China's Push for Greater Influence in the Popular Culture Arena: The *Ip Man* Saga

Jukka Aukia

Published online: 27 Feb 2022.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

China's Push for Greater Influence in the Popular Culture Arena: The *Ip Man* Saga

Jukka Aukia

University of Turku

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical analysis of four kung fu films that were co-produced by Hong Kong and Mainland China and depict the legend of Ip Man, Bruce Lee's teacher. It discusses different representations in the *Ip Man* saga, and argues that while othering Japan and the West, the Chinese self is depicted in the saga as a benevolent but powerful actor. The texts of the films are thus found to echo past and present Mainland identity narratives and to be connected to the Mainland's push for soft power. The article links popular culture to politics by showing how political narratives are made attractive at an everyday level, thus contributing to the literature on identity and soft power.

Introduction

The latest instalment in a film saga that was co-produced by Hong Kong and Mainland China, *Ip Man 4: The Final Fight*, was released internationally in December 2019. The films represent a popular culture genre in Mainland China and Hong Kong and portray the legend of the martial artist Ip Man, who is famous for having tutored Bruce Lee. The first film in the franchise, *Ip Man* (2008), won Best Film at the 2009 Hong Kong Film Awards. Its sequels, *Ip Man 2* (2010) and *Ip Man 3* (2015), were also well received in Hong Kong, as was *Ip Man 4* (2019), which went on to break box office records in Mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore.

In Hong Kong, however, where many of the events of the saga take place, *Ip Man 4* also faced a backlash upon its release. Pro-democracy protesters urged people to boycott the film and accused the producer, Raymond Wong, and the main star, Donnie Yen, of pro-Beijing sentiments (Chu, 2019). While the protest movements of recent years have hampered relations between Hong Kong and Mainland China, *Ip Man 4* was seen by the protesters as epitomising pro-China attitudes, in particular that of the local business community, which has courted the Mainland. Given that the earlier films were well received in Hong Kong, this reaction of the protesters showed clear ambivalence among Hong Kongers towards the saga.

Taking this ambivalence as a starting point, I critically discuss the four *Ip Man* films in this article. While it is the actions and statements of Wong and Yen that provoked the response of the pro-democracy activists, the discussion shows that the political

CONTACT Jukka Aukia ✉ jukka.aukia@utu.fi

inclinations of the production team also manifest in the identity narratives of the films. This culminates in the final film of the saga. In highlighting the dark side of the liberal West and portraying it as racist, *Ip Man 4* can be seen to suggest that Western-oriented pro-democracy activism naively places trust in the wrong side of the conflict.

That said, the nationalist discourse adopted by the *Ip Man* saga is not a modern invention: long before the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), kung fu provided a platform for presenting nationalistic sentiments in China. Along with other aspects of traditional culture such as Confucianism, however, the tradition of kung fu was banned in the Mainland during the Mao era. Thus, the current prominent position of the genre in the present-day Party-controlled Chinese popular culture field signifies its re-inclusion in the state's soft power repertoire. Interestingly, the *Ip Man* saga carries on the nationalist discourse of the 1970s kung fu films, and blends this with officially accepted present-day nationalism. In fact, the heritage of othering China's traditional enemies and polishing the Chinese Self resonates well with the officially accepted present-day cultural soft power canon of the Mainland.

The concept of soft power, which can be understood as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' (Nye, 1990), has gained popularity within the CCP's propaganda bureaucracy (Callahan, 2010). However, the CCP's soft power efforts in the West have not done much to improve the perceived image of China among a wider audience (e.g., Li & Wong, 2018). Indeed, reinforcing its own legitimacy through domestic and diasporic cultural coherence appears to be a more relevant soft-power goal for the CCP. In my view, Hong Kong and Taiwan present a soft-power dilemma for the CCP, as local populations often reject Mainland nationalism in favour of Western-derived liberal identities. As my discussion shows, by putting in place industry mechanisms, the Party-state has created circumstances that encourage the popular culture industry in both Hong Kong and the Mainland to tap into and reinforce officially accepted Party identity narratives. This links policy and popular culture on the practical level.

In terms of theory, I have built on International Relations (IR) studies that highlight the significance of popular culture and its ability to frame, maintain and reinforce political conditions by making them everyday (e.g., Fey et al., 2016; Schulzke, 2017). I have also linked recent post-structural IR studies that connect soft power and public diplomacy to identity construction as a discursive phenomenon (e.g., Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi, 2018; Pan et al., 2020). These studies seek distance from a resource-impact based approach to soft power, in favour of an identity and narrative-related under-standing. Here, national identity is understood as centring on perceptions of the national Self, and identities are seen as being constructed relationally; the construction of the national Self is based on highlighting differences to Others (Gustafsson, 2016). Desirable identities are created mostly through in-group cohesion and out-group demonisation (Huddy et al., 2013, 15). Building on this body of work, my aim is to highlight how the texts of the films create in-group cohesion and out-group demonisa-tion by making identity representations commonplace, thus building attraction and soft power.

