Hybridizing China in Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002)

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China is home to a rapidly expanding film industry whose revenue is projected to surpass that of the US by 2019 (Verrier & Hamedy, 2014). Although Hollywood films comprise a significant part of the film market in China, Chinese films have largely failed to penetrate the US market successfully. One notable exception is Zhang Yimou's martial arts epic, *Hero* (2002), which is ranked as the third highest grossing foreign film in the US from 1980 to 2014 ("Foreign Language," 2014).

Zhang began his career as a preeminent member of the Fifth Generation, a group of Chinese art house filmmakers, but *Hero* marks his transition to more commercially inclined filmmaking. The blockbuster film also represents his desire to make Chinese films as popular internationally as their Hollywood counterparts (Wang, 2009, p. 301). While various scholars such as Sheldon H. Lu (1997) and Chris Berry (1991) have written about the transnational character of Zhang's films, not much critical attention has been given to how they embody the concept of cultural hybridity. In order to account for the international box office success of *Hero*, this paper argues that the film represents a self-conscious attempt to mold a hybrid cultural product using transnational appeal. Many of Zhang's films are notable for their heightened orientalist aesthetics that unequivocally position China as a subject for western audiences. In *Hero*, however, self-Orientalism highlights the elusive essence of China. Hybridity thereby emerges as a key concept as Zhang incorporates Western moral and political philosophy to destabilize the West's image of China in an age of globalization.

Chinese cinema in the twenty-first century presents a curious phenomenon that highlights "the persistence of otherness" (Needham, 2006, p. 10). This notion of otherness is an extension of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in which the East was constructed as the antithesis of the West as a means to affirm the political superiority of the latter. Thus, if the Western self was defined as rational and scientific, the Eastern other was irrational and mystical. The body of knowledge that Said defined as "orientalist," however, mostly refers to Western texts produced in the nineteenth century. Postcolonial theories in the late twentieth century have raised awareness about the imperial mentality governing Orientalism to the point that it is generally regarded as a pejorative term.

Traditional discourses of otherness and difference start to appear somewhat outdated in the contemporary world. The mystique behind the so-called East seems to have diminished in an era of media saturation that witnessed both the explosion of the Hong Kong film industry in the late 1980s and the Korean Wave in the 2000s. Moreover, China's meteoric rise to power means that it no longer belongs to the "Third World." The country boasts a colossal box office industry that is projected "to reach about $5 billion [in 2014] and surpass the US by 2019" (Verrier & Hamedy, 2014, para. 12). Although Hollywood films comprise a significant part of the film market in China, Chinese films have largely failed to penetrate the US market successfully. One notable exception is Zhang Yimou's martial arts epic, *Hero* (2002), a film that seems to operate on Said's discourse of otherness and difference.

Hero features an all-star cast with the then unprecedented budget of $31 million for a Chinese film. It debuted at the top of the US box office upon its release in 2004, beating other Hollywood releases, including *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* and *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement*. Its total North American box office gross was $53,710,019 and its global box office gross reached an impressive $177, 394, 432 ("Hero," 2004).

Set during the last years of the Warring States period (475-222 B.C.) as the First Emperor of Qin, Qin Shihuang (Chen Daoming), attempts to unify China, *Hero* recounts Nameless's (Jet Li) attempt to assassinate the emperor. In order to arrive within one hundred paces of his target, the film unfolds in flashbacks as Nameless narrates how he eliminated three legendary warriors—Long Sky (Donnie Yen), Broken Sword (Tony Leung), and Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung)—to realize his assassination plot. While critics generally praised the film as a visual extravaganza with impeccably staged martial arts sequences, both Chinese and western film critics deplored the lack of strong characterization and the absence of a proper plot. The film's politics, which presents what appears to be an apologist stance

for authoritarian rule, has also been subject to scrutiny. Tou Jiangming comments that "*Hero* does not have the courage to present the massacres Qin Shihuang ordered in the name of peace under heaven" (as quoted in Kahn, 2003). Paul Clark (2005) pans "the vacuity of content" as suggesting "that the thrust of the work is to endorse . . . authoritarian leadership" (p. 185).

