Business, soft power, and whitewashing: Three themes in the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film

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Abstract
Applying the grounded theory approach, this study identified three major themes—business, soft power, and whitewashing—in the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film, which is the biggest co-production between Hollywood and China in history. It also discussed the interconnections among the three themes and the implications of these interconnections. The connection between business and soft power revealed China’s strategy of enhancing its soft power through business collaborations with Hollywood. The connections between whitewashing and business, and between whitewashing and soft power, suggested the dialectical dynamics among them. This complex dynamics would influence the soft power of both China and the United States.

Keywords
Business, China, Hollywood, soft power, whitewashing

“The Great Wall” film is the biggest US–China co-production in history with a cost around US$150 million. Directed by the most renowned Chinese director Zhang Yimou, and casted by many superstars in both Hollywood and China such as Matt Damon, Andy Lau and Hanyu Zhang, this film attracted the attentions of film professionals, critics, and moviegoers in China. Although moviegoers rated it 4.9 out of 10 at Douban, the most influential film social media networking site, the film gained US$170.9 million from Chinese market. In the United States and other markets outside mainland China, the box office performance was disappointing. It only grossed US$45.1 million in the United States and Canada, the biggest film market in the world. This film was also rated low
on Rotten Tomatoes, an American review aggregation website for film and television. Only 35% of critics gave it positive reviews.

Obviously, “The Great Wall” is not a successful movie compared with other Hollywood blockbusters such as “Transformers” and “Avatar.” Nevertheless, this biggest co-production film has significant implications for the relationship between Hollywood and China. As Hollywood is a national brand for the United States and plays a vital role in building America’s soft power, this co-production also has significant implications for the soft power of both nations. The relationship between Hollywood and China has come to be prominent in recent years, as Chinese companies such as the Dahlian Wanda Group (hereafter, Wanda) have made huge investments in Hollywood. These acquisitions caused the trepidation of Chinese incursion in the movie industry in the US public sector. In all, 16 US House of Representative members penned a letter to the head of the Government Accountability Office. They urged the government to dedicate special scrutiny on Chinese investments in Hollywood, and suggested to broaden the definition of national security by including film and news media institutions (Wong, 2016).

By analyzing the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film, this study identified three major themes from the content: business, soft power, and whitewashing. The interconnections of these three themes and the categories under them were discussed. These interconnections suggested new angles to understand the relationship between Hollywood and China, and revealed their complex and dialectical impacts on the soft power of both China and the United States.

**Literature review**

**Hollywood and China**

Hollywood first accessed China as early as 1930s when Chinese films were regarded as in the “golden age” (Y. Zhang, 2004). During the two decades of 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood movies occupied about 75% of Chinese film market (Wendy, 2011). But its access to Chinese market had been interrupted for three decades since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Hollywood regained its access after China adopted reform and open policies. Paramount and Universal were the first Hollywood studios that distributed their movies in China. In 1994, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television decided to import 10 Hollywood movies. And Warner Brothers became the first studio that had revenue share contract with China Film Export and Import Corporation, a model followed by many other Hollywood studios (Jihong & Kraus, 2002).

Hollywood’s return should first attribute to China’s reform and open policies, which have fundamentally transformed China’s economic and cultural landscapes. It should also attribute to the need of China’s film market. China’s film market had suffered a great depression during the 1990s. The number of Chinese moviegoers decreased 5 million person-times every year, resulting in a deep decline of box office (Wang & Ren, 1999). A majority of Chinese movie studios were heavily debt-ridden. And thousands of film-related enterprises either closed or were forced to do other business (Fang, 1997). To bolster the rapid plummeting film market, Chinese government decided to open the door to Hollywood and facilitated the reform in film industry. Hollywood played a role of “savior” during this period as its films attracted a large number of audiences and boosted the box office (Wan, 2005). By the end of 20th century, 10 Hollywood movies conquered about 70% of China’s film market, while domestic films only captured the remaining 30% (Rosen, 2002; Zheng, 2000). To improve the competitiveness of domestic films, Chinese government advocated market-oriented reforms and actively promoted the Hollywood model. It abolished the state monopoly
over distribution after 1993 and invited non-state investment in the film production. With the guidance of the government, Chinese film industry underwent a full-scale commercialization with vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition (Jihong & Kraus, 2002).