To begin, I survey the contexts of the analysis: the validity of using popular culture texts for political analysis, the representation of Chinese tradition and nationalism in martial arts cinema, and the attention to culture and soft power in current CCP policy.

Following this, the narratives of the films are presented from an identity perspective. I conclude by discussing the value of revitalised kung fu to the Mainland's soft power push, as well as the multivalent meanings of popular culture texts.

Popular Culture and Politics

Several IR studies have focused on the relations between popular culture and the state. Fey et al. (2016), for instance, introduced the relevance of popular culture texts, their meanings and their authors' motives for IR. Popular culture, they found, has the potential to produce common sense and may thus sustain, create or challenge social orders. Similarly, Grayson et al. (2009) have discussed popular culture as a potential site where identities are created and communicated. Popular culture, including cinema, is likely to play a role in negotiating and constructing identities, and thus sustaining and creating social, cultural and political conditions (see also Weldes, 2003).

According to Fey et al. (2016), there exists an 'intertext' between what they termed the 'first order' and the 'second order' – namely, the real world and the fictional world (Fey et al., 2016, 348–365). This directs one 'to view the signifying and lived practices of popular culture as "texts" that can be understood as political and as sites where politics take place' (Grayson et al., 2009, 158). It also allows for the problematisation of the relation between the 'popular' of popular culture as a producer of national identities and the nation-state as a political actor. This dynamic includes those discursive practices within popular culture that could potentially reinforce elite identity narratives by relocating their apparent emergence to the people (Grayson et al., 2009, 157–158).

A reasonable argument can therefore be made that the success of US popular culture has helped American values intrude on the global 'common sense'. Concurrently, the US film and television industry has received considerable scholarly attention over the years. Among the various genres of Hollywood cinema, present-day political science studies have paid the most attention to science fiction and fantasy. Themes and products include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Davies, 2010), *Doctor Who* (Dixit, 2002), zombies (Drezner, 2014), *Battlestar Galactica* (Fey et al., 2016), *Game of Thrones* (Clapton & Shepherd, 2016) and *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* (McEvoy-Levy, 2018). Thus, the social, political and cultural influences of US cinema and television have been well documented. De Zoysa and Newman (2002) have specifically shown how American film has become an essential part of the early childhood socialisation process in many parts of the world. In this way, American values, basic assumptions, idioms and subtexts have become part of the global consciousness.

While the bulk of academic political science attention has been devoted to Western popular culture, specialists on China have focused on the few internationally recognised Chinese blockbusters. The most notable films to be analysed have been the martial arts movies *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Hero* (2002). Both productions elicited academic controversy over the meaning of 'Chinese-ness' in the world and the state's role in defining it. To illustrate, Eperjesi (2004) has found *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to be the construction of an identity that is dispersed (territory) but integrated (ethnicity) in forming an imagined community of Chinese-ness. In contrast, Chan (2004) has pointed out that while the film builds an integrated image of China, it does this by criticising traditional Chinese culture, including patriarchal hegemony and filial piety.

Regarding *Hero*, Rawnsley (2007) maintains that the film questions one's right to control social and political narratives in China. In addition, Larson (2014) has argued that *Hero* criticises culturalism by implying a lack of authenticity in attempting a unified and homogeneous Chinese culture. Whether either of these films should be interpreted as mere Chinese state propaganda or not appears to remain unresolved in the literature (see De Souza, 2012).

However, whether popular culture should be seen as state propaganda or not misses the mark somewhat. Priya Dixit (2002, 290) sums up this insight in arguing that the focus of popular culture-oriented political science should not be testing whether it causes policy outcomes, but noting how similar representations are present in both international politics and popular culture. Hence, the focus should be on meaning-making and identity-building by showing how these may intrude on the 'common sense' of the audience. In other words, the aim is to look for narratives, arguments and stereotypes of identity-building and show how popular culture has the potential to make them 'everyday'.

Developments in Kung Fu Cinema

Before the emergence of cinema, martial arts played a central role in defining Chinese national identity. For example, against the backdrop of colonialism, practising kung fu during World War I was seen to achieve national salvation (Li, 2001). This view was further promoted, amid booming nationalism and militarism, after the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912. The common belief was that practising kung fu promoted traditional culture (Lu et al., 2014; Wu & Chan, 2007).

Therefore, martial arts have traditionally been a nationalistic channel through which Chinese people have pursued unification. Consequently, through the emergence of cinema, Chinese nationalism has been portrayed and reinforced through kung fu movies by the 'maintenance and reinvention of nationhood' (Lu & Yeh, 2007). Furthermore, the martial arts film genre is seen as a framework in which the 'core values of Chinese tradition' are preserved, and a 'sense of nationalism' is stressed (Lu et al., 2014, 331).

In the aftermath of World War II, kung fu movies were produced mainly in Shanghai and Guangdong. After the ascendance to power of the CCP in the 1950s, and particularly after the Cultural Revolution, production moved to Hong Kong (Fu, 2000a). In fact, during the Mao era (1949–1976), kung fu movies were banned by the CCP, along with other forms of traditional culture, such as Confucianism, that the Party interpreted as representing feudal superstition and opposing communist values (Coonan, 2011).