This paper seeks to argue that *Hero*'s visual style and content showcase a subtle political ambivalence despite its status as a commercial film. China's global ascendency means that it recognizes in a "self-conscious moment" that "cinematic representations of China will cross global/cultural boundaries" to appeal to a non-Chinese audience (Harrison, 2006, p. 569).

While various scholars such as Sheldon H. Lu and Chris Berry have written about the transnational character of Zhang's films, not much critical attention has been given to how they embody the concept of cultural hybridity. For this paper, I define hybridity as a subversive concept that "destabilize[s] cultural identities of all kinds" (Dirlik, 2000, p. 181). In order to account for the international box office success of *Hero*, this paper argues that the film represents a self-conscious attempt to mold a hybrid cultural product using transnational appeal. Many of Zhang's films are notable for their heightened Orientalist aesthetics that unequivocally indicate China as a subject for western audiences. In *Hero*, however, self-Orientalism highlights the elusive essence of China. Hybridity thereby emerges as a key concept as Zhang incorporates Western moral and political philosophy to destabilize the West's image of China in an age of globalization.

The Beginning of the End?

Zhang, along with Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, belongs to the celebrated group of Chinese art house filmmakers known as the Fifth Generation. In 1982, he and his classmates became the first graduates of the Beijing Film Academy following the political upheaval caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). His first film, *Red Sorghum* (1988), won the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival. It was a pivotal moment when Chinese cinema—then considered a form of Third World cinema—"became, for the first time, globally visible" (Chow, 2007, p. 13). This unexpected victory of an unknown thirty-seven-year-old director inaugurated the West's fascination with Zhang and his peers. Zhang would go on to win major awards at the most important European film festivals: *Ju Dou* was the first Chinese film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1990; *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the 1991 Venice International Film Festival; *The Story of Qui Ju* (1992) won the Golden Lion at Venice in 1992; and *To*

Live (1994) won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival. Lu (1997b) thereby observes that Zhang's film career is "synonymous with the globalization of Chinese cinema" (p. 125).

When *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear, it marked a watershed moment in the history of Chinese cinema. Yet, it also spelt the "beginning of an end" of what Lu (1997) terms "New Chinese Cinema"; this was "a phase characterized by intellectual elitism, disregard for the film market, idiosyncratic mannerism, and artistic experimentation" (p. 8). Paul Clark (2005) arrives at a similar conclusion: *Red Sorghum* "marked the apogee of the Fifth Generation enterprise" as an autonomous, creative venture because all of Zhang's subsequent films bowed in the direction of "more commercial pressures" (p. 208-209). After 1988, Zhang would actively seek transnational capital outside of the Mainland to create films specifically targeted for western film festivals.

Zhang's hyper-awareness of the western critical eye has drawn severe criticism from domestic film critics. As Jinhua Dai (2002) points out, his films have often been conflated as "representing 'Chinese Cinema' as a whole in the Western cultural realm" (p. 229). Dai accuses Zhang of pandering to western tastes. His earlier films, which are often understood as historical allegories of pre-industrial China, feature so-called orientalist subject matters such as "oppression, contamination, rural backwardness, and the persistence of feudal values," all wrapped in "stunning sensuous qualities" (Chow, 2000, p. 404). By willingly subjecting his film to the Western gaze, Zhang has been accused by critics such as Yaowei Zhu and Yiu-Wai Chu (2013) of "self-Orientalism'" (p. 28) or what Rey Chow terms "cultural 'exhibitionism'" and the "'Oriental's Orientalism'" (as quoted in Lu, 1997b, p. 126).

