Hero is Back- The rising of Chinese audiences: The demonstration of SHI in popularizing a Chinese animation

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Abstract
This article studies how Chinese audiences’ participation contributes to a new all-time animation box-office champ, “Monkey King: Hero is Back,” and how such participation may contribute to facilitating a richer and more varied cultural life in China in the future. This made-in-China animation film snatched the throne from DreamWorks Animation’s “Kung Fu Panda 2” by breaking the latter’s 4-year record (617 million RMB) after announcing its box-office sale had exceeded 800 million RMB on 4 August. The significance of the animation is approved by a seminar held by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, naming it “the milestone of domestic animation film production” on 4 August. The legend of the animation is an exemplification of the enthusiasm of Chinese audiences, who identify themselves not only as fans but also followers and cheerleaders of the film. They self-addressed themselves as zi lai shui (literally means tap-water, 自来水), figuratively means the Internet mercenaries willing to advertise the film on social media at their own expense. Drawing on the literature of power and influence, fans of “Monkey King: Hero is Back” will be interviewed and their online activities and comments will be analyzed to find out (1) how the scattered audience members built a united identification online and (2) how such spontaneous but also well-organized Internet aggregation turns into SHI (overwhelming with numerical strength, social capital, and influence) and further empowers the Chinese audiences in an era in which social media prosper in China.

Keywords
Chinese audiences, audience participation, power, Monkey King: Hero is Back, social media

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Since the 17th Communist Party of China’s National Congress in 2007, a series of policies have been announced to support the Chinese domestic animation industry, including the introduction of new tax incentives to increase industry investments, the construction of new industrial parks featuring animation productions, and the strengthening of copyright laws to protect creative content. The government’s involvement has encouraged and taken advantage of recent technological developments, an expanded labor market, and a rapidly growing domestic film audience.

As a result, Chinese animation projects have begun to thrive when only a few years ago they barely survived (Fu & Zhang, 2016). According to a document entitled, “A Report on the Development of China’s Media Industry 2015,” the gross revenue of the Chinese animation industry exceeded ¥100 billion in 2014, an increase of 14.83% in a single year. Clearly, the film animation industry is prospering. In 2014, 53 animation films were shown in China accounting for a total box-office revenue of ¥3.028 billion, both domestic and international productions. These animated productions accounted for 10.22% of the total Chinese box-office receipts and constituted a 101.87% increase compared to revenues for animated films in 2013 (Deng & He, 2015). Domestic animation films outnumbered imported ones and generated ¥1.1 billion box office which was twice as last year. Seven domestic animation films earned more than ¥50 million each in 2014, and “Boonie Bears: To the Rescue” (Chinese: 熊出没之夺宝熊兵) set a new record as the highest-grossing Chinese animated film in history earning receipts of ¥247 million box office till the end of 2014.

The record was short lived, however, as Monkey King: Hero Is Back (Chinese: 西游记之大圣归来), released on 10 July 2015, generated a whopping ¥956 million at the box office. The film thus became not only the highest-grossing Chinese animated film, but also the highest-grossing animated film released in China as it overtook the box office totals of imported animation films up to 2015. The previous record for the highest box office total for an animated film was held by Kung Fu Panda 2, produced by DreamWorks Animation which had achieved box-office receipts of ¥617 million over a period of 4 years since its release in 2011. Such a legacy continued until the release of Kung Fu Panda 3 (¥100.2 million) and Zootopia (¥153 million) in 2016, and Despicable Me 3 (¥102 million) in 2017. Monkey King was declared to be a “milestone of domestic animation film production” by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the CPC and The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People’s Republic of China (SAPPRFT), in a seminar specially held to discuss its significance on 4 August 2015.