From the time of the Sino–Japanese War in the 1930s, and continuing through the Mao era, migrants from the Mainland flocked to Hong Kong to escape poverty and political turmoil. Thus, Hong Kong acquired the resources to continue the production of the kung fu films that had originated on the Mainland. However, unlike the more cautious earlier generation of migrants from the Mainland, the next generation was vocal in articulating criticism towards the colonial system (Fu, 2000a, 71). Therefore, from the late 1960s onward, building on Mainland nationalism, kung fu movies produced in Hong Kong began to form a new cultural imagination and popular nationalism. Many of these films were adapted from popular *wuxia* novels (depicting 'martial heroes') published in the 1920s and 1930s. The plots were usually set in the socio-historical

context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Scenes of Chinese martial artists fighting Japanese and Westerners became iconic (Lu et al., 2014). Thus began the 'golden period' of kung fu movies, which inherited the nationalistic and post-colonial mentality of the Mainland (Teo, 2016).

Two popular culture figures in particular dominated the kung fu scene in Hong Kong during this era: the real-life figure of Wong Fei-hung, played by different actors in the 1950s, and Bruce Lee in the 1970s. The latter eventually helped kung fu achieve world fame. For the communist Mainland, however, the Cold War-era kung fu genre of Hong Kong represented Western decadence. Despite the kung fu movies carrying on Mainland nationalism, they were seen as the products of the decadent colony of the West (Fu, 2000b, 208). Mainland interest in the Hong Kong movie industry was revitalised only after the economic opening up in the 1970s, and the signing of the joint declaration between the British and the Mainland in 1984. This revival of interest was influenced by the central government's agenda to control Chinese popular culture industries (Keane, 2010). As a result, Mainland audiences could only start watching the films of Bruce Lee in the 1980s.

The local film industry in Hong Kong had to renegotiate its relations with the Mainland and the central government after the signing of the joint declaration in 1984. The Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) provided the defining framework for these relations. Signed in 2003, the CEPA functions as a mechanism under which Hong Kong filmmakers are motivated to advance CCP soft power through co-productions with the Mainland: Chinese-language films produced in Hong Kong gain wider access to the Mainland market, while Mainland filmmakers gain business access to Hong Kong.

Despite the CEPA, however, the active censorship on the Mainland has influenced Hong Kong's film industry, including kung fu cinema. According to Sala (2003), the CEPA continues to state that the CCP Department of Censorship and Propaganda retains the right to censor any film or parts of a film that it deems necessary. Instead, filmmakers in Hong Kong seem to follow existing guidelines and self-censor themes such as politics and homosexuality. Moreover, under the CEPA, while there are no restrictions on where a film is set, the narrative or the main character must relate to the Mainland. Another reason for censoring co-productions has been excessively dark and bleak messages (see May & Ma, 2014). According to Peng and Keane (2019), this has led to a situation where, to make higher profits from distribution and exhibition on the Mainland, many Hong Kong directors and producers have 'gone north' to gain greater revenues by sacrificing creative freedom.

Revitalising Traditional Culture

The motivation of the CCP to nationalise the popular culture industry has been to use it as a soft power tool with which to counterbalance the cultural influence of the US (Wang, 2003, 46–72). The underlying assumption, which is prevalent among Chinese policymakers, is that, without a strong state-led commercial media, China would be unable to influence global public opinion (Aukia, 2019). In fact, China's understanding of soft power is practically synonymous with cultural attractiveness (Edney, 2012).

In 2009, China launched a media 'out-going' campaign. The goal was to increase 'China's voice' internationally, with a budget estimated at $US6 billion (Hu & Ji, 2012). Keane (2010, 130) shows that the 2009 reforms of the cultural, media and creative industries, including the film sector, became a central factor in the Chinese state's enthusiasm for soft power. Earlier, Zhang et al. (2007, 37) detailed how the state was increasingly allowing private investors to enter the Mainland film industry and thereby compete with Hollywood productions.

Using popular culture, the CCP sees the popularisation of traditional culture as enhancing Chinese national identity. Thus, the central strategy of present-day CCP-backed cinema is to draw on traditional Chinese culture (Su, 2010, 320–321). Historic films have been given the Party's official blessing, as historical themes are perceived to be politically and financially safe as well as commercially successful (Su, 2010, 319–321). In contrast to the bans of the Mao era, traditional culture is today a key element in the CCP's international and domestic branding of China. Thus, traditional kung fu is a good fit with the Mainland's soft power push.