Although Chinese moviegoers enthusiastically embraced Hollywood movies, the debate around Hollywood movies swept multiple parties in cinema circles. Along with moviegoers, film distributors and exhibitors propped up the importation of Hollywood movies as they boosted box office and revitalized China’s film market. Some scholars cheered the benefits brought by Hollywood movies, stating that Chinese filmmakers learned advanced skills and technologies, and Chinese film managers learned marketing and business strategies from Hollywood (Song, 1995; Xi, 1995). Some also argued that Hollywood movies helped Chinese audiences know more about the outside world and broaden their worldviews (Zheng, 1994). On the other hand, scholars especially the left-wing intellectuals strongly opposed the importation of Hollywood movies. They held that the entry of Hollywood would strangle indigenous film industry and lead to the destruction of domestic films (Jihong & Kraus, 2002). Some of them criticized the content of Hollywood movies, arguing that they are deprived of esthetic value and philosophical depth (A. Zhou, 1998). Some critics adopted cultural imperialism perspective and predicted that Hollywood movies spread American ideologies that endanger Chinese traditional culture and destroy Chinese people’s collective national identity (Yin, 2004).

Chinese authorities also retained a paradoxical position toward Hollywood. They guided the commercialization reform following the Hollywood model, were glad to see the revitalization of film industry, and wanted to learn the Hollywood’s technical mastery to reform their propaganda strategies (Jihong & Kraus, 2002). Meanwhile, they raised a serious concern that the Hollywood cultural invasion would destroy the communist ideologies on which their regime is built. In practice, they enforced strict quotas and censored the content of Hollywood to build strong protectionist barriers as most Chinese filmmakers advocated for protective policies (Crane, 2014). Although Chinese government raised the annual quota to 34 after China acceded to World Trade Organization (WTO) (Wyatt, Cieply, & Barnes, 2012), and added 14 more after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the United States in 2012 (Grimm, 2015), this number is very small compared with more than 600 Chinese domestic movies produced by Chinese film companies (Statista, n.d.).

China’s film industry has not suffered from the strict quota policy as it has undergone a booming period since the beginning of the new millennium. The rapid economic growth, the commercialization of domestic film industry, as well as the raised quotas, have driven it into the fastest growing film market in the world. In 2016, China grossed US$6.6 billion of box office, ranking as the number one international box office market (Motion Picture Association of America, 2016). China will surpass the United States and become the largest film market in 2017 (Bloomberg News, 2016). Hollywood gleaned huge profits from China’s prosperous film market. Transformers, 2012, Avatar, Transformers: Dark of the Moon, Titanic 3D, Transformers: Age of Extinction were the top-grossing films in China in 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014, respectively. Although the top grossing film in 2016 was a domestic film (The Mermaid), three Hollywood movies ranked the second, third, and fifth (Zootopia, Warcraft, and Captain America: Civil War) ("List of Highest-Grossing," n.d.).

China’s huge and flourished film market has enormous attraction to Hollywood (Hunt, 2014). Although the strict quotas and content censorship have frustrated Hollywood studios, they have gradually learned the strategies to adapt to these restrictions. For example, after several films related to Dalai Lama being banned by Chinese government, such as Seven Years in Tibet and Kundun, Hollywood studios have engaged in self-censorship when their films are targeted Chinese
market. As a result, such films would no longer be produced by Hollywood studios (Ho, 2011). Moreover, to pander to Chinese authorities and audiences, Hollywood studios incorporated more Chinese elements in their movies through multiple approaches: casting more Chinese actors, borrowing Chinese stories, adopting Chinese background, and simulating Chinese gong fu (Chao, 2012).

**China's soft power strategies**

Soft power was first introduced in Nye (1990), and more fully developed in Nye (2004). It was defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye, 2004, p. x). During the past two decades, this concept has attracted the attention of scholars across multiple disciplines and political leaders all over the world. It has also been frequently used in news coverage, and become a common keyword in the discourse of international politics.

Chinese scholars argued that the core ideology of soft power is consistent with their traditional philosophies such as Taoist and Confucius (Ding, 2008). To further build this concept, they provided new insights on the conceptualization of it. For example, Peking University Soft Power Study Team (2009) expanded Nye’s definition by adding two additional components: institutions and the quality of people. Huang and Ding (2010) added two other components: good governance and technological innovations. G. Sun (2015) segmented culture force into cultural attraction, linguistic persuasion, moral influence, spiritual vigor, intellectual creativity, theoretical guidance, the force of public opinion, and artistic charm. Overall, Chinese scholars proffered a broader conceptualization of soft power than Nye’s initial one (Lee, 2016).