The success of the film Monkey King reflects the maturation of the quality of a Chinese animated production, and indeed of the Chinese animation industry, but more importantly it demonstrates the enthusiasm that Chinese audiences have for domesticated animation films which “speaks to their hearts,” and how they contribute to the box office. It is far from clear, that other Chinese animation films can replicate the success of Monkey King. The box-office collections of Monkey King (¥956 million) almost doubled that of the second and third most widely seen local productions, Big Fish and Begonia (Chinese: 大鱼海棠, ¥566 million) and Boonie Bears: Entangled Worlds (Chinese: 熊出没之奇幻空间, ¥522 million), and almost quadrupled that of the fourth, Boonie Bears: Mystical Winter (Chinese: 熊出没之雪岭熊风, ¥296 million). At the same time, the gap between Chinese and foreign animation film industries is still pronounced. Up to 1 October 2015, only eight Chinese animation films generated more than ¥100 million box office each in Mainland China, while 25 imported animation films each earned more than ¥100 million in the box office, which is triple of the domestic ones in terms of number. The situation didn’t change much in 2016. Thirteen animation films took over ¥100 million at the box office in China, but only two of them were Chinese production.
This article will study how Chinese audiences’ participation make “Monkey King: Hero is Back” a new all-time animation box-office champ, and how such participation may contribute to facilitating a richer and more varied cultural life in China in the future.

The participating Chinese audiences and unfruitful studies

Despite being the largest and the most vibrant sample of audience studies, Chinese audiences have not been studied scientifically or intensively. Since 1982, Audience studies in China have experienced the stages of being neglected, being investigated by governments and institutions, and being researched by academics as well as governments and institutions respectively (Huang, 2014, p. 152). Contemporary audience studies in China have tended to be descriptive and have not produced generalizable theories, and have shown great favor toward empirical studies but mostly to imitate western studies (Tan, 2015; Wang, 2013). Such studies have also often been deficient in methodological rigor (Cheng, 2013), such as convenient sampling and inadequate methods, or have lacked a well-informed critical perspective as well as interdisciplinary investigation (Liu & Mou, 2014), therefore most research findings have focused on the demographic and behavioral characteristics of audiences, rather than to conduct psychological, social, and cultural analysis to investigate the uniqueness of being “Chinese” audiences.

Media and audiences cultivate the relationship of interdependence in China, which is an important and necessary perspective to be adopted in studying Chinese audiences. Chinese media have benefited from possessing one of the largest audience groups, and Chinese audiences have benefited from the speedy development of Chinese media ecological environment. In just about 30 years, the boundaries between press, broadcasting, telecommunication and computing have melted (Storsul & Stuedahl, 2007, p. 12), consequently Chinese audience members’ perceptions alter from media dependency for action guide to media evaluation and consumption, and further progress to media criticism, participation and production (Huang & Chitty, 2009).

Chinese audiences react to and engage media in various approaches and multiple dimensions, with identifiable increasing initiative and vitality, and its effects are magnified by enormous population in China and technology evolution. Audience participation in media programs started in 1986 in China, which was a live audience calling in a radio program (Huang, 2014, p. 142). Today Chinese audience members participate actively in both traditional and new media. They gather, produce and disseminate news, participate in studio discussions, and act as judges, reviewers, or critics in evaluating and assessing mediated performances. In doing so, they also help to promote, regenerate, and derive media products, and also determine their success or failure. The success of the animated film Monkey King: Hero Is Back is an example of the power of audience participation in shaping the Chinese film market.

Monkey King: Hero Is Back is a legend of Chinese animation films in both reputation and box-office performance. The Monkey King cost about ¥100 million to produce yet it grossed ¥956 million in box-office sales in the Chinese domestic market. Such economic return is more significant in view of the cost in its long production cycle of 8 years, the divestment problems, and the small budget that was allowed to promote the film. The film not only drew a large public audience, it also attracted the attention of Chinese academics. A search in China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (CNKI), the biggest and most authoritative academic database in China, with 大圣归来 (English: Monkey King: Hero Is Back) as the search term, revealed 42 research papers on the film were published as of 10 October 2015. Yet, it is noteworthy that none of these papers focused on audiences and their participation, but rather the analysis of the box-office success (Chen, 2015), the
marketing strategies (Zhang, 2015), the production (Tian, 2015) and artistic esthetics of the film (Li, 2015), and the possible influences to Chinese animation industry (Wang, 2015). This article aims to fill in the gap by studying Chinese audiences’ participation as valuable contributions to the popularizing of the film, and how their participation is sufficient to exemplify the rising of Chinese audience, and the possibility that the empowered group may shape not only the film market but also social development in China in the future.