The Visual Spectacle

Critics such as Robert Y. Eng (2004) have asserted that Zhang has become a more commercially inclined director at the cost of "relinquishing art for commercial profit." If this is true, Zhang's career has come full circle with *Hero*, a film he explicitly created in the mold of the Hollywood blockbuster. While the distribution of his earlier films targeted the more elite circle of western film critics in the European festival circuit, *Hero* aims for mass spectatorship from the international film market. In addition to its financial success, critical reception of the film upon its 2004 US release was largely positive. *Time* film critic Richard Corliss (2004) hailed the film as a "masterpiece," while the *Chicago Tribune's* Michael Wilmington (2004) described the film as "swooningly beautiful".

Zhang has long proclaimed his aspiration to make Chinese films as globally popular and competitive as their Hollywood counterparts (Wang,

2009). The breakthrough success of Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) demonstrated the financial viability of the *wuxia* genre, and *Hero* features the same composer, Tan Dun, and actress Zhang Ziyi.

Wuxia can be transliterated as "martial chivalry" or "martial hero." Although it began as a literary genre that centered on mythical China, it gained popularity as a film genre in Hong Kong in the 1950s and early 1960s. These films often featured swordplay and "emphasized magic and fantasy" (Bordwell, 1999). *Wuxia* films dropped in popularity with the advent of kung-fu films (which focus on hand-to-hand combat) in the mid-1970s, until it made an extraordinary comeback with Lee's 2000 film. Due to their use of both martial arts and historical settings, *wuxia* films are instantly recognizable to Western audiences for their apparent Chineseness. *Wuxia*—"an internationalized Sinophone genre" (Zheng, 2010, p. 49)—serves as a medium for "the self-reflexive globalization of Chinese popular cultural forms" (Harrison, 2006, p. 570). Early *wuxia* films produced in Hong Kong were generally considered part of a "lowbrow genre," with fight sequences presented in a visceral, bloody, and often messy manner (Zheng, 2010, p. 49). Zhang breaks with generic expectations by constructing the fight sequences as elegant visual poetry, thereby transforming *wuxia's* lowbrow roots into a "tantalizingly beautiful transnational middlebrow must-see" (Zheng, 2010, p. 49).

Yi Zheng (2010) notes that visual poetry is a hallmark in all of Zhang's works, but it "became the mainstay of [*Hero's*] aesthetic and affective investment" (p. 48). *Hero* fills the screen with gravity-defying warriors who perform impeccably choreographed martial arts sequences. In one of the film's earlier battle scenes, Emperor Qin's army attacks a calligraphy school in the Kingdom of Zhou where Broken Sword and Flying Snow are hiding. An army of thousands launches a formidable shower of arrows. Nameless and Flying Snow defend themselves with their bare arms, swords, and their flowing silk gowns. Inside the school, meanwhile, the calligraphy master maintains his stoic pose as he inscribes words onto a sand template, utterly nonchalant about the assault of arrows aimed at killing him and his students. Broken Sword maintains an equal sense of calmness as he writes calligraphy in bold red ink. The shot of the swift movement of his arms with his blowing long hair is juxtaposed with Nameless's balletic movement as he defends the school. Granted the scene dazzlingly merges digital special effects with traditional manpower, even Zhang's most ardent admirers would have to admit to its excessiveness.

Wuxia as a genre requires a suspension of disbelief, but the exaggerated level of human athleticism coupled with East Asian Zen stoicism borders on parody. Lisa Schwarzbaum (2004) of *Entertainment Weekly* regarded its

"operatic solemnity" as "fetishistic," while the renowned sinologist Michael Nylan (2005) belittled the film as "repetitious and kitschy," and as being little more than "eye candy" (p. 769-770).

The heightened orientalist aesthetics behind *Hero* and Zhang's earlier works generated criticism about self-Orientalism and historical inaccuracy. In what Chow (1995) terms "the Oriental's Orientalism" (p. 170), the Oriental becomes complicit in the hegemonic discourse that reaffirms the political superiority of the West. The fundamental tenet of Orientalism as expounded by Said (1978) is the theory's political nature: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony . . . The Orient was Orientalized . . . because it *could* be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental" (p. 5-6). The power dynamics between West and East, however, have undergone a major shift in the twenty-first century.

