

Third-culture Huàllywood: Or, ‘Chimerica’ the cinematic return.

We live in difficult times, in times of monstrous chimeras and evil dreams and criminal follies

Joseph Conrad *Under Western Eyes*

Prelusion

The above epigraph wormed its way into this essay after being encountered as a masthead on two different papers informing it. The first being John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff’s writing on millennial capitalism,¹ wherein they observe that ‘ours are perplexing times: “Times of monstrous chimeras” in which the conjuncture of the strange and the familiar, of stasis and metamorphosis, plays tricks on our perceptions, our positions, our praxis’ (2000, 293). Of import to my arguments below, the authors there illuminate how the ‘ontological condition-of-being under millennial capitalism’ exposes a complex universe of displaced and refracted identity and belief, which embodies complex ‘ironies, [...] all the way down; to the very “soul of the Millennial age”’ (292-3): Ideas germane to this essay’s thinking about certain China-US and US-China transborder films starring chimeric aliens and monsters. Linked to this, the other paper deploying the Conrad quote was subtitled ‘The Chimera in Film and Print,’ and mounted a survey into the role of these mythical creatures in science-fiction and fantasy. Because of these encounters, the Conrad line returned like a German *ohrworm* (earworm), melodically affecting my deployment of the *chimera* persona(e) to describe a curious mongrel cinema emerging from the intersectionalities of contemporary ‘Hollywood’ and ‘Huallywood’ (*hua laiwu*, 华-lywood) productions.

Worth foregrounding here is that the chimera is a hybrid. A fabled beast of Greek mythology composed of bits and pieces of different animals. The Chinese have an equivalent, of course, personified in the *qílín* (麒麟). However, despite this being a fire-coated harbinger of prosperity—which surely fits well with profiteering Hollywood and Huallywood dreams—I prefer to use the former term here, on account of its felicitous overlaps with another mixed millennial monster: The economic behemoth that the historian Niall Ferguson’s and the economist Moritz Schularick christened ‘Chimerica’ (2007); a symbiotic colossus that contingently surfaced as a consequence of China joining the WTO, opening itself up to the

flows of global capitalism, and articulating the (then) global big saver (China) with the global big spender (America), and the largest global exporter (China) with the world's (then) number one 'over consumer' (America).ⁱⁱ Although Ferguson and Schularick argued that Chimerica was already coming to the end of its life in 2009, we who study movies know that all worthy monsters have a propensity to re-spawn in their own cinematic sequels (2009). The resurrection, or *becoming-cinema* of Chimerica (to forge links to Jonathan Beller's arguments about the mutual implication of cinema and capitalism (2006)), becomes emblematic of a *third-culture* —to purloin Mike Featherstone's term (1995, 82)— concept that I render *Huàllywood* (*Huà laiwu*, *℥-llywood*) (Fleming 2016, 2017): evoking transformation and disguise, as will become clearer below.

Before getting to such considerations, though, I offer one final remark regarding the essay's epigraph here. For, it also strikes that the line is drawn from Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* (1911), which is itself a title with pertinent resonances to this essay's methodologies; which most often draw upon depictions and characterisations of China (and its film industry/market) in Western (or Anglophone) media. These methods consecutively underline the importance of studying extra-cinematic media and institutions that, although plagued by issues of 'paratextual ephemerality' (Jonathan Gray 2016, 39), still play an important role in the production of cinematic discourses. In this instance by helping promulgate or make palpable the presence of a third-culture Chimerican assemblage. By such means I foreground some of the perceived changes and continuities defining today's transnational production and consumption trends, while offering fresh critical insight into the nature of third-culture practices that impact broader translocal media trends.

Introduction

Surveying manifold problems with what we might call *methodological nationalism* with regard to the study of Chinese cinema in 1998, Chris Berry noted that 'it is not so much China that makes movies, but movies that help to make China' (131). Today this truism overtly expands beyond the films produced within the heteromorphic geopolitical territory that Berry now refers to as the 'new Chinese super nation-state,' (2013, 468).ⁱⁱⁱ For example, in *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009) and *Arrival* (Dennis Villeneuve, 2016)—to take but two recent science-fiction films—we find Chinese protagonists, settings, institutions, and

‘politics’ being prescriptively deployed within Hollywood fare. The use of China as an expedient *dues ex machina* in such instances is often interpreted as Hollywood-style ‘soft-power’ plays, designed to soften up Chinese gatekeepers and consumers by favourably depicting the PRC’s government and military—who help save the human race, or safeguard the future of the planet (see e.g. Fleming forthcoming). Beyond this, there remains other critical ways to read such phenomena. To illustrate one, I here take two other transnational science-fiction/fictive blockbusters—*The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016) and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Gareth Edwards, 2017)—that allow us to better apprehend the chimeric nature of mega-budget transnational production, consumption, and revenue sharing. By virtue of belonging the most successful movie franchise of all time, the latter film offers itself as an ideal focalizer for apprehending Hollywood tactics in an era when China has become one of the world’s most lucrative market forces. In particular, the asteroid belt of paratextual press orbiting this film allows us to gather the geopolitical impact of China upon the forty-year old jewel in the Hollywood crown. Thereafter, considering China’s most expensive movie to date—*The Great Wall*—and the corresponding press releases surrounding it also allow us to detect similar, if not inverted, strategies at play in this ‘Huallywood’ production. Considered together, we can better see how contemporary third-culture products emerge from in-betweens of the mutually implicated intersectionalities of ‘Global Hollywood’ and transnational ‘Huallywood.’