**Research questions and methods**

This study sought to answer two questions to explain the success of the film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*:

1. How did the audience members of *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* build the united identification of *zi lai shui* (literally meaning: tap-water, Chinese: 自来水), the Internet mercenaries willing to advertise the film on social media at their own expense?
2. How such spontaneous but also well-self-organized audience aggregation and participation turns into SHI (overwhelming with numerical strength, social capital and influences by definition) and further empower the audience members to shape the fate of the film?

The study used qualitative research methods in order to better understand the changing patterns of Chinese audience members’ activities over time and achieve a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the role of audience participation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Silverman, 2000, p. 8). Content analysis of audiences’ online comments, 2 focus groups and in-depth interviews of 5 audience members were employed, and the following steps were undertaken in the field research.

Our first step, however, was to watch the film twice. The first viewing was by two researchers together soon after its release so that a brief content analysis of the plot and image of the film and an experiential observation of the audiences were made and the research design was developed. Then one researcher watched it with a group of fans, so that a participant observation and a follow-up focus group were conducted. Second, relevant literatures about the film were reviewed. Third, the audience online comments relating to the film, specifically the posts regarding the film on video sharing website bilibili.com, and douban.com, the largest and most active online movie forum in China, dated from 10 July to 1 November 2015, were analyzed. Lastly, 5 in-depth interviews were conducted with audience members of the film as well as pertinent media practitioners and researchers.

**QUAN (power) and SHI: A Chinese communication theoretical framework**

Many theories have been offered to explain the role of power and social influence in shaping human social interactions (Kotter, 1985; Wrong, 1979). Power and influence are importantly theories. For example, when considering power in relation to influence, some have sought to construct a definition of power that encompasses influence. “Power is the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen acts on others” (Wrong, 1979). In relation to each other, it is popular to consider influence to be under the broad conception of power (Kotter, 1985). Wrong (1979) asserts that “Power is identical with intended and effective influence” and French and Raven (1959) “define power in terms of influence and influence in terms of psychological change.” Someone in a powerful position or having greater status will most likely wield a certain degree of influence over someone in a less
powerful position, and the one in lower position normally has perceived the reward for complying and the threat of not complying (Willer & Skvoretz, 1997).

There is also a tradition of investigating power and influence as independent concepts. Theorists have defined power as the structurally determined potential for obtaining favored payoffs in relations where interests are opposed, while influence is the socially induced modification of a belief, attitude, or expectation (Willer, 1997). Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) draw our attention to social influence as the changes in people caused by what others do. According to Heider (1958), power is a person’s ability to accomplish something, to alter the environment whether human or nonhuman, while social power is a person’s ability to cause another to do something, and the ability of an actor to change the incentive structures of other actors in order to bring about outcomes (Dowding, 1996).

Other theorists have sought to demarcate power from influence. For Parsons (1963), power derives from “positive and negative sanctions” through which “ego may attempt to change other’s intentions,” whereas “influence is a way of having an effect on the attitudes and opinions of others.” This distinction is like that drawn earlier by Bierstedt (1950), for whom “influence and power can occur in relative isolation from each other.” Mokken and Stokman (1976) specified that the exercise of influence may take place mainly by means of persuasion, information and advice, but power is often associated with force, coercion and sanctions.

Studies on power have an inner-structural and external influential orientation, and a vertical flow of influence in exercising power is identified. Weber (1914) considers power as the core of the subject of social stratification, and refers to it as the chance of a man or a group to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others, in either traditional, rational-legal, or charismatic bases of domination. Such a notion built on conflict and intention was challenged by Foucault (1988), who pointed out that power is not dominant, unilateral, and oppressive, but distributed, and also that power is mobile, unstable, reversible, and determined by its own internal logic.

Despite the differences identified in the theories offered by these leading scholars, the assumption that there is a form of rationality behind the exercise of power is commonly accepted (Iliopoulos, 2012), and an up–down vertical path of power implementation through influence is suggested. The consideration of power in the effects of persuasion and negotiation is added into the theories, but the idea that influence produces power exercise through status-based expectancies is not yet clearly established (Willer, 1997).