However, in addition to drawing heavily on the historical popular imaginary, the CCP also uses historical narratives of victimhood in its public diplomacy communications (Wang, 2018). The aim is to construct a shared identity through seeking compensation for humiliation caused by bullying Japanese and Westerners. These narratives 'help' the world to understand the Chinese story, including the 'one hundred years of humiliation' inflicted by the colonial powers (Lams, 2018). Therefore, kung fu cinema, which presents an imaginary version of traditional Chinese culture, including Confucian virtues and foreign controversies, also fills this soft power role well. To illustrate this point further, according to Teo (2016), the conventions of the kung fu genre dictate that a patriotic protagonist displays chivalrous behaviour and pursuit of righteousness. The hero of the film is expected to follow cultural nationalism, including cultural norms such as patriarchy and a Confucian ethos mixed with the Buddhist principles of tolerance, virtue and patience. The nationalistic hero also has concern for the underdog, the oppressed and the needy. Moreover, the political image of the kung fu hero is highlighted over his image as a martial artist (Teo, 2016, 57–71). The hero does not practise kung fu just for the sake of it; rather, he fights with moral righteousness as much as physical skill. As a result, the Confucian essence of the hero enables the character to be a universal Chinese hero, erasing the boundaries between Cantonese and Mandarin in battling the salient enemies of China: Japan and the West.

The current Chinese cultural narratives can be considered what Edward Friedman (2008) refers to as 'misremembering the past'. In these narratives, the condemnation of traditional culture during the Mao era is absent. Importantly, adding to the Mao-era narrative of victory over foreign imperialism, the current identity narratives also emphasise past humiliation and victimhood at the hands of Japan and the West (Friend & Thayer, 2017). As Peter Gries (2005) argues, the point of the identity narratives that revitalise traditional culture and past humiliation is to polish the in-group and redefine Chinese cultural superiority. In addition to presenting the traditional culture imaginary, including controversies with foreigners, kung fu cinema's depictions of universal Chinese heroes has the potential to contribute to the polishing of the in-group and the political elites, as I discuss below.

The *Ip Man* Texts

As indicated above, the intention of this article is to approach the texts from a political identity-building perspective. Those aspects of the narratives that concern the Self are presented first, followed by those that relate to the Other.

Narratives of the Self

Situated in pre-World War II southern China, the narrative of the first *Ip Man* film depicts the character of Ip Man as a handsome, wealthy and well-respected martial arts practitioner who has a beautiful family and middle-class lifestyle in the southern Chinese city of Foshan. When a local master challenges him to a duel, Ip first offers the man dinner, then after a shared smoking session, defeats him easily. Upon his victory, viewers learn that Ip respects his opponents; he allows the beaten master to save face, saying, 'Thank you for taking it easy on me'. In a related incident, Ip embarrasses a Kuomintang police officer by disarming him. He notes that 'We martial artists are energetic and loud, but not uncivilised'. The idyllic harmony of everyday life in Foshan is disrupted by a group of reckless and dirty men from northern China who arrive to challenge the local martial arts masters. After contemplating, hesitating and expressing unwillingness to fight, Ip is left with no choice but to face the challengers, proving his superiority in both fighting skill and moral conduct. By this point, viewers recognise that Ip is superior in martial arts and that he gives spontaneous lessons in both fighting and morals to both his fellow citizens of Foshan and Chinese people in general.

While the second film follows the same narrative pattern, the events are situated in 1950s post-war Hong Kong. There, Ip struggles to succeed with his new martial arts school, while the directors of competing local schools are unconvinced about the new-comer. The text re-introduces the villainous northerner from the first film, now an ally and a morally improved man because of Ip's tutelage. Upon learning of the corrupt business dealings with foreigners of a leading local martial artist (Master Hung), Ip shames him, saying, 'You chose to compromise with the foreigners'. This leads Ip to a conflict with the established Hong Kong martial arts masters; after much physical and moral back-and-forth among them, mutual respect is achieved.

In the text of the third *Ip Man* film, the viewer meets Ip in 1959 in Hong Kong, where he is now an established martial arts teacher and a respected celebrity. Bruce Lee is introduced in the first scenes, but then left out of the narrative, which centres on the school of Ip's son. A Western real-estate developer named Frank, who is played by Mike Tyson, plans to take over the school. To this end, he uses his local Chinese cronies to scare the school master. Eventually, they must face Ip, who as a concerned father is – again – forced to resort to violence. In the end, the main problematics of the third film centre on the question of whose kung fu is more authentic: Ip's or that of a Hong Kong rival who previously worked for the corrupt foreigner to deprive Chinese children of their school. The crucial point of the film is when the fight is made public by the media, who frame the duel as a fight over 'who represents the true spirit of kung fu'. The question is resolved in the final fight. Ip is again reluctant to take part, as he is a pacifist by nature, but his dying wife signs him up for the fight.

The fourth *Ip Man* film transfers the above narrative theme to San Francisco as the hero embarks on a journey to the US to find a new school for his son. In San Francisco's Chinatown, he meets local Chinese kung fu masters with whom he must – of course – fight. The Chinese community in San Francisco is displeased that Ip's pupil (none other than Bruce Lee) is teaching kung fu to foreigners, who might misuse the powers of Chinese culture, as is literally stated in the text. Typical of the narrative pattern of all the *Ip Man* films, Ip gains the respect of the local Chinese masters after beating them in both the physical and moral realms.