Chinese political leaders have shown huge passions in promoting China’s soft power. The current president Xi Jinping announced “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world” (Feith, 2015). His predecessor, the former president Hu Jintao, also voiced a similar proclamation that China will build its socialist cultural soft power. The remarkable economic growth during the past several decades has enhanced China’s economic and military might, which makes Chinese political leaders be more confident in pursuing the leadership in the world. President Xi’s “Chinese Dream” initiative, essentially the rejuvenation of China’s significant influence in the world it had possessed for a long time in history, crystallizes China’s ambition.

However, China suffers a severe deficit of soft power compared with the United States. According to Portland (2016), China’s soft power was listed 27th among 30 sample countries, and the United States was listed at the top of the list. Pew Research Center (2015) reported that China had a less favorable image than the United States among the world’s leading economies. This deficit drives Chinese leaders to employ multiple strategies to enhance soft power. In particular, China has actively engaged in organizing and participating in international organizations, negotiations, and forums, and held two mega events: Beijing Olympics in 2008 and Shanghai World Expo in 2010 (Zhao, 2016). China has also made great efforts to build the strength of Chinese media in the international arena. These efforts are embodied by the “external propaganda” project, which was estimated to have a US$10 billion annual budget (Shambaugh, 2015). With such strong financial supports, Chinese media have gained rapid expansion overseas. Xinhua News Agency employs 3000 journalists and has 170 bureaus around the world. It is implementing the strategy of transforming into a modern multimedia conglomerate. Chinese government’s support helps Xinhua built stronger capacity to compete with the Western media giants such as Associated Press, Reuter,
and News Corporation (Shambaugh, 2015). China Central Television (CCTV) broadcasts in six languages around the world, and it set up branches in Nairobi, Kenya, and the United States. China Radio International broadcasts in 38 languages and maintains 27 overseas bureaus. China has also increased the investments in the education projects overseas. For example, Chinese government sponsors China’s Confucius Institute that operates 475 centers in 120 countries.

One of the strategic goals of China’s overseas investments is to boost soft power (Deborah & Tang, 2012). The investments in media and education areas are more directed to this goal than those in other areas as soft power essentially relies on attractiveness of ideas, culture, values, and image (Nye, 2004). Trump administration viewed China as a major challenging competitor and recognized China’s intention of shaping a world antithetical to the US values and interests (The White House, 2017). And Wanda’s investments in Hollywood have caused concerns in the US public sector (Wong, 2016).

Whitewashing

Whitewashing is an important concept in the study of racism. It “refers to both the process and works within a loose problematic of racialization,” in which the focal point manifests “on the construction of white racialized identities” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 4). Whitewashing has come to be prominent in many fronts, such as workplace, education, and film, in the multiracial and democratic societies (Brown et al., 2003; Reitman, 2006). In the filmmaking practice, whitewashing first refers to the act of selecting white actors to portray non-white roles. This practice started as early as the beginning of 1900s when motion pictures were produced without sound. In D.W. Griffith’s (1915) “Birth of a Nation,” many white actors played the roles of black savages. This practice is known as “blackface,” which is “a style of theatrical makeup that originated in the United States, and is used to make an actor look like a black person, but in a very exaggerated way” (“Blackface,” 2008, para. 1). Black people were not the only victims of this practice. White actors also played the roles of other race/ethnicity groups: Latinos were portrayed through “brownface;” Asians were portrayed through “yellowface;” and indigenous people were portrayed through “redface.” This practice has endured harsh criticisms from film critics and become persistent in the contemporary film industry. The recent example is Cameron Crowe’s (2015) “Aloha,” in which the white actress Emma Stone played Captain Allison Ng, a character of Asian descent.

Scholars noted that the inequality of culture representation and racial stereotypes are also the essential dimensions of whitewashing. A study performed by University of Southern California (USC) found that only 23.7% of all speaking characters in the 500 top-grossing movies released between 2007 and 2012 were minorities (Keegan, 2013), even though the minority population consists of 40% of US population (“Hollywood Diversity,” 2017). Even in these speaking roles, minority characters are commonly portrayed according to undesirable stereotypes, and are marginalized with flat and uninteresting storylines. (Kai, 2016). Latinos are portrayed as laziness or criminality; Asians are portrayed as duplicity and untrustworthiness; Native Americans are portrayed as drunken or savage (Behnken & Smithers, 2015). Even in the “sympathetic” films such as Kevin Costner’s (1990) “Dances with Wolves,” in which actual Native Americans were casted to portray emotionally complex characters, the narrative was still focused on the white man’s adventures and misfortunes (Churchill, 1998). On the other hand, Caucasians play a dominant role in the cinematic representation. USC’s study estimated that 76.3% of all speaking characters in the 500 top-grossing movies were white (Keegan, 2013). Caucasian actors are written as characters with ranging personalities, and most of the heroic characters have been played by them.
This Hollywood practice has not been changed over a century. As Sirota (2013) noted, in the last quarter-century, 10 white savior films have received major Hollywood award nominations, with half of those coming in just the last 5 years.