The power theories derived from western culture and society are incompetent to explain the complexity of social and cultural significance of how audience participation influences China. Audience participation in media programs has become a global phenomenon as a result of new developments in media technologies due to the forces of globalization, and as a result of a reconstruction of media culture and economics (Huang, 2013). The accumulation of quantitative changes results in qualitative changes, so in China, the huge population, time-honored cultural tradition and rapid-developing media environment work together, and form a unique physical context for audience participation in Chinese media programs; therefore, a theoretical framework on power with Chinese characteristics to interpret Chinese audience participation is needed.

Historically speaking, power (QUAN, in Chinese: 权) is associated with authority, control, and social class/position in China, and the impulse of desire for power is based on the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm on this land. Such ideology underlies the politics in China, from national, institutional to household oneself. Power refers to having the final say, and it has been ritualized and symbolized in China over the course of thousands of years. An official seal made of gold, silver, copper or stone would be given to an officer assigned by an empire or upper officials, and the seal was unique and could not be reproduced even if it was destroyed or lost.
Furthermore, losing the seal meant losing the position and the power associated with it. All formal documents must be sealed/stamped before being announced and distributed in ancient China, which represented authority, unchangeable and obedience (Jiang, 2009). Such cultural tradition is still kept in contemporary China and people value sealed stamps more than signature concerning any power- and authority-related issues.

The internalization of the legitimacy and desire for power (QUAN) in China enables the agents of power to have superior influence. Those without such power have discovered that they can enhance their own power by establishing social relationships and connections with those holding such power through “forming ties with the powerful ones” (McClelland, 1973). A study in Taiwan shows that obtaining influence in a social setting can be achieved by establishing a self-perceived strong collective identity through relationship building, especially with those in power (Randel & Wu, 2011). Such studies suggest a complementary edge-to-center path of power implementation besides the mainstream up–down vertical one, and its obviousness and ubiquity in China is facilitated by the enormous population causing cut-throat competition, and the cultural tradition of collectiveness (Jiang & Huang, 2009).

A more pertinent and precise theory describing the uniqueness and complexity of activities and relationship in China is SHI (Chinese: 势). We first proposed this theory in papers discussing how Chinese cyber culture (Jiang, 2009; Jiang & Huang, 2009) was uniquely impacted by the effects of new media technology as multiplied by China’s large population. Henry Kissinger mentioned SHI in his On China in 2011, and admitted it “a concept with no direct Western counterpart” (p. 32). He emphasized the strategic dimension of SHI connoting “the strategic trend and potential energy of a developing situation” (Kissinger, 2011, p. 32), by quoting the philosophy of Sun Tzu, author of the famed treatise The Art of War, that “the power inherent in the particular arrangement of elements and . . . its developmental tendency.” Kissinger (2011) points that SHI is a kind of maneuvering approach connoting both the ever-changing configuration of forces and their general trends (p. 33). He also emphasizes the importance of understanding Chinese and their activities within the theoretical framework of SHI rather than merely of power, since the Chinese keep a traditional logic that the world can never be conquered therefore the best way to deal with it is to harmonize with its trends, which is part of SHI (Kissinger, 2011, p. 33).

SHI also contains the meaning of force and influence, posture, and male genitals besides the meaning of “the circumstances of their condition” stated by Laozi and Legge (2014), and the meaning of the tendency and potential energy of a situation by Sun Tzu, according to Modern Chinese Dictionary (1998, p. 1154). In terms of referring to male genitals, it can be understood as the symbolization of SHI as seal of QUAN (Jiang, 2009). In ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Rome, Greece and China, there were customs that only castrated eunuchs were allowed to serve in inner courts of the palace, and being castrated is called QU SHI (Chinese: 去勢), similar to adding the prefix of “de” before SHI in English. These castrated persons lost their symbolized SHI, but they gained a certain term of QUAN by getting very close to the most powerful persons, the family of emperors (Jiang & Huang, 2009). Such customs exemplify the edge-to-center path of power implementation on the one hand, and reveal the cultural tradition of circulation between QUAN and SHI since ancient China.