Narratives of the Other

In addition to enhancing the identity of the main protagonist, the texts also centre on othering foreigners. According to the pattern displayed in all four texts, once the inner disputes among the Chinese actors are settled, they move to the background of the narratives, and the focus shifts to conflicts with foreigners. In the first film, this takes place through the arrival of the Japanese occupation forces. Ip is deprived of his home, which is turned into a Japanese army headquarters, then forced to seek work in a dirty factory. Ip soon finds out that a Japanese general is coercing local martial artists who are working at the factory to partake in his personal fighting games. After the deaths of two of his comrades in the Japanese fighting pit, Ip feels it necessary to take part and defeats 10 Japanese *karateka* (a practitioner of karate, a Japanese martial art). It is no coincidence that the scenes with Japanese fighting games are presented in muted, almost black and white, tones. It sets a dark and inhumane tone, differentiating the fighting scenes against the Japanese from those between the Chinese.

Ip's performance brings him to the attention of a Japanese general, who demands that Ip teach kung fu to his soldiers. For Ip, this is out of the question, and the only alternative is to duel with the general himself. As he is being escorted to the duel, Ip contemplates his choice: 'Chinese martial arts are Confucian in spirit, the virtue is benevolence. You, the Japanese, will never understand, because you abuse military power, you don't deserve to learn Chinese martial arts'. Ip beats the general in the public fight, at the end of which he is shot by the general's right-hand man in a very unsportsmanlike fashion. The film concludes with a badly wounded Ip barely escaping Foshan for Hong Kong with his family, and the epilogue uncritically binds the fictional events of the film to the real-life Ip Man and Bruce Lee, noting that Ip 'used his fists to unite the Chinese'.

In the second film, while watching the Chinese settling their disputes civilly, the viewer is again introduced to a common enemy, this time in the form of a British boxing champion who arrives in Hong Kong. From the outset, the British are depicted as loud, crude and corrupt, and the boxer, named Twister, makes his racist sentiments instantly clear, saying, in reference to a Chinese police officer (Sergeant Po), 'Will somebody get this yellow piece of fat out of here?' Twister is a tall, muscular and masculine Caucasian, which is a direct contrast to the elegant, short and almost feminine Chinese. Moreover, Twister is not convinced by Chinese martial arts, and asks, 'What is this pantomime, why are they dancing and screaming?' His insults force Master Hung to challenge him to a duel. Hung makes his case for agreeing to the fight, uttering what become his last words: 'I can't let that foreign devil insult Chinese martial arts'. Viewers are exposed to horrific violence when Twister brutally kills Hung in the fight, after which the theme of the

narrative explicitly turns into Chinese versus Western boxing. Again, after initially refusing to fight, Ip is forced to take on the much larger and stronger opponent to avenge the death of his former Chinese opponent (Hung), with whom the inner dispute had earlier been settled civilly.

The match between the Chinese and Western styles of boxing is, of course, unfair. As the fighting progresses, the Westerners conspire to change the rules, and kicking is deemed to be against accepted norms and standards. In the end, Ip is, nonetheless, victorious, and the film closes with him delivering a lecture on noble morals to the international audience of the fight: 'By fighting, I am not trying to prove Chinese martial arts are better than Western boxing. What I really want to say is that, though people may have different status in life, everybody's dignity is the same'. In the epilogue, a young Bruce Lee makes an appearance, visiting Ip. Again, the overall impression the viewer is left with is that the fictional film narrative is seamlessly connected to real-world events.

While the third film centres on infighting between the Chinese over the right to rule Hong Kong, the fourth film returns to the same pattern of narrative as the first two films, but transferred to San Francisco's Chinatown. Again, initial disputes among the Chinese recede into the background when a true conflict arises. First, Ip must defend a Chinese girl from racist bullying at school, and then he must defend Chinese people from racist US marines. As it turns out, the marines study Japanese-style karate as hand-to-hand combat, and they refuse to include Chinese kung fu in their curriculum. In an unforgettable scene, a racist US marine hazes Chinese soldiers while the wooden practice dummy of Wingchun is being burned in the background, creating a clear allusion to the Ku Klux Klan. After much fighting and racism are displayed by the marines (towards both Chinese and African Americans), Ip proves the supremacy of Chinese culture and kung fu in a duel with the leading marine.

The Politics of Representation

While the above discussion established the main elements of my reading (that is, the self-othering narratives), other frameworks have also been applied to the *Ip Man* texts. Most notably, for Siu Keung Cheung and Wing Sang Law (2017), tacit displays of Hong Kong identities explain the equally positive reception of the first two films in Hong Kong and the Mainland. Highlighting the ambivalence towards the films in Hong Kong, their argument is that in addition to representing overt Mainland nationalism, the first two films also covertly question it and cater to Hong Kong identities.

The argumentation of Cheung and Law (2017) largely concerns hero representations; in their view, a typical nationalistic hero is a deeply moral character with a strong sense of right and wrong 'in any political nationalist narrative' (Cheung & Law, 2017, 165). Furthermore, for Cheung and Law (2017), the mundane character of Ip downplays representations of patriotic heroism in favour of the everyday family affairs that occupy the protagonist's time. This, in their view, is against the conventions of the patriotic hero in Chinese cinema, who typically struggles tirelessly for his country. Moreover, the economic self-interest rather than any self-sacrifice of the Chinese characters in the first two *Ip Man* films, according to Cheung and Law (2017, 165), is an indication of the humanistic message of the films rather than a patriotic one. Finally, for Cheung and Law (2017, 166), the relative narrative flexibility of the texts is an indication of both the

realistic and dramatised dimensions of the films. What they deem completely realistic depictions of migrant mentality and hardship in Hong Kong are, for them, representative of pro-Hong Kong attitudes in the texts.