Huallywood: Or, What’s in a name?

To best understand what *Huallywood* is, and does, I below engineer an encounter with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the ‘assemblage.’ Worth mentioning as we move towards this is that assemblages typically exhibit two broad intermeshing dimensions: One relating to a parliament of material objects and machinic bodies that co-constitute it (with their own manifold qualities, properties, abilities, forms, and speeds), and the other to the collective regimes of enunciation (discourses, order words, language, myths, and *dispositifs*) that surround and interpenetrate the former. From such vantages we might note how Zhen Zhang (2015) describes Huallywood relating to two interleaving phenomena: 1) China’s rise to become the world’s second largest film market, and, 2) the nation’s economic ascendance to global producer by means of transnational co-productions with the likes of Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the USA. Accordingly, Huallywood most often intersects

with discourses surrounding China's transborder film industry entering a new 'golden' era (Zhang 2015), as can be gleaned from this *South China Morning Post* article from the 2016 Chinese New Year:

With China's box office setting a record high for a single day on Monday, it is Huallywood rather than Hollywood that is cashing in. On the first day of the Year of the Monkey, Chinese box offices took 660 million yuan (US\$100.5 million) – smashing the previous record of 425 million yuan on July 18, 2015. And the biggest hits were Chinese produced. (Zuo 2016)

The films celebrated here are implicated with, but not mutually exclusive to, the products of the National Digital Film Industrial Park in Wuxi, near Shanghai, which has itself been nicknamed Huallywood since 2012. As Sharat Shroff explains, the prefix *hua* (华) here becomes 'symbolic of China' ('*hua ren*' referring to Chinese people and '*hua yu*' to the Mandarin Chinese language) (Shroff 2015). Taken on its word, then, Huallywood here essentially means 'all things Chinese' plus 'Global Hollywood' aspirations. Several Chinese critics have name-checked similar phenomena, or forged comparable neologistic blends. Wendy Su, for instance, uses the term 'Chinawood' (Su 2011, 197, 2016, 67), which is but Huallywood in a single rather than hybrid language register. The dream of Chinawood, she notes, is to compete with Hollywood on its own terms.

More recently, the *Taipei Times* has covered an altogether different Huallywood project. One article informs readers that the 'Taiwan Land Developing Corp has teamed up with Canadian-based Cameron Thompson Group to build a studio park in Huailien County with a view to making it a local version of Hollywood' (Hsu 2016). This Huallywood boasts a different etymology, though, with the location in Hualien (*Hoê-liân*, 迴瀾, meaning 'eddies') accounting for this politico-industrial portmanteau (Hsu 2016). Both these *Huallywood/Hoellywood* industrial expressions constitute transborder filmmaking hubs that emerge as aspiring Hollywoods, paralleling greater China's rise to global status of hegemon or powerhouse economy. Somewhat predictably, though, the semantic enveloping of a Chinese prefix with the suffix -llywood has led to criticisms of a self-subjugation and/or a politico-industrial desire synonymous with Western cultural hegemony: as per 'Bollywood, Lollywood, Nollywood, or any other Jolly-good hegemonic sounding film industry' (Fleming 2016; see also Li 2016b). But in what way inferior? Well, as Mr. Clinton's campaign so succinctly put it back in the 1990s—around the time Deng Xiaoping's policies began

allowing Hollywood films to muscle over China's domestic box office—'It's the economy, stupid!'

That is, all other political, artistic, and ideological trifles notwithstanding, Hollywood's superiority lies in producing saleable commodities that global moviegoers hand over their salaries to see in ways simply not matched by any other Hollywood industry. Closely aligned with this, in the world of (neoliberal) academia (where we lay our scene), Huallywood concomitantly surfaces as a conceptual neologism coined by Peiren Shao, Professor of Media and Communication at Zhejiang University (Shao 2014a, 2014b). Song Hwee Lim argues that Huallywood should here be primarily understood in terms of Peiren's ambition of establishing a new theoretical paradigm in the field of transnational Chinese cinema studies (2015, 2). Noticeably, in the cross-pollinated worlds of Anglophone-Chinese scholarship, the term has gained most traction via an on-going series of international Huallywood conferences and seminars organized at Zhejiang University since 2013, and through an expository entry published in the Ten Year Anniversary of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* by Yongchun Fu, Maria Elena Indelicato and Zitong Qiu: whom Lim describes as 'three young scholars who work at the Ningbo institute under the rubric of "Huallywood," but who received their PhD training outside of the PRC' (2015, 2).