Before China's rise as an emerging superpower, it was often confined to a passive position where it was freely manipulated into a distorted system of representation. At present though, China is an active participant in molding an image of itself as the country's economic growth affords it greater agency in self-representation. This is not to say that a film produced in China by a Chinese director claims greater historical authenticity than a Hollywood produced film about China. Since *Hero* is not a social realist film, *wuxia* offers Zhang an opportunity to liberate himself from the problems surrounding "the burden of representation" (as quoted in Fang, 2005, p. 82). *Hero* is a myth—that is, a fantasy—about legendary warriors and only the Emperor Qin is based on a historical figure.

As a tale that hearkens back to pre-modern legends, historical authenticity is neither the film's primary focus nor what the director is targeting. What draws the viewer's attention is the spectacle. Thanks to the cinematography provided by Christopher Doyle, who collaborates frequently with Wong Kar-wai, there is an "excessive prettiness" to *Hero* that almost gives it a "sleek, synthetic non-texture" (Chen, 2004, para. 4). Avoiding close-ups that imbues a scene with a more haptic quality, the film is often framed in perfectly symmetrical long shots to spotlight the characters' graceful movements amid the vast natural scenery. What Nylan (2005) dismisses as "eye candy" is, in fact, more than escapist entertainment. Zhang's film actively invites the gaze of the western viewer through the luscious spectacle that unfolds on the screen. Writing about his earlier films, Chow (1995) claims:

> [W]hat Zhang is producing is rather an exhibitionist self-display that contains, in its very excessive modes, a critique of the voyeurism of Orientalism itself . . . this exhibitionism—what we may call the Oriental's Orientalism . . . In its self-subalternizing, self-exoticizing visual gestures, the Oriental's Orientalism is first and foremost a demonstration—the display of a tactic (p. 170).

The self-subalternizing element is discernible in films such as *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, which include themes of rural backwardness. *Hero*'s backdrop, however, is a sophisticated ancient civilization whose characters are not marginalized. Each warrior, in fact, dons a regal aspect in their mastery of martial arts. On display is no longer the benighted individuals of Third World cinema, but an exhibition of technical expertise, strong acting, and brilliant cinematography from a non-Hollywood film.

Deconstructing the East

Lu (1997b) argues that Orientalism can be a "strategy for survival" for East Asian films confronted by a threatening flood of Western films (p. 132). Zhang made a similar statement in a 1999 interview in response to his transition from art house to commercial director: "It's about survival, and only next is artistic value. If you can't survive, then where does this value come from?" (as quoted in Stone, 2005, p. 13) Yet, recycling static orientalist images is no longer sufficient to guarantee survival in an age of globalization. *Hero* appears to fall into the pitfalls of essentialization when the calligraphy master holds his ground despite the rain of arrows, declaring for the benefit of his frightened students: "today you'll learn the essence of our culture" (Zhang, 2002/2004). Broken Sword makes a similarly opaque statement of oriental wisdom by declaring that calligraphy and swordplay share the same "true essence" (Zhang, 2002/2004).

The film plays on such hollow references to a Chinese essence as the truth is revealed to be elusive. Appearances prove deceptive as the Qin King exposes Nameless's multiple lies. For instance, the tale in the calligraphy school is replete with red (red gowns, red lipstick, red rooms, and red ink), Zhang's trademark color that marks his films' Chineseness to the level of fetish. The red presumably symbolizes the unfettered passions of two lovers (Broken Sword and Flying Snow), but this story of irrational and sensual Orientals turns out to be false.