Following these lines of argumentation, I have divided my own discussion of the political significance of the films in this article into three sub-sections: *hero representations, colonial representations* and *narrative flexibilities*, respectively.

Hero representations

I start my discussion with an examination of how the main protagonist is depicted in the saga. Here, in my view, the key question is what a hero represents to different audiences. My personal outlook is Western, and maybe for this reason, arguments based on the understanding that a typical patriotic hero should be flawless are not in my view satisfactory. On the contrary, a patriotic popular culture hero is often flawed. And what is more, this flawed hero usually comes to redeem himself through hardship and sometimes self-sacrifice. For Joseph Campbell (1949), this type of narrative structure is famously represented in what he called the hero's journey. In the case of Ip, while he does experience hardship during the Japanese occupation and gains insight into the everyday realities of Hong Kong, we do not see any significant change in his character. These minor narrative fluctuations are not representative of Campbell's hero's journey. Therefore, the *Ip Man* saga appears to represent not a narrative of personal growth, but a narrative of continuation where the stable attributes of the hero manifest when required.

A related question concerns the representation of Ip as a family man. While it is indeed interesting that the films devote a considerable amount of time showcasing Ip's affection for his family, an argument can be made that, in these representations, there is nothing out of the ordinary. Examples of heroes who engage in mundane daily life amid patriotic struggle can be found in Chinese cinema. In *The Red Cliff* (2008), for instance, the protagonists toil with mundane issues despite the northern threat. Liu Bei keeps himself busy by making straw sandals, while Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang help with the birth of a horse and spend an evening celebrating. Interestingly, secondary characters question the necessity of these everyday pursuits, but the protagonists are resolute; routine tasks and celebrations take precedence for the heroes. Therefore, it would not seem out of place for the patriotic character of Ip Man to spend time on family and everyday affairs. On the contrary, it is his most recognisable human trait. Indeed, protagonists in popular culture are seldom perfect, and they are placed in everyday situations so viewers can identify with them. As discussed above, popular culture taps into, negotiates and reinforces identities precisely through the mechanism of making them commonplace and everyday (see Grayson et al., 2009). Even superheroes run into everyday struggles; this enables audiences to identify with them.

A depiction of Ip as a family-oriented and morally flawless hero appears thus self-evidently a nationalistic representation. In fact, the depiction of a morally flawless patriotic hero as a family man in effect represents non-liberal values. In addition to the Ip Man texts, we can observe this in the Chinese patriotic films *Wandering Earth* (2019), *Wolf Warrior* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017). In all these films, considerable time is devoted to the protagonist's family and romantic affairs. Conservative, middle-class

values are central to the authoritarian worldview since the presence of family gives the patriotic hero a reason for sacrifice. In the *Ip Man* saga, we can furthermore observe representations of a 'wise father' who disciplines his passions and serves as an upholder of the in-group status quo. Ip Man is also forced to act as a 'brave hero', demonstrating the vitality of Chinese culture and defending the in-group in battling the more physical (salient) foreign enemies, despite his self-professed pacifism. While the texts portray the main protagonist as a typical virtuous Confucian leader (self-discipline, patience, tolerance), through secondary characters, they also communicate acceptable cultural behaviour for subordinates and family members (filial piety, patriarchalism, loyalty).

In fact, to a greater extent than the heroes of *Wolf Warrior* and *Wandering Earth*, the representation of Ip Man as a benevolent but powerful hero is like the identity narratives that the CCP leadership applies in its rhetoric. Chinese president Xi Jinping, for instance, often uses Confucian quotes to illustrate his approach to governance, and self-discipline is mentioned frequently in his media communications. He wishes to be seen as a benevolent, paternal leader who inspires Chinese people to embrace traditional values, as seen in a speech in which Xi depicted himself as the father figure of the Chinese nation and said he considered China to be his family (see Wang, 2018). At the same time, Xi also likes to present himself as a powerful military leader (see Lee Myers, 2018). In seeking to portray a particular sense of self-identity, Xi often describes China as both strong and beautiful, underlining both China's traditional culture and present-day modernity while also focusing on historical tragedies and present-day cultural confidence (He, 2017; see also Communist Party of China, 2018, 10). Drawing heavily on China's past confrontations with Japan and Western colonial powers, China's historical experiences are often presented in Xi's rhetoric as traumatic and having led to present-day Mandarin exceptionalism (see Huang, 2013).