SHI in terms of force and influence has the potential, or even is sufficient to achieve a similar result of QUAN (power) in certain degrees, but it depends highly on the balance of forces, and it is exercised mostly through a down-up vertical path. Karl Marx was influential upon the 20th century but not powerful at all, while Stalin, on the other hand, was both powerful and influential due to being a man of power (Bierstedt, 1950). Such narratives correspond to the argument that Marx had some SHI but was without QUAN, while Stalin had both QUAN and SHI. Institutions or individuals possess QUAN and SHI normally in four ways.
1. Those who possess both QUAN and SHI typically hold high positions or belong to the upper classes in the society, and as a result they have the most influence on the society and also on other individuals. Such people typically apply up-down vertical paths of power implementation mainly.

2. Those who possess QUAN but who relatively lack SHI, may exercise some power, but they are also somewhat restricted by their limitations. Such people generally play edge-to-center paths when interacting with those above them and equal to them, and an up-down path while facing the lower classes.

3. Those having SHI but relatively lacking in QUAN, normally possess economic strength, social reputation and influences, and may therefore desire power primarily to protect or serve their own interests. Such people are often the most enthusiastic about accessing power, since having SHI enriches them with resources to get close to or even trade for QUAN. The edge-to-center paths are mostly exercised by this group, but the up-down paths also work in facing lower classes.

4. Those who possess neither QUAN nor SHI remain in the middle or lower classes in the society. Most of the time such people play edge-to-center paths, but down-up paths may prove very effective if collective activities can be organized or spontaneously emerge, especially if many people become engaged.

Findings and discussions
Chinese audiences are normally scattered individuals and being members of an audience for a particular program does not require that the audience members know each other, or even consume media contents at the same time or same place; therefore, a shared identity as an audience member for a specific program is hardly common for most media products. The fan community of Monkey King inherited the existing community of Chinese animation and comic fans, which has the scale of 49.84 million loyal participants and about 100 million regular members in China (iResearch, 2015a). The fans of animation, comic and game (ACG) are predominantly male (61.4%), and most were born after the 1990s (73.4%). Half of them (56.9%) play online games for more than 3 hours every day on average and are willing to pay for the derivative products of ACG and are eager to participate in related activities like cosplay, video production and fan subs (iResearch, 2015b).

Bilibili as a genesis of audience participation
Monkey King as a domestic animation awakened the dormant passion and longing of Chinese ACG fans for a master work of China, and the enthusiasm evoked in the audiences turned into participative activities to promote the popularity of the film. The firestorm of public opinion celebrating the film was initiated on bilibili.com, a China-based video sharing website themed around animation, comic and game fandom, where users submit, watch and add real-time overlaying commentary subtitles on videos, for an interactive media experience.

The triggering event was the release of the music video (MV) of Monkey King’s theme music on bilibili.com at 10:57 am on 27 June 2015, 2 weeks before the official release of the film. The song was performed by Kit Chan, a Chinese singer and actress of Singaporean nationality. Tens of thousands of commentary subtitles were added on to the MV right after its release, and this type of audience participation helped spread the excitement about the film on social media. Prior to 30 October 2015, there were 21,995 commentary subtitles, 1.148 million views and 214,000 favorites of the MV of Monkey King’s theme music on bilibili.com.
Social media worked as a transactional venue enabling the audiences to gather online to set *Monkey King* the top agenda of news and topics out of their own wish. With rocketing ticket sales and heated discussions online, *Monkey King* became a trending topic on search engines and news websites. Two days after *Monkey King*’s premiere, the first 10 recommendations on toutiao.com, one of the most popular news websites and APP featuring daily top headlines in China, all covered *Monkey King* news. *Monkey King* fans also enthusiastically discussed their views of the film on Weibo, WeChat, and douban.com.

**Weibo as the a platform for opinion and fan arts**

Weibo contributes the most to *Monkey King*’s popularity, and Sina Weibo is the best example. Sina Weibo, akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, is one of the most popular microblogging sites in China attracting over 30% of Internet users. An official account of the film set up on Sina Weibo (http://weibo.com/xiyouji3d), attracted 294,000 followers, and published 835 posts prior to 30 October 2015. Another account of *Monkey King* fans also established on Sina Weibo (http://weibo.com/dashengshuichang) attracted fewer followers (38.9 thousand) but had many more posts (5885) by 30 October 2015. The number of posts reveals that the fans of *Monkey King* were 7 times more active in posting statements about the film than were the team managing the official account, which helps demonstrate the role that audiences played in popularizing *Monkey King*.