In 'Research notes towards a definition of Huallywood' Fu et al offer a short introduction to, and contextualisation of, this new-fangled transnational conception (2015). Therein, the authors survey familiar problems with PRC-centred models of 'national' or even 'transnational' Chinese cinemas, a range of Chinese-language paradigms (including those of Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (2005)), and earlier Sinophone models (see e.g. Shumei Shih's (2004)). With regard to the latter, readers are reminded that Lu 'poignantly pointed out' that the term 'Sinophone' problematically enfolds 'the suffix "-phone" [which] evokes the spectre of European colonization' (2015, 55). Saying this, Shao remains indifferent to his own semantic welding of the Chinese signifier *hua* to another Western (politico-industrial) suffix. Placing arguments concerning Hollywood cinema as neo-colonial dominator to one side, in Shao's conception, the prefix *hua* refers to 'Chineseness,' including an expanded range of ethnic and diasporic 'Chinese' elements.^{iv} Berry and Farquhar note that due to its implicit conceptualisation of transnationalism as a 'higher level of unit and coherence,' and Chinese identity as a 'cultural order that is transnational,' the concept runs the risk of reinstating Mainland China as the imagined yet ineluctable centre of Huallywood studies (Berry and Farquhar as cited in Fu et al 2016, 56).

Attempting to redeem the term somewhat, Fu et al argue that rather than being an unintended or uncritical reproduction of the cultural hegemony of the ‘West’ on the ‘East,’ Huallywood might also offer a challenge to re-think entirely the relationship between Chinese and Western cinematic productions, while departing from the ‘idealist insistence on a separate, self-sufficient ‘Chinese tradition’ that should be lined up against the Western one because it is as great if not greater’ (Chow as cited by Fu et al 2016, 58). It is for comparable reasons that I here posit shanghaiing Shao’s academic term and offering an outlandish detoured third-culture concept instead, which strategically employs an alternative homonymic version of the sound *huà* (化) as its prefix: This being a term that gathers together a different constellation of meanings including: to change, convert, influence, transform (as in *biànhuà* [to change], *xiāohuà* [to digest]), while also drawing in character components linked with disguise, and varying). By so doing, I conjure forth an image of a disguised, digested, varied, and transformed *Huàllywood* that evokes a changling third-culture phenomenon emerging from the entangled contact zones of Global Hollywood and transnational Huallywood.

Chimera of Chimerica

The introduction to this special issue offers a thumbnail sketch of on-going debates surrounding the conceptualisation of Chinese national cinema, or cinemas. Undergirding many such discussions, we might add here, is a healthy scepticism surrounding the ‘ideological artefact’—to reactivate Marx’s term—of the ‘nation-state.’ Which, as Comaroff and Comaroff point out, can be unearthed as a fantasy construct on three grounds: ‘the state, the nation, and the hyphen’ (2000, 322). Benedict Anderson today still arguably remains one of the most persuasive voices decrying the nation-state as an imaginary construct, as was the case in 1998 when Berry offered his cinematic critique of extant national cinema paradigms (136). And although Anderson’s ideas—regarding the imagined nation and its national community emerging as a consequence of national-language print media—are passionately contested, there remain credible and productive observations within Anderson’s work that are worth salvaging. Not least his notion that nation-states operate as quasi-characters within a novelistic news world, playing out their dramas within a shared, but essentially imaginary, time-space continuum.^v

Of course, as a species, we do not read print newspapers as much nowadays. But we do still follow ‘the news.’ And in today’s most popular online platforms and echo chambers, reportage still retains many of the novelistic features Anderson described. Consider for instance the coverage of the global media event that was the release of *Star Wars The Force Awakens* (J.J Abrams, 2015). To put things in context, we might recall that the film’s Christmas release saw *Star Wars* officially become the highest grossing movie franchise of all time. However, as if designed to add drama to its already unqualified success, readers also learned that in order to be crowned *the* biggest-grossing movie of all time, the spectacular space opera had to out-perform *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009)—the spectacular space melodrama—at the Chinese box office after a postponed January release. This allowed the Western media to prolong its fascination with the film, while indulging in surplus financial speculation. What is of interesting to us here, though, was the extent to which ‘China’ became a significant focus of the story *à la* Anderson, allowing the Western media to engage in gratuitous Chinese character building and plotting.

So, who or what is China in the eyes of these ephemeral media artefacts, and what does this tell us about perceptions of today’s translocal cinema? Interestingly, throughout almost every single press release examined, China, as character or proper noun, on its first or second mention was almost unerringly articulated with the nominal cluster ‘second-largest film /movie market in the world.’ Notably, the implicit first (which everyone seemingly knew) was subtly enfolded in an unmarked fashion into the explicit secondary other. China was also shown to have different movie tastes. This ultimately meant that, in amongst all the economic salivation, there was a tangible anxiety that Disney’s *Star Wars* might not get its scripted happy ending. ‘The latest instalment of *Star Wars*,’ a sobering new year release read ‘opened in cinemas across China [today], where its unpredictable popularity looks set to undermine expectations it would become the highest grossing film of all time’ (Hutchison 2016). Explanations of why habitually led to an obligatory recounting of a forty year drip-feed of *Star Wars* history lined up against the essential (edited) touchstones of modern Chinese history. The sort of thing we see in the pre-credit intro to quality television series, to remind viewers of relevant character and plot details important to this episode: ‘Previously on *Game of Thrones*...’ In the *Star Wars* articles, a paragraph or two would characteristically traipse through the PRC’s highlights: Mao, the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping, *Titanic*, *Avatar*, and a today’s massively expanding consumer force. Taiwan and Hong Kong were patently not China. For, in the images accompanying such releases the PRC’s touristic

landmarks and clichés were carted out courtesy of staged marketing stunts. The storm troopers lined up on the Great Wall doing double duty by virtually folding together actual images of the wall and virtual images of the terracotta army.