Hero employs the *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950/2002) inspired narrative structure of flashbacks and colored testimonies to underscore the theme about the subjectivity of truth. This theme is found in Western philosophy,

and it is also a universal concern. By merging a topic familiar to Western philosophy with a story set in ancient China, *Hero* exhibits a hybridity that stems from the process of globalization, which posits that "traces of other cultures exist in every culture" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 148). The shared philosophical concern (namely, the subjectivity of truth) bridges the cultural gap that may exist among the film's transnational audience. As Nameless's multiple testimonies are revealed as false, the film "displays and deconstructs the very process of making history, insisting on the ways that deception, self-interest and self-delusion influence not only individuals but also national identities" (Fuchs, 2004, para. 8).

It is important to note that the universal does not imply an overlooking of local specificities. Gary D. Rawnsley (2010) observes that the device of storytelling, by juxtaposing "narratives recounted by storytellers with varying degrees of knowledge and power," asks significant "political questions that are directly appropriate to modern China" (p. 14) including questions: "who is allowed to tell the real story? Whose voice is heard? [And] whose version of history is legitimate and accepted as such?" (p. 14).

Disjoint narratives also bespeak the complicated nation-state that is China. Composed of the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, "China" is the "subject of deconstruction, hybridization, multiplication, fragmentation, division, and erasure" (Lu, 1997, p. 12). Even the film's production process is a transnational result. Although produced by a Mainland Chinese film studio, it recruited a top caliber "pan-Asia-Pacific crew" and collaborated with special effects studios in the U.S. and Australia (Wang, 2009, p. 300). This internationalized process challenges the claims of some nationalist critics who celebrate *Hero* as a triumph of China's nativist filmmaking abilities.

Ambivalent Politics

Nameless assassinates the emperor to avenge his massacred family. Unlike his sword that was "forged in hatred" and despite being a "man of Zhao," Broken Sword is the only warrior who manages to transcend his parochialism (Zhang, 2002/2004). The epiphany that persuades him to abandon the assassination plot comes from the *tianxia* philosophy ("all-under-heaven"). With the hilt of his sword against the king, Nameless speaks his final words: "Your Majesty, your visions have convinced me that you are committed to the highest ideal of ultimate swordsmanship. Therefore, I cannot kill you. Remember those who gave their lives for the highest ideal: peace" (Zhang, 2002/2004). Bu Tong claims that this sudden shift indicates the film's "deep servility" in which it perceives "the world from the ruler's standpoint" (as quoted in Kahn, 2003, para. 6).

Tong is not alone in his criticism. Zhang's critics (both in China and the West) have denounced *Hero* for endorsing and legitimizing Emperor Qin's ruthless totalitarian rule. The consequence is the reification of the majority Han ethnicity and the erasure of other ethnic minorities.

According to this interpretation, the film's heightened visuals exemplify fascist aesthetics by employing spectacle, which acts as a smokescreen to tame and legitimize totalitarianism (Larson, 2008).

Fascist aesthetics glorify surrender and death, justifying Nameless's surrender as a heroic act that ultimately "extols despotism, unilateral militancy, and misguided patriotic fever" (Larson, 2008, p. 183). Hong Kong director Evans Chan even censured Zhang "as the Leni Riefenstahl of current day China" (as quoted in Stone, 2005, p. 13). Riefenstahl is a German director known for Nazi propaganda films such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

For Chan, *Hero* devolves into little more than a well-crafted piece of state propaganda that condones the oppressive policies and dictatorial power of the Communist Party (Stone, 2005). Emperor Qin remains a politically sensitive topic in China, especially because Mao Zedong looked to the Emperor as a model. Although Chan's criticism is rather harsh, his general assessment of Zhang's film as being authoritarian has been taken up by intellectuals in China and the West. Read this way, the film's reactionary political message dilutes its more innovative efforts to form a hybridized cultural product that is cognizant of the slippery nature of Chineseness.