Scholars investigated the causes of whitewashing in the filmmaking practices. Ginneken (2007) observed that most of the filmmakers in Hollywood come from Anglophone settler states, their former colonial heartland, Great Britain, and other four larger countries on the European continent. They are full of good intentions but have limitations in their cosmopolitan worldviews. The stereotypes of minorities have remained unchallenged in their minds as well as their filmmaking practices. Denzin (2002) argued that as the racist system of cinematic representation has been prevailed for a long time, it is difficult to break the system after it becomes the norm.

Scholars argued that Eurocentrism is the underlying force of whitewashing in the filmmaking. Shohat and Stam (1994) defined Eurocentrism as “the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world’s center of gravity, as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the world’s shadow” (pp. 1–2). Holtzman (2000) stated that Eurocentrism is “so thoroughly immersed in popular culture that its messages and values seem ‘normal’ to us as well” (p. 212). Having been cultivated by these messages and values, many Americans look things through a Eurocentric perspective, where anything other than a Caucasian is deemed “The Other,” which always has a negative or inferior connotation. This Eurocentric worldview shapes not only the practices of filmmakers but also the consumption of films. American moviegoers want to watch the films that reinforce their belief of Eurocentrism. If a film contradicts Americans’ predispositions, it would not be successful in box office.

Nevertheless, whitewashing faces challenges not only from the harsh criticisms of critics but also from the change of demographics in the US society. In 2015, minority population already consisted of 38.4% of the US population. Hollywood cannot ignore the demands of this huge minority population. Actually, filmmakers have adjusted their casting strategy by increasing minority actors. Hope (2013) noted that the percentage of minority actors of Oscar Best Picture Nominees has increased to 15% during the period of 2000–2011 from 0.4% during the period of 1940–1950. And this changing strategy generates more box office revenue. A recent study showed that for the 25 movies with 21%–30% of the cast being minorities in 2015, the median box office net profit stood at US$105 million. Meanwhile, the 64 movies with only 10% or less minorities in their cast had median box office earnings of only US$41.9 million in the same period (General, 2017).

The discourse of “The Great Wall” in Chinese media

“The Great Wall” initiated a passionate discourse among Chinese moviegoers and scholars. They expressed different opinions and debated with each other in various media platforms. There were 235,862 people who commented on this film at Douban. The moviegoers and critics also had comments on other social media platforms such as Tencent Dajia and Sina Weibo. Their comments varied from the most upbeat to extremely negative. Chinese scholars’ attitudes toward this film were also mixed, paralleling with those of moviegoers.

The positive comments were focused on the film’s significance for Chinese film industry. In particular, as this film is the first Hollywood–China coproduction blockbuster directed by Chinese director, it is a valuable experiment for Chinese film industry to garner international appeal (Yan, 2017). If it is successful, more Chinese directors, actors, and other cinematic professionals would have more opportunities to work with Hollywood studios. And this would promote the production standards and qualities of Chinese films (W. Zhang, 2016). The positive comments were also from
the implications of and tactics employed by this film for exporting Chinese culture through the platform of Hollywood (Yang, 2016; B. Zhang, 2017). Nevertheless, the criticisms were also focused on the presentations of Chinese culture in this film. Some scholars argued that various Chinese elements, such as Chinese drums, Kongming lanterns, and Shaanxi opera, were awkwardly imbedded into the thin plot, making this film lack of artistic value even under the banner of exporting Chinese culture (Liu, 2017; D. Zhou, 2017). Chinese scholars acknowledged the significant role of film industry in a nation’s soft power and related Zhang Yimou’s efforts of exporting Chinese culture to China’s national strategy (Deng, 2017; K. Yang & Hao, 2017; Y. Zhang, 2016). Whitewashing is not a major theme in the discourse. But a few critics mentioned it and viewed it as a tactic of pandering to Western audiences (Xu, 2017; Yi, 2016).