The enthusiasm of *Monkey King*’s audiences was also exemplified by the innovative original artworks that fans posted on Weibo. The contributors called themselves Doujin (Chinese: 同人), and they created artworks derived from characters and other elements of *Monkey King*. These artistic creations included paintings, animations, music, collages, posters, cosplay and so on. The audience’s artistic creations not only demonstrated their favorable and participative attitudes, but also created endless topics for discussion and content for circulation, and in such a way, the fan appeal of *Monkey King* is extended (Figure 1).

The flow of information on Sina Weibo was characterized by a multi-level communication pattern, led by celebrity opinion leaders, official accounts of the film as advocates, and mass audiences as followers, composers, forwarders, and lobbyists (Chang, 2015). Figure 2 (Chang, 2015, P. 80) below reveals that Sina Weibo serves as a platform for opinion and innovation, and the role celebrities, the official account, and audiences play in the communication, as well as how some enthusiastic audience members work as nodes connecting the communication network.

**WeChat as the presentation venue**

WeChat facilitated the shaping and circulation of mainstream favorable opinions of *Monkey King*. WeChat is a mobile standalone text and voice messaging communication service used by about 570 million active users monthly in China. Unlike Weibo, which emphasizes public access, the information shared by users in their WeChat Moments can be seen only by those already connected with them. Public accounts registered on WeChat are normally the sources of popular content shared by normal users. By the end of 2014, the number of WeChat public accounts had reached 8 million, and the accounts of media celebrities, public intellectuals and top organizations and companies attracted most subscribers.

The flow of information on WeChat is characterized by a cycle-layer communication pattern, led by public accounts as opinion leaders and main content providers, mass audiences as subscribers as well as presenters and opinion leaders in their friend circles. The advantage in information acquisition and
Figure 1. The innovative production of *Monkey King* fans.

Figure 2. The communication of *Monkey King* topics on Weibo.
analysis, and the strength in narration and distribution ensure that media public accounts keep the dominant position of providing content related to Monkey King. The ability to control the content presented in their WeChat moments makes Monkey King fans kind of opinion leaders in their friend circles, and their enthusiasm of advocating and promoting the film causes the phenomenon that only favorable contents are noticeable on WeChat. Figure 3 (Chang, 2015, P. 81) below shows that WeChat is used as a presentation venue, and the public accounts push feeds to their subscribers while audiences choose and present actively their favorable content in their WeChat moments. Those audience members who have many friends serve as nodes connecting the cycle-layers into a communication network.

**Douban Movie as the field for debates and consultation**

Douban Movie served as both a platform for debates stimulating heated discussions online, and as consultant advising potential viewers to watch Monkey King, therefore contributing to the rocketing ticket sales of the film. As a Social Network Service (SNS) website, it allowed registered users to record information and create content related to films, books, music, and recent events and activities. Douban (Chinese: 豆瓣) has 100 million registered users and has gained the prestige of having petite bourgeoisie tastes since it was launched in 2005. Audience members visit Douban to find ratings and reviews of Monkey King before watching the movie, and come back to share their comments and reviews after watching it. Monkey King earned a high mark of 8.4 on Douban Movie, with about 229,000 audience members scoring it. Compared with WALL.E, the highest rated animation on Douban (mark 9.3), Monkey King attracted more active and participative audiences. WALL.E had only 88,900 short comments, while Monkey King had 123,000 prior to 1 November 2015. Similarly, the numbers of audience reviews also favored Monkey King (4374) versus WALL. E (1947; Figure 4).
Figure 4. Audience rating and comments on Douban Movie.
There are obvious reasons *Monkey King* became a smash hit and a critical success. First, its success is based on its high visual quality. According to Laiming Luo, a critic, the film “directly appeals to viewers’ sense of sight with loud colours, dynamic action scenes and occasionally quiet background shots in the style of traditional Chinese landscape painting.” Second, it “appeals to both children and adults, therefore my husband and I enjoy the film no less than our daughter,” one interviewee stated. The film also benefited from an integrated marketing strategy. *Monkey King: Hero is Back* was based on Cheng’en Wu’s famous novel *Journey to the West*, one of the four masterpiece novels in China. On the one hand, the film benefits from the fact that its characters and stories are familiar to audiences, the plot involves “a Chinese style heroic legend and an exciting adventure against evil and darkness in troubled times,” according to Luwei Zhang, one of the producers; on the other hand, a new image for the monkey is created and therefore the film transforms the story and adds new life to the classic. Director Xiaopeng Tian expressed the integrating strategy of the film that “we use our own traditional stories to resonate with our audiences’ emotions, and technically we tell the story by means of the West.”