Jia-xuan Zhang offers a rare alternative interpretation about the film's political ambivalence. She notes that the last shot with the Great Wall betrays what appears to be a triumphant message of unification as the wall and the mountains "are backlit, cast in shadow," which produce a jarring "feeling of darkness" that does not coincide with "the glory of the unified empire" (Zhang, 2005, para. 15). Eng (2004) also argues that *Hero* is "not a paean to authoritarianism, [but] a sharp rejection of it" (para. 2). The Qin King claims that he will end the wars between kingdoms and usher in an era of peace. Unfortunately, what viewers actually "see of the Qin state is its relentless war machine and faceless bureaucrats" (para. 3), a sharp contrast to the vibrant colors and movements of the assassins. Eng further opines that "the film's grim and relentless imagery of the Qin" (para. 7), is presaged by the historical outcome. The Qin king failed to bring peace, and instead "caused great human suffering" that ultimately caused the dynasty to crumble "in the flames of rebellions provoked by its cruelty" (para. 7).

The crux of the film's politics lies in how one interprets the concept of *tianxia*. The English subtitles of Miramax's 2004 American release translated *tianxia* as "our land" or "our country." This translation denotes "a specific

geopolitical grounding, suggesting that Nameless abandons his revenge for the 'good of our country'; in other words, the Chinese nation" (Lan, 2008, p. 1). Rawnsley (2010) thereby notes that this discourse of nationalism is the most transparent in the film. Yet, *tianxia*, as a more abstract Chinese philosophical concept meaning "all-under-heaven," also bespeaks a unity that transcends national boundaries. While *tianxia* is an ancient Chinese concept, "utilitarian discourses provide the means of interpreting the choices" (p. 13) of Nameless and the Qin king as well. The incorporation of Western moral and political philosophy is made more explicit in the film's closing credits as quotes from Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) and *The Discourses* (1531) are presented. Machiavelli stated: "it is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good, it always justifies the action" (as quoted in Zhang, 2002/2004). His utilitarianism lies in his emphasis on the effects, which should produce the greatest good for the greatest number.

Since the goal of utilitarianism is to promote the happiness and well being of the majority, the individual becomes secondary. In *Hero*, the principal characters wrestle with the tension between individual desire and the commitment to a higher goal. It is the sacrifice of individual desires and concomitant freedom that appears to mark the film as politically reactionary. Broken Sword desires to save the king at the risk of destroying his relationship with Flying Snow, and Nameless desires to save the king at the risk of losing his life. Even the king of Qin desires to save Nameless at the cost of alienating his councils.

Authoritarianism in the modern world is often conflated with tyranny whereby "the tyrant rules in accordance with his own will and interest" (Arendt, 2006, p. 97). As Hannah Arendt (2006) clarifies though, "even the most draconic authoritarian government is bound by laws" (p. 97). This is the image of authority that is depicted in Zhang's film. After Nameless saves the king's life, the ruler is stricken by a deep conflict about whether he should spare his assassin's life. His numerous councils demand that he "show no mercy" as "this is the law of Qin" that must be enforced in order "to conquer all under heaven" (Zhang, 2002/2004). The king's sympathy for Nameless prompts tears, but as he is also not above the law, he is forced to obey the law and order the execution.

The idealized principle of *tianxia* prompts all three men to relinquish their personal desires. Broken Sword and Nameless's decision to spare the king is antithetical to self-serving interests; indeed, their decision is ultimately self-destructive as it results in their deaths. Flying Snow, the one character who maintains a self-fulfilling attitude in her pursuit of vengeance against the king, commits suicide in the film's conclusion. Her refusal to see

beyond her personal hatred leads to the death of her lover, Broken Sword. While her death is tragic, it is not heroic. The titular hero in the film most likely refers to Nameless and perhaps Broken Sword. *Tianxia* drives the two characters toward *civitas*, "the spontaneous willingness to make sacrifices for some public good" (Bell, 1996, p. 25). The Qin King promises harmony that is denied in the fragmented period of political turmoil during the Warring States period. Nameless realizes that the death of a few, himself included, is incomparable to the continuing bloodshed and chaos that is bound to ensue if he assassinates the king. His acceptance of the king's authority recalls Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* justifies the power of the state over the individual in the name of safety and security that is denied in a state of nature.