Although Legendary was purchased by Wanda, most Americans still view the productions of Legendary as Hollywood movies since Legendary is one of Hollywood legacy studios. Many of them would not know this purchase because it was not a high-profile event in the US media. For those read the relevant news, they would probably read the quotation of the founder of Legendary Thomas Tull that Wanda would not exercise any control over Legendary’s creative content (C. Sun, 2016). The analysis of the US media coverage on “The Great Wall” has the implications for Chinese filmmakers as they are making great efforts to export Chinese culture to the US market. This study explored the major themes imbedded in the US media coverage of this film and discussed the connections among them using the grounded theory approach. Moreover, based on the review of literature and the discourse of this film in Chinese media, the following two specific research questions were proposed:

RQ1. How did the US media portray the China-Hollywood relationship in the coverage of “The Great Wall” film?

RQ2. What was the overall tone of the US media coverage on “The Great Wall” film? On what aspects it was reported more positively? And on what aspects it was reported more negatively?

Method

News sample selection

LexisNexis Academic was used as the news database to obtain news reports about the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film. The news was searched using “Legendary” and “The Great Wall” as the keywords in the headline and lead paragraph (HLEAD) at the end of June 2017. Total 134 news articles were downloaded. The author filtered the articles not published by the US media, and then removed the articles not related to “The Great Wall” film and redundancies. The remaining 38 news articles were used for analysis. The majority of these articles were from The New York Times, a flagship daily newspaper in the United States, and The Hollywood Reporter, the most influential news magazine focusing on Hollywood film industry.

Coding approach

The grounded theory approach that involves open coding, axial coding, and selective coding was employed to identify the themes (Becker & Stamp, 2005). Two coders (the author and another coder) worked together to conduct open coding, which identified the idea units based on the same or similar ideas. To build the consensus of the coding, each coder coded independently news
articles that were randomly selected from the news sample, and discussed their coding work to find out the similarities and differences. This coding process was repeated until all news articles were open coded. In the next stage of coding, the author did axial coding in which the codes were identified by grouping idea units based on the same or similar ideas (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), and created 39 codes. In the following stage, inter-coder reliability test was conducted. Each coder used these codes to separately code five news articles (13% of the news sample) randomly selected from news sample. Inter-coder reliability was tested using the percentage of agreement, which was lower than 90% in the first round. Two coders independently coded other five news articles randomly selected using the same codes. The percentage of agreement in the second round test was over 90%. Then, the coders separately coded the remaining 33 articles. Finally, the author did the selective coding through which the codes were grouped into categories, and categories were grouped into major themes.

Results

Table 1 reported the codes, categories, and major themes, as well as the counts and percentages of codes. Three major themes and nine categories were created from 39 codes that were identified 395 times in the news sample. The first major theme was business, which consisted of the following seven categories: “film performance,” “co-production,” “pandering,” “Hollywood’s business in China,” “China’s film market,” “Legendary business,” and “Wanda business.” “Film performance” had six codes that denoted different tonalities of the two aspects of performance: box office and review. These six codes were identified 51 times (12.9% of the total counts) in the news sample. “Co-production” had 11 codes that described various aspects of “co-production” between Hollywood and China. These codes were identified 173 times (43.8% of the total counts) in the news sample. “Pandering” had five codes that reflected various aspects of pandering and different tonalities toward this issue. These codes were identified 18 times (4.6% of the total counts) in the news sample. “Hollywood’s business in China” had two codes that represented Hollywood’s business interests and strategies in China. These codes were identified 36 times (9.1% of the total counts) in the news sample. “China’s film market” had four codes that described four aspects of China’s market. These codes were identified 34 times (8.6% of the total counts) in the news sample. “Legendary business” had three codes that denoted three aspects of the studio’s business. These codes were identified 10 times (2.5% of the total counts) in the news sample. “Wanda business” had two codes that emphasized Wanda’s global strategies in film industry and its investments in Hollywood. These codes were identified 16 times (4.1% of the total counts) in the news sample.

The business theme was the dominant theme as it consisted of 7 categories and 33 codes, which were identified 333 times (85.6% of the total counts) in the news sample. Another major theme was soft power, which consisted of one category: China’s soft power strategy. And the third major theme was whitewashing, which consisted of one category: whitewashing. The soft power theme consisted of three codes, which were identified 26 times (6.6% of the total counts) in the news sample. The whitewashing theme consisted of three codes, which were identified 31 times (7.8% of the total counts) in the news sample.