By elevating the character of Ip Man to a moral pedestal, the texts of the films speak directly to Mandarin exceptionalism. The Chinese Self is civilised, benevolent and powerful. Ip Man represents leadership that does not resort to violence except when forced to. Bridging the gap between the kung fu ethos and the CCP's official Party line, China's premier news programme (*Xinwen Lianbo*) outlined a similar foreign policy doctrine: 'China doesn't want to fight but is not afraid to fight'. While this is clearly a reference to China's peaceful development, all of this suggests that the CCP, like the semi-fictional hero representation in the *Ip Man* saga, fends off the image of an aggressor and portrays itself as a peaceful but powerful military force.

Colonial representations

More so than flawless personal characters, conflict about fulfilling personal versus collective agendas is common for popular culture heroes. In fact, heroes are often torn between meeting personal and patriotic goals. In *Star Wars* (1977), for instance, the character of Han Solo struggles between striving for personal financial benefit and fighting for the in-group (the Rebel Alliance). In the end, both Han Solo and Ip Man set aside their personal interests and choose to fight for the patriotic cause. Moreover, representations of concern for personal survival do not in themselves indicate that *Ip Man* films have a humanistic and anti-war message. Indeed, anti-war texts tend also to address the humanism of the opponent, which is certainly lacking in the *Ip Man* saga.

Humanistic representations of antagonists can be found in such anti-war films as *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), and even in more traditional non-Hollywood war films such as *Cross of Iron* (1977).

That said, the ways in which colonial representations manifest in the *Ip Man* saga are relevant in discussing the political significance of the films. The obvious lack of total condemnation of the collaboration between some Hong Kongers and the colonial administration reveals the allegorical engagement with the colonial past of the city. In my reading, I see the non-condemnation as an allegory for a symbolic return to Mainland China for those who accept the CCP's nationalism. Particularly in the third film, this line of thought is addressed in dialogues between Ip and Sergeant Po, such as when the latter expresses a need for outside help: 'Hong Kong seems prosperous but is instead a mess. We need your help'. Po and Ip go on to contemplate the issue of managing Hong Kong. Po starts with the obvious: 'You know foreign devils run Hong Kong'. Ip replies that action should be taken, saying, 'All these things we do for tomorrow'. Given that the fictional conflict in *Ip Man 3* centres on a public school, these dialogues emphasise the corrupt and cunning manipulation of a city that is governed by foreigners and their Chinese collaborators. It is implied that the Western-derived corruption is solved by CCP influence and officially accepted Mainland morals. To this end, Ip tells his wife that most locals welcome his help, saying, 'People want me to stay and guard the area'.

As his guiding principle throughout the saga, Ip shows empathy for the Chinese collaborators, but only after they come to condemn foreign rule. In *Ip Man 2*, this line of thinking is advanced through the character of Master Hung, who collaborates with the Westerners. In essence, this act transforms Hung into the truly tragic figure of the film. First, he is refused his payoff by the British police, then he must endure racial slurs from Twister. It is the latter that causes Hung to oppose the foreigners; not getting paid appears to be less important to him than enduring racial slurs from a clearly ignorant foreigner, which speaks against any yield-to-survive philosophy. Throughout the text, Ip accompanies Hung as a moral mirror and as a physical force to avenge his death. A less subtle suggestion is that collaboration with foreigners does not lead to financial success, as Mainland nationalism represents survival for ethnic Chinese in a decadent environment.

Ultimately, the conflicts between the personal and collective agendas in the texts can be deconstructed through a detailed, identity-based reading, and various phases of group identity formation (in-group positivity/inter-group conflict) can be observed. In-group identification takes priority during the seemingly civilised and harmless bickering that occurs first between the northern and southern Chinese and then in Hong Kong between the newcomer, Ip, and the established martial arts schools of Kowloon. These disputes are settled in a cultured manner, with harmony and high morals applied by all parties in the end, leading to in-group positivity.

Out-group conflict is depicted in *Ip Man 2* and *Ip Man 4*, and the present-day relevance of the conflict is underlined. In the narrative, the UK and then the US are the main antagonists, and they are represented as racist, corrupt and power hungry. In the fourth film, the coherence of the Western Self is placed under suspicion by overt accusations of racism. While these can be seen as throwbacks to the commonalities between the US 'kung fu craze' and blaxploitation films in the 1970s (see Desser, 2000), the representations function to destabilise Western identity by exaggerating existing

social power hierarchies. The films do not Other China's own history; rather, the texts do this for Japan and the West by assigning racial, colonial and imperial pasts as central to their identities.

Interestingly, the third film presents a degree of variation on this narrative formula. During the school conflict, the text portrays both the Westerner (Mike Tyson) and his local Chinese cronies as the out-group. While in-group identity recognition is touched on as a problem, the main dilemma seems to concern the legitimacy of leadership and the right to define the identity of the in-group. The narrative emerges through a rather serious conflict between the Chinese over whose martial arts style is the most authentic. The fictitious dilemma over the right to articulate the meaning of Chinese-ness is like Party politics, as the need for social cohesion and unity is high on the CCP agenda. For example, during the 19th Party Congress, Xi explained, 'We, the Chinese people, have greater confidence in our own culture [...] There is greater unity in thinking both within the Party and throughout society' (Communist Party of China, 2018, 6). Since Xi's ascension to power, the Party has been more assertive about domestic identity politics, composing narratives of social cohesion that seek to legitimise its rule (see Jacobs, 2014).