As with most media-events nowadays, controversy was also to emerge. As one BBC article reported amid all the excitement, China received criticism when its ‘re-versioned movie poster for the Chinese market’ was unveiled (Chen 2016). At this point the international media indulged in decoding China’s ‘few tweaks.’ ‘New lead character Finn, played by black British actor John Boyega [has] shrunk in size, compared to the original poster’ complained one BBC article, for instance. CNN enticed its web traffic with a clickbait ‘China poster is racist’ link (2015). In both readers were informed that Twitter-sphere influencers also expressed ‘outrage’ (and waggish humour), with embedded micro-media quotations inferring a backlash against racist China. ‘We all know John Boyega has a major role in the new film so who are Chinese authorities to try and dictate his part?’ tweeted one curated fan (Chen 2016). The idea of implicit and endemic Chinese racism against black people also became a major site of mainstream media speculation. Meanwhile, in Hollywood, a potential self-imposed black boycott of the ‘white-washed’ Oscars in the broader context of #blacklivesmatter highlighted that the US media might have been throwing stones in their own proverbial glasshouse.

As if in counteroffensive, other race issues raised their head with regard to the lack of ethnically Chinese characters in the Hollywood franchise. Hitting them where it hurts, as such, this was specifically tied to film’s lack lustre box office success within China. ‘*Star Wars* fans in China have also long been vocal in declaring their hope for a Chinese Jedi’ reported Heather Chen, for example, ‘[a]nd they want it to be Hong Kong martial arts legend Donnie Yen’ (2016). Cascading a typical Weibo message, BBC readers were notified: ‘If George Lucas is smart, he will know that casting Donnie Yen will be the way to break into the Chinese market.’^{vi} While another selection pleaded: ‘If John Boyega can be cast as a major character then please consider Donnie Yen as a Jedi.’ It seems that when economics is politics, the voice of China—the second largest movie market in the world—is more often than not granted a complimentary Hollywood politics of listening. Indeed, on *The Force Awakens*’ opening weekend in China, *Inverse* magazine already reported that ‘Hong Kong martial arts actor Donnie Yen and the Chinese actor and director Jiang Wen have been cast in the next *Star Wars* film, in a bid to appeal to Chinese audiences’ (Hutchison 2016). To help

explain the becoming-Chinese of the US franchise much of the Western media also indulged in some futural Chinese character building. As *Inverse* typically noted, ‘China is expected to surpass north America as the world’s largest movie market as soon as next year, and Hollywood is casting Chinese actors and incorporating Chinese elements to appeal to the huge audience’ (Hutcheson 2016). Or put differently, ‘it’s still the economy, stupid!’

Yen and Wen were not technically the first Chinese Jedi, though, as was made clear by manifold articles focusing on Disney’s attempts to promote *Star Wars* to a new generation of Chinese consumer. In point of fact, the first (token?) Chinese Jedi was Lu Han, often introduced to Western readers as a ‘25-year-old Chinese pop star-turned-screen neophyte [who] emerged as the de facto face of Hollywood in China’ (Brzesk 2015). Lu Han was also christened the ‘official ambassador’ for *Star Wars* in China, with Disney anointing him an ‘honorary member of the “Jedi Order”’ (see Brzesk 2015)—whatever that is. He accordingly released a pop song and accompanying *Star Wars* themed music video, where he could be found cavorting afore a CGI green-screen wearing his Jedi robe. It all seemed a bit of an afterthought, though, especially as Disney seemed to miss a marketing trick. For, to crack a joke, is not Lu Han Solo not a neater Chimerican fit? Indeed, we might recall that in the fictional transmedia universe, Han Solo is a smouldering smuggler who famously made ‘the Kessler Run’ in ‘12 parsecs,’ thanks to his Millennium Falcon. In the real world, Lu Han was tasked with smuggling the Disney franchise through to a new market of teenage fans via his ‘12 million’ Weibo followers (see Brzesk 2015) and his millennial smartphone.

Joking aside, in this marketing gesture we locate echoes of what Yiman Wang calls the ‘interweaving transactions,’ ‘mutual implications,’ ‘border crossings,’ and the converging constitutions of the Chinese and US industries as they increasingly veer ‘towards co-production, co-authorship, mutual inflection and interpenetrated marketing’ (Wang 2009, 174). That is, an increasing blending of cultural ‘elements’ to help (re-)market Chinese and US products overseas (Ibid). From this vantage we can frame Lu Han as a potential posterchild for mega-budget and mega-revenue Chimerican cinema. Some Western press certainly hinted at such, with one telling article introducing Lu Han thus: ‘Often described as China’s answer to Justin Bieber, the 25-year-old pop star is suddenly everywhere, promoting *Star Wars* and *Kung Fu Panda 3*, and next appearing opposite Matt Damon in Zhang Yimou’s *The Great Wall*.’ But ‘[g]ive it a few years,’ the report continued, ‘and Justin Bieber may come to be known as the U.S. answer to Lu Han’ (Brzesk 2015). And in such sentiments

we can detect a growing sense that the entertainment industry more broadly is undergoing a geopolitical sea change, the nature of which becomes evocative of another science fiction chimera located in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), and to which we will return shortly.