RQ1 asks how US media portrayed China–Hollywood relationship in the coverage of “The Great Wall” film. It was found that the US media focused on four dimensions of China-Hollywood relationship: co-production, pandering, Hollywood’s business in China, and China’s film market. The US media highlighted multiple aspects of co-production, such as cast, crew, script, investment, and distribution of this film. Moreover, “The Great Wall” was portrayed as a bellwether/model/test
Table 1. Codes, categories, and major themes in the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film.

| Category                          | Code                                      | Count | %    |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| Business                          | Film performance                          |       |      |
|                                   | Box office success                        | 7     | 1.77%|
|                                   | Box office not success                    | 13    | 3.29%|
|                                   | Box office neutral                        | 10    | 2.53%|
|                                   | Positive review                           | 2     | 0.51%|
|                                   | Negative review                           | 18    | 4.56%|
|                                   | Neutral review                            | 1     | 0.25%|
| Co-production                     | Cast                                      | 21    | 5.32%|
|                                   | Crew                                      | 31    | 7.85%|
|                                   | Investment                                | 22    | 5.57%|
|                                   | Script/story                              | 25    | 6.33%|
|                                   | Distribution                              | 6     | 1.52%|
|                                   | Bellwether/model/test                     | 13    | 3.29%|
|                                   | Other aspects                             | 1     | 0.25%|
|                                   | Other “co-production” projects            | 11    | 2.78%|
|                                   | Hope/optimism                             | 12    | 3.04%|
|                                   | Difficulty/challenge                      | 12    | 3.04%|
|                                   | Zhang’s success/style/philosophy          | 19    | 4.81%|
| Pandering                         | Reverse whitewashing                      | 3     | 0.76%|
|                                   |Accommodating Chinese government and audiences |       |      |
|                                   | Accommodating audiences outside China     | 2     | 0.51%|
|                                   | Critique                                  | 5     | 1.27%|
|                                   | Support                                   | 6     | 1.52%|
| Hollywood’s business in China     | Hollywood’s interests in China            | 22    | 5.57%|
| China’s film Market               | Hollywood business strategies in China    | 14    | 3.54%|
|                                   | Market size and growth                    | 15    | 3.80%|
|                                   | Diversity                                 | 2     | 0.51%|
|                                   | Uncertainty                               | 3     | 0.76%|
|                                   | System, rules and regulations             | 14    | 3.54%|
| Legendary business                | Legendary leadership                      | 7     | 1.77%|
|                                   | Legendary finance                         | 2     | 0.51%|
|                                   | Legendary business strategy               | 1     | 0.25%|
| Wanda business                    | Wanda business strategy                   | 9     | 2.28%|
|                                   | Wanda investments in Hollywood            | 7     | 1.77%|
| Soft power                        | China’s soft power strategy               |       |      |
|                                   | China’s ambition                          | 1     | 0.25%|
|                                   | Chinese investments in Hollywood          | 2     | 0.51%|
|                                   | Chinese elements/values/themes            | 23    | 5.82%|
| Whitewashing                      | Critique                                  | 13    | 3.29%|
|                                   | No such a thing                           | 12    | 3.04%|
|                                   | Not a concern in China                    | 6     | 1.52%|

for many other ongoing “co-production” projects, a point mentioned frequently in the news coverage. Although the challenges and difficulties of the co-production were mentioned frequently, the hope and optimism were also equally mentioned. This indicated that the US media adopted a supportive attitude toward the co-production strategy between Hollywood and China.
The US media also highlighted the pandering theme. They mentioned that the strategy of only dropping Chinese actors into roles not meaningful to the plot did not work very well. The examples of this strategy included the roles of Chinese actress Li Bingbing and the Chinese Olympic boxer Zou Shiming in “Transformers: Age of Extinction,” and the role of Chinese actress Angelababy in “Independence Day: Resurgence.” This strategy was criticized by Chinese critics and audiences. Chinese audiences’ desire to see more meaningful roles played by Chinese actors in Hollywood blockbusters pushes Hollywood to create larger roles for Chinese actors (Schwartzel, 2016). Hollywood’s modified pandering strategy provides more opportunities for Chinese actors to enter this world-leading movie production system. For example, Donnie Yen starred in the latest Star Wars film “Rogue One” and “XXX: The Return of Xander Cage,” and made a big splash in Hollywood (M. Lee, 2017). “The Great Wall” is another example of Hollywood’s modified pandering strategy as the majority of roles were played by Chinese actors and the story was a Chinese story. The US media neutrally viewed pandering as a tactic for Hollywood to enter China’s market, and “The Great Wall” was a successful model of this tactic.

Hollywood’s interests and successes in China and its connections with China were frequently mentioned in the US media, so did China’s fast-growing film market. This content provided the endorsement for Hollywood’s strategies of co-production and pandering. China’s huge and rapidly growing film market has tremendous attraction to Hollywood studios. To capture a big chunk of this huge market, they applied pandering tactic and modified this tactic to further satisfy the wants of Chinese government and audiences. It was also mentioned that co-production is also the strategy of Hollywood to circumvent the quota limitation.