What seemed most appealing to audiences were the dramatization of the narrative and the power of the legend. The film offered audiences a pure “made-in-China” animation that was comparable in quality with Japanese anime and the best animated Hollywood productions. It is said that more than 600 Chinese workers contributed to the production of the film, and the quality is so good that Andrew Mason, producer of Hollywood blockbuster *The Matrix* exclaimed after watching it in the 2015 Cannes International Film Festival: “There is no involvement of a Hollywood team? According to my understanding of the industry, the cost of such a film will not be less than 100 million U.S. dollars.” Director Tian emphasized in an interview that the creators devoted significant effort into producing a film with Chinese characteristics in emotion, expression, and aesthetics and that they did not want to imitate Western or Japanese characters. Tian also pointed out that “Monkey King is a superhero of China, and Chinese audiences appreciate it because they long for and cherish our own superhero.”

Second, *Monkey King* appealed to audiences through its sincere and idealistic attitudes of production. According to Producer Zhang,² the film makers spent 8 years making the film as perfect as they could, and at the same time, they had to overcome serious problems such as a collective riot of animators, as well as the unexpected withdrawal of financial support after one investor’s request that the script be modified was rejected. As a result, the director had to use his own money to finish the film, which left no budget for marketing or advertising to promote the film once it was completed. The dedicated yet tragic experiences of the production team evoked audiences’ sense of mission, and further stimulated their participative activities to promote the film at audiences’ own expense.

Third, the scant share of screenings scheduled for *Monkey King* in nationwide cinemas also won sympathy from audiences, therefore audience members paid attention to the schedule and box office, promoted the film passionately and even watched the film again to uplift its box office. The day *Monkey King* premiered, 10 July 2015, it was shown on only 9.08% of the screens in China, yet two other dramas released on the same day *Tiny Time 4* and *Forever Young* were shown on more than 30% of screens. Thanks to the support of audiences, however, the film’s popularity suggested that it was capable of attracting a huge box office collection. On 14 July 2015, its release was expanded to 24.51% of the nation’s screens. The production team of *Monkey King* attributed the box-office performance to positive reviews and strong word-of-mouth buzz for the movie. In the focus group, a fan shared her experience of promoting the film, including posting long positive reviews in social media, watching the film three times to better (Chinese: 刷) its box-office
performance, as well as paying for her friends and relatives to invite them to the cinema who otherwise wouldn’t come on their own expense.

Finally, an emotional resonance between the audiences and the film was established in many ways. The story of the monkey evokes the memory of Chinese moviegoers, who in their childhood have looked up to the Monkey King as a defiant rebel against traditional patriarchal values. Also, the unconventional long-face monkey narrated the life of a sorehead, middle-age guy, who with inspiration from a child, found his true self and became a hero again. Such a story spoke directly to the heart of audiences. Therefore, when the Monkey King unleashed his full strength, viewers felt as excited as if they had just experienced it themselves. Again, the crowd funding method used to solve the problem of fund shortage turned out to be an opportunity to touch the audiences’ hearts (Yang, 2015). In all, 89 private investors joined the program in November 2014 with ¥7.8 million in total, and each of them received ¥250 thousand from the sale of the film and also saw their children’s names shown on screen when the film ended. The 109 children were called crowd-founding producers which showed that their support was appreciated by the production team. This caring behavior also “enhanced the impression of sincerity and idealism that audiences had of the film.”3

Inspired by the rich and appealing narrative and beautiful visual images of the film, and empowered by the access to new forms of social media, the diverse and scattered audience members of Monkey King helped build and sustain excitement for the highly creative and artistic production. Hundreds of celebrities promoted the film voluntarily on social media posting online endorsements. These figures included Yun Ma, founder and chairman of China’s e-commerce giant Alibaba, and Xiaoming Huang, a famous actor. Millions of grassroots audience members identified themselves not only as fans but also followers and cheerleaders of the film. They self-identified as zi lai shui (literally tap-water, Chinese: 自来水), which figuratively means, Internet mercenaries willing to advertise the film on social media at their own expense. These self-identified spokespersons revealed the desire of the audiences to participate in a community of shared identity and shared purpose. Other terms were also invited, such as Amway (Chinese: 安利) used as a verb referring to promote the film enthusiastically. These terms further work as code signals to enhance the identification of the community as well as distinguish themselves from others.

