

Rewriting the 'Sick Man' History: Imagining Chinese Masculinity in the Contemporary Military Action Genre

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Abstract : The recent Chinese military action blockbusters, notably known as, Wolf Warrior/Zhan Lang (2015), Operation Mekong/Mei gong he xing dong (2016), Warrior 2/Zhan Lang 2 (2017) and Operation Red Sea/Hong hai xing dong (2018), have achieved phenomenal box-office successes and in particular, Wolf Warrior 2 became China's highest-grossing film of all time. However, their yearly presence tends to show a paradigmatic shift from China's primacy of wen manliness (soft) to wu masculinity (hard). With the increasing cinematic exposure of a more muscular image manifesting in both the Chinese heroic soldiers and China itself as a rising global power, the backlash of the Chinese public against the proliferation of the feminized masculinity influenced by the 'pretty-boy' pop-culture and China's harder approach to the current Sino-US tensions have correspondingly emerged and continued to brew. Chinese masculinity imagined in these films is one of the key factors that enable a gendered interpretation of the correlation between the Chinese on-screen fantasy and off-screen reality, that is, China's public and official discourse about the hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic masculinity as well as China's international profile on cinematic appearance and in today's Sino-US relation. By reading closely at the four megahits as visual-audio texts with Chinese masculinity studies by Kam Louie and Geng Song, this paper attempts to examine the Chinese construction of manliness with historical accounts and argue why and how the recurrent emphasis of hard/military masculinity (wu) on screen are viewed as China's contemporary rewriting of the 'sick-man' history in the film form. Through this investigation, the paper finds that the rewriting of the 'sick-man' history in the cinematic world through heroic brawny soldiers comes to resonate a collective anxiety of China in countering the real-life increasing feminized masculinity on the public appearance, particularly on the male celebrities. In addition, the superpower fantasy about China illuminates a hypermasculine imaginary of China as a global rising power and this coincidentally echoes China's current tougher diplomatic strategy tackling the Sino-US trade war, South China sea dispute and Huawei-US lawsuits.

Keywords : Chinese masculinity, Chinese military action film, feminized masculinity, manhood and nationhood, sick man of Asia

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