RQ2 inquires the overall tone, as well as different tonalities on various aspects, of “The Great Wall” in the US media coverage. Under business theme, there were two categories that had codes reflecting tonalities. The “film performance” category had two codes reflecting positive tonality: box office success and positive review; it also had two codes reflecting negative tonality: box office not success and negative review. The sum of positive code counts was 9, and the sum of negative code counts was 31. Obviously, the US media used more negative tone in reporting the performance of “The Great Wall” film. The “pandering” category had one positive code: support (6 counts), and one negative code: critique (5 counts). This finding indicated that the US media used mixed tone in reporting the issue of pandering. The “whitewashing” category had two positive codes (“no such a thing” and “not a concern in China”) with total 18 counts, and had one negative code (critique) with 13 counts. This finding revealed that the US media used more positive tone in the portrayal of the whitewashing issue. Overall, the US media used more negative tone (49 counts) than positive tone (33 counts) in reporting “The Great Wall” film.

The interconnections of three major themes

The business theme was a dominant theme in the US media coverage under which co-production was a dominant category. These findings suggested that business aspects, especially the collaboration between Hollywood and China, were the focus of the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) argued, Hollywood studios are “both economic and cultural institutions . . . both a site of artistic and social expression as well as a business concerned with the maximization of markets and profits” (p. 249). The business interest is always in the top priorities of Hollywood studios. Hollywood studios attempt to find feasible strategies to occupy larger share of China’s huge market. And pandering and co-production are two new strategies Hollywood is adopting. Although the negative reports on the box office in American market indicated that this
Zhang's biggest co-production film was not successful from an American’s perspective, the successful stories of box office in China suggested that Hollywood’s new strategies are feasible to capture Chinese moviegoers.

The second major theme in the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” was soft power. As the literature suggested, China suffers a severe deficit of soft power, and China’s political leaders made great efforts to enhance China’s soft power. Wanda’s acquisitions in Hollywood were among the prominent projects of Chinese investments in the US media industries. Although Wanda’s Chairman Wang Jianlin said, “I am a businessman, my goal is to be successful in business” (“Chairman Wang,” 2016), the US media noted the connection between Wanda’s business activities and China’s national strategies, as well as Zhang Yimou’s purpose of exporting Chinese culture. Wanda’s acquisitions have caused concerns about China’s propaganda controls on American media (Swanson, 2016). The Washington Post even warned that Hollywood could become Beijing’s next propaganda outlet (“Beijing’s Next Propaganda Outlet,” 2016). The analysis of this study showed that the US media highlighted the Chinese elements in this film and connected it to China’s ambition of enhancing soft power.

Blechman (2004) argued that soft power is not deployed, shaped, or even guided in a meaningful way by governments. Hollywood movie studios are not subsidized or supported by the US government. They are commercial organizations with the bottom-line purpose of making profits. The dominance of Hollywood movies in the world is driven by the economic forces, such as the economics of scale of film production, and the talents and resources dedicated to film production in Hollywood (Lowenstein & Merrill, 1990; Scott, 2002; Van Elteren, 2003). Thus, the soft power contributed by Hollywood is the byproduct of the business of Hollywood. Chinese government is more intentionally building China’s soft power as it has subsidized/supported the operations/investments in the media and education projects overseas. Chinese companies and filmmakers aligned themselves with the government’s strategy. Wanda intentionally invested in the film industry abroad. And Zhang Yimou also intentionally exported Chinese culture through his film. In the literature of soft power, the connection between business and soft power has not been highlighted. The US media coverage of the Wanda’s acquisitions in Hollywood and Zhang Yimou’s efforts of exporting Chinese culture revealed this connection.

Whitewashing is the third theme in the US media coverage. As revealed in the literature, it is an enduring issue in the Hollywood cinematic practices, which has multi-dimensional connections with the broad social issues of American society, such as racial stereotypes and Eurocentrism. The critique of Whitewashing in “The Great Wall” film referred to the heroic role-played by Matt Damon, a Caucasian Hollywood star, who lead a Chinese army to save China from dragons. It was viewed as the Hollywood’s repeated practice of casting white actors in roles originally conceived as nonwhite. And this film was criticized as perpetuating “the racist myth that only a white man can save the world” (Strauss, 2017, p. 1).