Theorising Hybrid Cinemas

In this section I harness various science-fiction images to help theorise a hybrid-model of 'critical transnationalism' (Higbee and Lim 2010), albeit buttressing these with the concept-model of the 'assemblage' (*agencement*). For, this philosophical concept offers a valuable additional frame to this study, not least because the notion of an assemblage was originally devised by Deleuze and Guattari to better allow us to perceive the flows of power (see Buchanan 2015, 382). Worth recalling here is that assemblages are agential conglomerates, or arrangements, composed of manifold bodies, forces, and practices that come together for limited periods of time to 'do things.' A notion that draws Berry to the concept in his own imaging of the ever-changing transborder cinematic relations and arrangements affecting China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (2013, 453ff). Among other things, Berry argues that assemblage theory helps reveal how this 'contingent ensemble of diverse practices' remains 'radically open to connecting with that which is different, if it enables further growth, development and change' (Berry 2014, 468).

Importantly, similar models can also be applied to the broader more nebulous film industry variously labelled 'global' (Miller et al., 2001, 2004; see also Berry 2014, 467) or 'planet' (Moretti 2001) Hollywood. In this outing I specifically explore what it can do for our understanding of the growing articulation and convergence between these two broader assemblages. But at this stage, our considerations demand a brief return to film history, and Sheldon Lu's observation that Chinese cinematic transnationalism dates back to 1896 (Lu 1997), or the period that David Leiwei Li refers to as the 'First Coming of Capitalism to China': When it was 'not Western commodities but Western cannonballs that first shattered the landlocked empire's territorial defense and with it a Chinese cultural superiority long taken for granted' (Li 2016, 1). While we cannot pay much attention to this era of 'proto globalisation' (see Berry 2013, 463) here, it helps to recognise how this deeper geopolitical history still resonates behind the scenes of today's 'epoch' of globalization proper, or what Li

describes as ‘the mise-en-scène of Capitalisms Second Coming’ to China (2016, 5). For, it is against this backdrop that millennial Hollywood commodities are oft framed politically as the latest ‘spiritual opium’—to appropriate an evocative left-wing Chinese phrase (see for example Ying Hong in Su 2011, 191)—forced upon the Chinese by today’s largest ‘Military-Entertainment complex’ (Elsaesser 2014).

Echoes of such views can be located in a 2014 article by Lu Hongshi, which describes Hollywood’s expansion into China as being stimulated by slow growth in the European and Japanese markets. In particular, unprecedented development in the Chinese economy offered Hollywood lucrative new ‘opportunities to explode.’ Leetaru similarly notes that ‘leveraging the Chinese market [became] the Chinese dream of the Americans,’ in that Hollywood and US companies began manoeuvring to conquer the Chinese box office (Leetaru 2014). As the above examples already illustrate, the most common strategies include ‘investing in film production, distribution, and circulation sectors; integrating Chinese cultural themes and characters into Hollywood; and cultivating Chinese audiences’ taste for Hollywood movies’ (Su 2016). In light of such, Chinese protectionist measures were often erected to ensure that Hollywood had to ‘compete with China on its own terms’ (Lu 2014).

Su explores similar moments of contact and tension between these two increasingly entangled industrial mega-machines in *China’s Encounter with Global Hollywood* (2016). There, with respect to China’s current Hollywood import policies, she notes that while left-wing intellectuals and Chinese filmmakers respond with impassioned calls to ‘resist Hollywood’ altogether, Chinese moviegoers, liberal film critics, and distributors-exhibitors appear rather more innervated by the cultural and economic gains wrought by new Hollywood encounters. To help picture a situation in which both paths paradoxically appear to be taken, we might briefly turn to Jane Bennett’s rethinking of assemblage theory which incorporates, amongst other things, the Chinese notion of *shi* (勢)—as it is explicated by the sinologist philosopher Francois Jullien (Bennett 2010, 23ff):--and appears particularly useful for understanding the ‘competitive conjoining’ of two transnational mega-assemblages.

Worth noting here is that Jullien argues that while *shi* originally emerged as a military term—used to describe a good general who was able to ride and marshal unfolding events to favourably influence outcomes—over the centuries the concept drifted and began interfering with other discourses including those of art and politics. Jullien thus describes *shi* as evolving to mean ‘a potential born of disposition,’ and harnesses this undertheorised Chinese concept

to show how humans can utilise and intervene in assemblages to help manipulate and steer ‘circumstances in such a way as to derive *profit* from them’ (Jullien 1995, 27, emphasis mine). Consider from this vantage a passage wherein Su appears to show the Chinese government riding the *shi* of Global Hollywood’s (read neoliberal capitalism) aggressive encroachment into their territory (read state-market ‘authoritarian liberalism’), despite the warnings of various Chinese filmmakers and left-wing intellectuals:

the Chinese government pressed forward with its strategy of ‘going to sea by borrowing a boat’—namely, taking advantage of Hollywood resources to transform the Chinese industry. As one official from the state film bureau asserted, ‘We should use the language of Hollywood to portray our own “Moments in Peking”’ (Su 2016 kindle edition).