Against the backdrop of the Great Wall, subtitles inform the viewers in the film's conclusion that Qin Shihuang unified China successfully and became the first emperor. Despite the desired outcome, *Hero* remains strikingly obtuse in the ideological statement it makes about whether the King of Qin exercised legitimate authority or if his power was established on the brute fact of conquest. Zhang has consistently denied that his film promotes a certain kind of politics. The director states that his purpose was to "write about people with warm blood. People who have faith and ideals" (as quoted in Kahn, 2003, para. 21). Whether or not the film carries a totalitarian undercurrent, it may be more significant that the film chooses to wrestle with the tension between absolute state power and individual sacrifices. As the founding father of the modern nation state, Machiavelli believed that the "founding was the central political action" and that the "means of violence" was justified to realize this "supreme end" (Arendt, 2006, p. 139). *Hero* prompts an evaluation of China's founding myth that possibly legitimizes or challenges the necessity of violence in the process of nation building. Though the act of (re)evaluating and returning to the foundation, the film invites critical introspection about China's past and present. Questions surrounding the extent of individual and state rights illuminate China's current situation. They are also issues that Western audiences—who have experienced fascism and authoritarianism—easily recognize. Like the *Rashomon*-inspired narrative structure, then, Zhang's film engages in transnational themes that befit its target audience of international filmgoers.

In explaining Japan's relationship with the West, Iwabuchi Koichi writes that "Japan's own image of itself . . . is shaped by a complicit orientalism that allows Japan to define itself as unique and unknowable on the basis that it remains separate from the 'West' in an unbridgeable cultural gulf" (as quoted in Needham, 2006, p. 10). China's self-construction in popular

cultural forms does not occur in a vacuum, it transpires dialogically through its relationship with the larger world, particularly the West. On one hand, *Hero* engages in a similar self-orientalizing tendency through the *wuxia* genre and ancient historical lushness. The characters' exquisite swordplay seems to reenact the stereotype of mystical Orientals residing in a pristine land. On the other hand, this trite image of the mysterious East is repeatedly debunked by the film's own layered narrative structure. What remains are the visuals and a host of unanswered questions that testify to the film's political ambivalence.

Conclusion

In describing China's relationship to the imperialist West, Chow (2000) asserts, "the point has always been for China to become as strong as the West, to become the West's 'equal'" (p. 406). When Zhang proclaimed that he wished to make Chinese films as internationally popular and economically successful as a Hollywood film, it amounts to an act of resistance "to counter Hollywood's omnipresent influence" and, by extension, an attack against a history of "cultural imperialism" (Wang, 2009, p. 301). In order to achieve his goal, however, Zhang had to make certain compromises to craft a cultural product with broad, international appeal. Although *Hero* is unambiguously a Chinese film with its orientalist aesthetics, the narrative structure of flashbacks reveals the film's self-awareness about the elusive search for the essence of Chineseness. It thereby highlights Chineseness as a reproducible commodity capable of producing multiple meanings depending on its audience; Zhang's ingenuity lies in playing with the audience's expectations about the empty signifier that is China. The incorporation of Western moral and political philosophy also adds a new level of complexity to the film by functioning as a potential allegory or parable for modern day China. If, as Chow claims, China wants to be regarded as the West's equal, *Hero's* political undercurrents demonstrate to the world that China, like the West had done before, wrestles with the same questions as it undergoes rapid development. Yet, if the film serves as a testament to China's newfound global status and economic prosperity, it may undermine the subversive edge of hybridity to disrupt and rupture binaries. Whether the film merely reproduces the dynamics of neo-liberal capitalism by profiting from the commodified concept of China remains an open question.

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