Although a few Chinese critics mentioned the whitewashing issue in this film, the US media quoted several times the argument of Zhang Yimou that there is no whitewashing issue in Chinese society and filmmaking practice. The whitewashing theme was related to business theme because this film was targeted to the global market, including North America, the current biggest film market. Casting Caucasian actors was the marketing strategy for attracting the global moviegoers, especially those in the North America and European market. Zhang Yimou said, “we can’t make an internationally successful film on our own. If we didn’t have Matt Damon, if we didn’t speak English in the film, then it would just be a purely Chinese film” (Qin, 2017). This tactic was viewed by several Chinese critics as pandering to Western audiences (Xu, 2017; Yan, 2017). The US media
coverage and Chinese discourse on “The Great Wall” film revealed a double-pandering strategy adopted by both Hollywood studios and Chinese filmmakers in their co-production projects: To pander to Chinese audiences’ desire of seeing more Chinese actors in Hollywood movies, Hollywood studios create more meaningful Chinese characters for Chinese actors; To pander to Western audiences’ feeling of superiority, Chinese filmmakers cast Caucasians as the central heroes. The negative reports on the box office in the US market suggested that Chinese pandering strategy was not successful. And the box office would have been even worse if the central hero was not a Caucasian actor as it contradicts Americans’ predispositions (Havens et al., 2009). Obviously, the double-pandering strategy employed in this film revealed the connection between whitewashing and business.

The Whitewashing theme was also related to soft power theme, although their connection was more intricate than that between whitewashing and business. The literature suggested whitewashing practice is rooted in Eurocentrism, a notion deeply embedded in American popular culture (Holtzman, 2000). Caucasian heroes in Hollywood movies, and Matt Damon in “The Great Wall” in particular, acted as the icons of Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism assumes the superiority of Western culture values over other non-Western cultures, and these values work as a cure to all kinds of problems (Pokhrel, 2011). The spread of the notion of Eurocentrism forces people in other societies to “rely on European ways of representation and concepts” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 15). The existence of Eurocentrism in China means that Chinese ideas about life’s meaning are ultimately being evaluated by the culture values of the West (Kho, 2014). The hero played by Matt Damon repeated the stereotyped metaphor of Hollywood movies that only Caucasians can save the world, and thus, covertly reinforced the notion of Eurocentrism.

On the other hand, Eurocentrism imbedded in this film was compromised by the Chinese story and elements. The film included enough the so-called Chinese elements, such as costumes, weapons, and music. The secret black powder, which was searched by European mercenaries who planned to take it to Europe, represented the innovation of ancient Chinese. More importantly, one of the European mercenaries was re-educated by Chinese virtues of bravery, selflessness, and discipline, and finally became the hero who saved the world from the atrocious attack of alien monsters. All these would create a positive image of ancient China and Chinese culture, which is constructive to China’s soft power.

Conclusion

This study applied the grounded theory approach to analyze the US media coverage of “The Great Wall” film. Three major themes were identified and discussed, and the media tone was evaluated. The different tones on various aspects reflected the attitudes of the US media toward this film. The interconnections of three major themes provided new theoretical angles to understand China–Hollywood relationship.

It was found that the US media adopted a supportive attitude toward the co-production strategy between Hollywood and China, and viewed pandering strategy as a marketing strategy for Hollywood to enter Chinese market. Although more negative narratives were found at the overall level, the US media also had many positive narratives on multiple aspects such as the box office performance in China, pandering strategy of Hollywood, and whitewashing.

The discussions of three major themes revealed the dialectical dynamics among business, soft power, and whitewashing. The co-production between China and Hollywood, as well as the Chinese acquisitions in Hollywood, suggested the connection between business and soft power,
Zhang

and China’s strategy of using economic power to promote soft power. The double-pandering strategy adopted by this film team reinforced this connection. While the pandering strategy of Hollywood side seemed successful in seizing the market share in China, the pandering strategy of Chinese side was not effective in capturing Western audiences. *Whitewashing* is not a social issue in China. It was viewed as a pandering strategy of Chinese side. Chinese filmmakers intended to employ this strategy to cater to Western audiences, and thus, export Chinese culture to Western societies. Meanwhile, this strategy would help strengthen America’s soft power since it further spreads the notion of Eurocentrism and reinforces the metaphor of “white heroes saving the world.”

As the biggest co-production film between Hollywood and China, “The Great Wall” acted as the bellwether for many other ongoing co-production projects, and signaled a new stage of the cooperation between Hollywood and China. China and the United States are two super powers in the contemporary world, competing with each other in multiple fronts including soft power. This study revealed the complex and dialectical dynamics among *business, soft power, and whitewashing*, which provided new perspectives to study China–Hollywood relationship, and had implications for the film and soft power strategies of both countries.

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