While we should remain cogent that all conflicts and alliances between the local and the global are conditional, contingent, and temporary (Su 2016), the two greater assemblages often described in economic, artistic, and industrial convergence and conflict can also be understood here as producing third-culture products. The *Transformers* (2007, 2009, 2011, 2014) and *Kung Fu Panda* (2008, 2011) series offer themselves as illustrative examples, for, amongst others Yiman Wang reads the latter as illuminating the interpenetration of otherwise competing ‘media capitals,’ that result in the production of ‘Chinese elements’ that originate outwith the geographical site of China (Wang 2009, 171-4).^{vii} Or put differently, instead of being synonymous with a national or regional identity, contemporary forms of cinematic Chineseness might increasingly be recognised as being just ‘an “element,” a “style,” or a signifier that can be combined with other attractions to create an audio-visual “recipe” that may maximise a film’s marketability’ (Wang 2009, 173). With the *Transformers* films the notion of an alien in disguise works on different levels, then, and offers us a useful post-Fordist chimeric image that shows Hollywood execs likewise riding the *shi* of an ever-evolving Chimeric geopolitico-industrial arrangement. For, after observing the usual decrease in domestic US box-office profits after the first *Transformers* sequel, there concomitantly emerged a diametric upsurge in Chinese revenue (BoxOfficeMojo.com). The unfolding series—which thus increasingly came to be made ‘under the auspices of China Film Group Corporation’s (CFFG) Sino-foreign ‘joint-venture agreement’ (Homewood 2018: 179)—accordingly began trading in more Chinese elements at the level of content (settings, product placements) and characters. Accordingly, Chris Homewood notes that these *Transformer* films began to reveal a form of schizophrenic identity. More generally, because the Hollywood studios were ‘motivated by the wallet rather than the soul,’ the geopolitical

consequence of tailoring their top-tier products to Chinese audiences and censors was that they simultaneously began operating as positive global promoters of approved Chinese political branding (2018, 175-7).^{viii}

In both the *Transformers* and *Kung Fu Panda* series, then, we can locate examples of Hollywood films morphing into Huàllywood productions. Bearing this transforming and transformative context in mind, in the following section I want to zoom in on two other recent science-fiction films whose form, content, actors and marketing help us grasp the complex geopolitical texture of contemporary third-culture Chimerican cinema.

Alien-Nation and self alienation

In an interview the transnational Chinese super star DonieYen^{ix} says: ‘I got a call from my agent, saying, “Disney just called me. They want you to be in a *Star Wars* movie”’ (Hawkes 2017). This was to become the ‘stand-alone’ *Rogue One*.¹ Having worked on several US productions prior to this, many viewed Yen as an emerging face of Huàllywood-style (as I here use it) productions. As Matt Pressberg puts it: ‘it’s hard to imagine anyone better poised to cash in on the nexus of China and Hollywood than an honest-to-goodness action star with a devoted fan base who speaks the two languages of the contemporary movie industry’ (Pressberg 2016). Intriguingly, although Yen had by then over 70 film credits under his belt (spanning Huàllywood and Hollywood), it was his outing as *Star Wars*’ blind Force-sensitive monk Chirrut Îmwe that seemingly granted him global A-list status. This being symbolically cemented by his becoming the ‘298th person’ to have their hand prints ‘immortalized’ on Hollywood’s walk of fame (Pressberg 2016)—afore Grauman’s Chinese theater.

On-screen Yen most often appears alongside his mainland co-star Wen, a figure likewise known for his transnational cinematic outings, including as director of the Chinese Western (more on which later) *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010). Wen here embodies Baze Malbus, the loyal ‘sworn brother’ of the blind Îmwe. As above, several articles suggested that ‘Wen is a pretty big movie star in China so his addition to the cast will likely boost the movie’s overseas success, something that is probably viewed as ever more important by Disney now

considering that *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* didn't do nearly as well in China as was expected' (Libbey 2016). Several other articles make similar (condescending) claims about the Chinese stars whetting the appetites of easily pleased Chinese consumers. ^x

If Yen and Wen represent two Asian faces beamed into a Hollywood science-fiction mega-production to boost appeal with Chinese consumers, we can locate an inverted picture in *The Great Wall*, where Matt Damon and Pedro Pascal function as *lǎowài* (老外 'foreigner') stars thrust into a corresponding Huallywood mega-budget alien film.^{xi} Tellingly, the movie was filmed in English (with incidental Chinese dialogue), and so officially counts as director Zhang Yimou's first English-language movie. Worth mentioning for its symbolic act of *mise-en-abyme*, the blockbuster opens by hijacking Universal's corporate globe logo, before zooming in on mainland China, where the animated frame begins running along the great wall, before passing through a violently forced opened crack on its edifice. Viewers thereafter segue into a live action scene shot in the *flexible* North-Western Qingdao landscape, the red geological structures of which evoke the Monument Valley settings of quintessential Ford-ist Westerns. Zhang thereafter tracks a horse chase through a dusty valley, wherein a small posse of white outlaws thunder away from a pursuing gang. In this sense, the film initially appears to constitute another iteration of what Stephen Teo calls the 'nomadic Chinese Western' (2014). Soon after other hybrid genre forms enter the mix, though, including horror, Chinese historical epic, kung fu, and science-fiction.

