely varying censorship laws between the two countries reflect distinct ideologies, cultures and values; each serves as a public relation in their film industry. "The United States is actually less censored, but there is still quite a bit of censorship here - whereas in China, it's much more extreme and prevents real creative liberty and expression because they have to adhere to state-approved ideas etc."

That global distribution hegemony allows for Hollywood stories to be in constant rotation as symbolic public relations and thus implant American values during daily media consumption around the world. Turning American films into more commodified fare for global consumption, Netflix and Disney+ would enhance Hollywood's domination. But the rise of digital distribution platforms also makes it possible for individuals to bypass Hollywood and discover local entertainment from across the world someday, diminishing Hollywood's grip on the global market.

The emergence of streaming platforms worldwide has significantly changed the way films are distributed, reducing Hollywood's dominance in the global market. The market share of Hollywood films in the United States reached 85% in 1994, but recent data shows a decline to around 60% in 2022 (Price Waterhouse

Coopers, 2023). With new streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime, the idea of film distribution has become more decentralized while delivering films to mass audiences. That opens the door for films all over the world to reach an international audience. This shift is transforming the film industry, meaning independent films like South Korean ones now have a chance in global competition. For instance, now that we have *Squid Game* and *Parasite* as cases in point, local productions can have a massive impact globally even if Hollywood is still running the show when it comes to blockbuster films. Streaming services, meanwhile, are pouring money into local productions that will appeal to viewers in emerging markets such as India and Brazil even if they carry content from all around the world.

While Netflix has yet to offer services in China, its foray into the China market is one of many such steps that shows how highly localized and diverse global entertainment world can be with rapid advances made by internet. In a bid to tap the booming online market, Netflix has partnered with local players like Baidu and iQiyi but its entry into the Chinese market is still a distant dream. Nonetheless, they also have to deal with many big challenges including tough regulations and competition from existing Chinese platforms like Youku, iQiyi and Tencent Video (Lotz, 2021).

This research indicates that the Hollywood film and its Chinese counterpart, as a symbolic

advertising spot to foster soft power, despite being in totally different political-economic systems, apply the same method of using film story line to build up the nation image. The crucial difference is not a matter of screen presence alone, but what it says and who is visible in this statement: Hollywood spotlight on individual heroics and global governance within entertainment capitalism vs. China's foregrounding of the collective nationalism and historical legitimation under state capitalism. This comparative performative trajectory expands our understanding of the filmic nature of public relations in transnational soft power competitions.

CONCLUSION

This work shows how film narratives are used as symbolic representations of public relations for the national image and soft power in the Hollywood–China geopolitical competition. Hollywood and China utilise different narrative tactics fundamentally rooted in their political economic systems, censorship procedures and geopolitics. Hollywood films, in that they work as part of the structure of entertainment capitalism, must draw on narrative forms such as emotional storytelling and individual heroism even when and because those stories legitimate US global leadership and foreign policy narratives. Movies like *Top Gun* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are not simply popular entertainments, but symbolic communication that buttresses American values and global power.

In contrast, China exerts nationalistic ideology and state purposes in their films by strict censorship through the “state capitalism” model. Movies like *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* have helped to promote collectivist nationalism, revisionist history and pride in the military whilst nurturing domestic solidarity and a more assertive international persona. These stories are played in cinema as an instrument of defiance against the West and a means of influencing the world.

Hollywood-China struggle in global cinema is not only aesthetic, economic or ideological, but also geopolitical rivalry in the war of narratives. Media capitalism, censorship and global distribution networks have turned films into the symbolic battlefield of soft power. As this battle heats up, film narratives will remain critical to national-image building and the shaping of global political debate with China more assertively competing as a nascent soft power against Hollywood’s decades-old supremacy.

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