Audiences are relatively disadvantaged groups in the power dynamics of films, since the production and distribution of films are controlled by administrations, production teams and cinemas in China, who have QUAN (power) to decide what audiences will see and when they will see it. Scattered audiences normally have neither QUAN nor SHI, but a community of audience members acting together, such as zi lai shui, may gain SHI, which may empower them to alter the situation. Zi lai shui as a community, have large number of active members in the group with similar goals, who consider promoting the film an important issue. Social media facilitate immediate communication and opinion sharing, and thus provided a venue for zi lai shui to stir up heated discussions among people with favorable opinions of Monkey King, and it inspired those community members to identify with the film. In such a way, zi lai shui wear all three factors having the potential to increase people’s likelihood to respond to power: number (large scale of fans), immediacy (immediate communication via social media) and strength (promotional activities), respectively (Latané, 1981).

The power of QUAN and SHI were exemplified by the social media comments posted by the audiences (Chinese: 参众) of Monkey King (Huang, 2014). Monkey King’s fan community, zi lai shui, adopted both edge-to-center (those who possess SHI but who are relatively lack of QUAN), and down-up (those who possess neither QUAN nor SHI remain in the middle or lower classes in
the society) strategy in the process of power implementation to promote their favorite film and lift up *Monkey King*’s box office. *Monkey King* fans mainly apply the edge-to-center pattern in the virtual society, which are mainly social media such as Bilibili, Weibo, WeChat and Douban. They participate in discussions, circulate and comment on posts, and even create film-related fan arts. The audiences enjoy a relatively equal position to official accounts, celebrities and media on social media, therefore they exercise the edge-to-center path to gain power to express their opinions and make *Monkey King* a box-office winner. In physical world, audiences have no choice but follow the down-up paths, since status is a kind of normatively defined social power (Weber, 1914). They formulate SHI by building up communities and shaping public opinion, and if they possess overwhelming numerical strength they can gain influence empower and negotiate with those who hold the power, and finally, the audiences achieve the goal that *Monkey King* gain more share of screening schedule and even an extension of running period in cinemas in China.

**Conclusion**

Using cutting-edge computer-generated imagery technology, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* tells a traditional Chinese story. The story of the film production is no less dramatic and attractive than the film itself, and their combination channels tremendous consumer power. Individual audience members identify themselves with the publicity and popularity of the animation, because they consider the film a masterpiece and even a signal of vitalizing the domestic animation. The dormant passion and longing of Chinese ACG fans for a marvel work of China was awakened, therefore casual audiences turned into willing converts enamored with the visual and emotional allure of the film.

Using social media, the scattered audience members created a united identification of zi lai shui and acquired SHI, an overwhelming numerical strength of adherents who have achieved a profound shared influence and a unique form of power. Their fervent persuasion hyped the film’s box-office income and made it both a smash hit and a critical success. Such social capital empowers the audience members to exercise the edge-to-center and down-up paths of power implementation so that they gain QUAN to change the unfavorable situation of small share of screening schedule and short run in cinemas.

The audience activities and community building of the film *Monkey King* reveal that Chinese people, facilitated by social media, can organize to form SHI and further gain power (QUAN), therefore they may have the opportunity to change the fate of things they care, but normally they might not be able to have a say on them. Such audience participation may contribute to facilitating a richer and more varied cultural life in China in the future, but only with a trigger like *Monkey King*, an active and organized community like the one of ACG fans, and most importantly a social media environment facilitating the gathering and exchanging of information and opinions to form SHI, hence to wield QUAN (power).

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**

1. Interviewee Ms Zhao, on 17 July 2015.
2. Interviewed on 21 July 2015.
3. Interviewee Ms Lu, on 20 July 2015.
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