Indeed, after encountering a murderous alien monster, the two surviving white mercenaries—in search of China's mythical gunpowder (a detail that incidentally frames the Chinese as the causal antecedent of all gun-toting Western mythologies)—happen across the Great Wall. It thereafter transpires that this defensive structure, built over a 1700 year period, offers protection from a rapacious hoard of *Tao Tei*—swarming hive-monsters controlled by an alien queen—which the fictional Chinese historians interpret as being sent to Earth via a (dollar) green asteroid to punish an unnamed selfish Emperor, and thus remind the Chinese about the dangers of greed. Here, highlighting another irony of our millennial times, while one might plausibly interpret these aliens as a thinly veiled metaphor for the external threats of profiteering (US) capitalists desires, one could concomitantly interpret the panoramic shots of the breathtaking Chinese landscapes and wall serving to stimulate or manufacture desires for touristic Chinese travel in foreign audiences. Beyond such chimeric millennial paradoxes, though, what becomes pertinent to think through with regard to our discussion above is how

casting and race again arose as interleaving issues in the media/public's reception of this transnational film. Certainly, when trailers and promo-materials were first released, commentators in various media spheres construed the casting of Damon, Pascal and William Defoe (who plays a supporting role) to be evidence of yet more Hollywood 'whitewashing,' and perpetuations of the 'white savior' myth (see for example Whitney 2016).^{xii} In interview at *Comic Con* Damon responded to such allegations by noting that the critiqued 'teaser trailer' was only 30 seconds long, and was trying to say:

'You probably don't know who this director is in Middle America, the Steven Spielberg of China. Don't worry, they speak English in this movie' – you hear my voice speaking English. 'Don't worry, Matt's in the movie, you've seen this guy before.' So they're trying to establish all these things. And by the way, there are monsters. So there's a lot of pipe they're trying to lay in that 30 seconds (Damon in Whitney 2016).

Arguably, Damon's justifications here paradoxically reinforce the critiques. Director Zhang also had to face heated criticism, offering a more robust defense by stating: '*The Great Wall* is the opposite of what is being suggested. For the first time, a film deeply rooted in Chinese culture, with one of the largest Chinese casts ever assembled, is being made at tentpole scale for a world audience. I believe that is a trend that should be embraced by our industry' (Calvario 2016). Zhang also noted that, quantitatively, the white characters were but two of the five main protagonists. However, Zhang arguably remains deaf and blind to the qualitative politics of language and form, especially the notion of the Hollywood 'mode being the message' (see e.g Jenkins 2016). Or again, Zhang freights forth his Chinese story on a borrowed Hollywood vehicle (or boat), and by so doing instances another example of third-culture Huàllywood cinema. For, with regard to the latter point, might we not recognize that the film trades in individualistic heroes, and has a final battle that is strikingly similar to the ending of the 'original' *Star Wars* (and the Abrams reboot), wherein a vastly outnumbered rebel alliance blow up a homogenizing threat to the universe. *The Great Wall's* last stand takes place inside the then Emperor's palace, which architecturally anticipates Beijing's Forbidden City. There, only William (Damon) and Commander Lin Mae (Tian Jing) remain fighting the swarming aliens, who huddle into a seemingly impenetrable (half death star) fortress-dome. At last, the transnational duo^{xiii} make a suicidal dive towards the living Tao Tei fort, guiding a gunpowder bomb through a chink in the aliens' bio-armor plating. The transborder combo finally destroy the rapacious monsters, save the Son of Heaven, the Middle Kingdom, and the Earth surrounding it. The Western mercenaries then get the highly

desired gunpowder as their reward, and head homewards to kick-start European and American colonial history.

Conclusion

In concluding we might return to the grotesque science-fiction monster from Cronenberg's *The Fly* mentioned earlier, as this offers us a useful metonymy for thinking through Chimerican cinema and its Hollywood features. Why? Recall that in this science-fiction narrative eccentric scientist Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) builds himself a teleportation machine. Experimenting on himself, Brundle clammers into one of his telepod chambers where he become materially disassembled into atomic pieces and zapped across space, only to be re-composed again in a complementary chamber. Famously, a rogue bluebottle creeps into Brundle's telepod, ultimately contaminating the experiment while forcing the computer to splice together Brundle's human DNA with that of the titular fly. Although asymmetric in size, the two beings' genetic codes become profoundly fused in a transformative re-combination. Brundle thereafter begins developing evermore fly-like characteristics and traits (and vice versa), gradually transfiguring into a heretofore unknown chimeric species: one that is neither fully human, nor fully fly. I posit that this fantasy process of genetic convergence and re-editing helps us reframe the above media autopsy, offering us a Brundle-Fly conceptual image for grasping today's processual third-culture Hollywood features. For unquestionably, in the last analysis, films like the ones discussed above index a shared politico-economical desire to increasingly make movies that 'fly' at the Chimerican box office.

ⁱ I'm here indebted to David Leiwei Li who highlighted the value of Comaroff and Comaroff's models for approaching Chinese cinemas (2016, 211-17).

ⁱⁱ Ferguson and Schularick note that conflating the names of these nations has the added bonus of recalling this mythical creature.

ⁱⁱⁱ This being tantamount to an agential trans-border assemblage composed of the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Berry elsewhere argues that outside of the politics of 'methodological nationalism,' these three Chinese territories have reached 'a point where the ability to draw simple lines between them or talk about co-productions between otherwise distinct territories is no longer appropriate' (2013, 458). And while student protests in Hong Kong point to an on-going geopolitical tension and struggle with PRC, economically speaking, the ever-evolving parliament of cinematic production, distribution, and consumption constitutes an assemblage: a 'contingent ensemble of diverse practices' that form into a heterogeneous totality, which thrives on 'relations of exteriority' (Berry 2013, 468).

^{iv} Fu et al point to Shao's use of *hua* referring to people living in China, Hong Kong, Macau as well as Chinese migrants and their descendants living anywhere in the world (2015, 56). Thus, the all-encompassing nature of this prefix does not exclusively apply to the latest Hollywood-Chinese cinematic productions from Wuxi Park, but encompasses an extensive range of films that include 1) *Huaren* (ethnic Chinese people) 2) *Huayu* (Chinese languages) 3) *Huashi* (affairs concerning Chinese people or China) 4) *Huashi* (Chinese history) and 5) *Huadi* (locations including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and Chinese communities living outside China) (55).

^v Following such a model, while the character of China might not play a role in an American newspaper on the morning after a mass shooting, say, the very 'novelistic format of the newspaper,' Anderson reminds us, assures its readership 'that somewhere out there the "character" [of China] moves along quietly, awaiting its next appearance in the plot' (2006, 33).

^{vi} This commenter is presumably unaware of Lucas selling the franchise to Disney.

^{vii} Wang argues the success of this Hollywood hybrid saw *Kung Fu Panda*'s 'return' to its so-called 'originary' country and generating feelings of 'awe, wow and shame' (172). The latter perhaps made manifest in the sentiments of Kong Qingdong, who warned his Chinese readership: 'Hollywood robs Chinese symbols and uses your own symbols to conquer you... Hollywood not only makes money out of you, it also intends to brainwash you and conquer your heart' (quoted in Su 2016).

^{viii} Homewood uses *Transformers 4*'s scripted praise of the Chinese government as an emblematic case in point, which he reads as 'a naked moment of pro-Beijing propaganda' (2018, 181).

^{ix} Born in Guanzhou in 1963, Yen moved to Hong Kong and then the US, before becoming a Hong Kong action hero, and one of Asia's most popular leading men. Although his filmography begun with *Shaolin Drunkard* in 1983, he became internationally famous for his portrayal of Ip Man (the grandmaster of the martial art Wing Chun), in two instalments in of the transborder trilogy: *Ip Man* (2008)—set in Foshan during the Sino-Japanese war but filmed in Shanghai—and *Ip Man 2* (2010)—set in Hong Kong under British colonial rule and also filmed in Shanghai.

^x It is noteworthy that within the film Yen and Wen both speak in English, and would thus require subtitling within China. Some Western press hint that the English script was more of a challenge for Wen because of his 'spotty English' (Britt 2017)—which apparently accounted for his absence from much Western promotional material. In one recorded interview with *People*, however, Wen communes in flowing English, speaking about never having seen a *Star Wars* film because of Cold War politics and Chinese policy. In comparison, very little Chinese dialogue or releases were required of the Hollywood stars of *The Great Wall*.

^{xi} Costing 135 million dollars to produce, at the time of writing the *Great Wall* remains the most expensive film produced in mainland China. The transnational financing is essentially Chimerican in nature though, with contributions from the USA, China and Hong Kong making up the main, with Australia and Canadian funds constituting the remainder (imdb.com). The Chimerican casting saw the title roles being fleshed out by Matt Damon, Tian Jing, Willem Dafoe, Andy Lau, Pedro Pascal, Hayyu Zhang, and as already indicated, Lu Han.

^{xii} Hollywood productions were at this time encountering a negative backlash on account of casting Tilda Swinton as the ancient Tibetan guru in *Dr Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016), Finn Jones in *Iron Fist* (Scott Buck, 2017), and Scarlett Johansson as the lead in the live-action remake of the Japanese anime *Kôkaku Kidôtai/Ghost in the Shell* (1995) (see Shepherd 2016, Whitney 2016).

^{xiii} Earlier in the film, the potential for a ‘traditional’ hetero-normative romantic coupling between the Hollywood (Caucasian male) and Huallywood (Asian female) stars is dissipated when Tian Jing’s Commander discovers that unlike herself—who is only “loyal to one flag” (her historical Hua-identity)—Damon’s mercenary figure will happily fight for the highest bidder. It is in her assertion that ‘we are different’ that we perhaps uncover a significant Huállywood feature of the film.