It is therefore not surprising that the political significance of the films can be seen to lie not only in their presentation of Mainland nationalism, but also in their similarities with the CCP's identity narratives. Chinese state media, for instance, tends to Other the West through accusations of political in-fighting, divisiveness and corruption, as well as by highlighting the erosion of Western liberal identity and the international system through confrontation (e.g., Blanchard, 2017). In doing this, the CCP Self is promoted as a moral actor capable of unification due to a benevolent but powerful character (e.g., Xinhua News, 2017). This unity seems to question the borderline in-group identities of the Chinese diaspora while placing centrifugal tendencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan under suspicion. The new-found empathy of Ip Man towards the everyday realities of Hong Kong under colonial rule appears to be an allegory for the CCP presenting a second chance for locals to identify with the proper in-group.

Narrative flexibilities

Since state capitalism in Mainland China has become mainstream, the CCP's criticism of Hong Kong has taken a post-colonial turn; urban capitalism is no longer condemned. Accordingly, unlike in the left-leaning Mainland cinema of the 1950s and 1960s (Leung, 2000, 228), the poor living conditions and selfishness of Hong Kong residents in the *Ip Man* texts are not portrayed through a capitalist lens; rather, the hardship of the Chinese migrants and immorality of the city are connected to colonial governance.

Therefore, flexibility in the texts to move between realism and fiction exists to form a specific narrative framework. As its main function, this framework enables dramatised interactions between the patriotic hero and his foreign enemies. The inclusion of realism offers real-life settings for fictionalised nationalistic narratives that bring together the patriotic protagonist and the archenemies of the CCP (Japan and the liberal West). Therefore, the political significance of the films lies also in the realism of the main protagonist as the teacher of a universally glorified popular culture figure, whose interactions with foreigners are dramatised.

Thus, in my view, the major discrepancies between the fictional accounts and published biographies of Ip Man are not arbitrary. First, Ip grew up in Foshan, where he started the practice of martial arts; he later worked as a police officer for the Kuomintang. The films, however, do not show Ip working for the Kuomintang. Moreover, in the films, his departure for Hong Kong is blamed on the Japanese, while it was the communist ascent to power that actually drove Ip to relocate to Hong Kong. His personal character is also polished in a way that makes sense only in a nationalistic framework. Where in the films Ip is depicted as a deeply moral family man, he was, in fact, an opium addict, leading him and his family to struggle financially until his death from throat cancer in 1972 (see Ip & Heimberger, 2001). A more sincere depiction of migrant mentality and hardship in Hong Kong in the 1960s would have addressed his opium habit. However, the hardships included in the films are minor, and they are all caused by a corrupt colonial administration. Here, it is easy to agree with Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi (2018, 189) that the politics of representation is found in the gap between the representations of the Self, its Others and that which they seek to represent.

That said, it is no surprise that the *Ip Man* films present a culturally and politically sanitised image of history focusing on China's unity. This is typical of the contemporaneous Chinese kung fu genre, including both *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which are overly generalised historical dramas that present a narrow vision of China. More so than contemporary films, however, the *Ip Man* saga is influenced by the nationalist discourse of the Bruce Lee films of the 1970s. *Fist of Fury* (1972), in particular, showcases the brutal othering of foreigners. By contrast, later productions in the 1990s, including the Jackie Chan films and the Wei Fong-hung series, present more sophisticated nationalism. For instance, *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991), in which Wong Fei-hung is played by Jet Li, negotiates between traditional Chinese nationalism and modern Western culture rather plausibly, not presenting black and white characters or narratives. Along the same lines, Jackie Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) presents characters whose defining personal characteristics do not follow any national or ethnic demarcations.

In contrast, Donnie Yen's *Ip Man* films not only raise the main protagonist to an inhuman pedestal from a moral perspective; they also re-invent history to continue the nationalistic discourse present in the 1970s films, as well as officially accepted contemporary Mainland narratives. In effect, they are texts that expect viewers to accept simplified and cartoonish othering as part of real-life events. To illustrate, producer Raymond Wong took pride in the notion that his version of history is now as well-known as the Disney cartoon heroes of Hollywood:

> Before the advent of the *Ip Man* movies, no one in China knew about Ip Man. [...] At that time, even people in Guangzhou didn't know about Ip, let alone people in the north of China [...] Now, Ip Man enjoys global popularity. Hollywood gets Iron Man and China has Ip Man (cited in Yau, 2019).

A narrow, fairytale-like vision of China is practical for filmmakers, as the Chinese film industry has recently been transformed according to two related agendas: making profits and conveying state soft power. In other words, the propaganda bureaucracy has simultaneously loosened control over the financing of productions and tightened control over the content in terms of the official CCP line (Gerth, 2010). The seemingly

paradoxical relaxation of state control of financing and tightening of state control of content in the Chinese film industry has meant that the sector is now subject to both commercial investment and state control (Wan & Kraus, 2002).

This policy decision seems to have been driven by the central government's fears of international competition, in particular from Hollywood and South Korea (May & Ma, 2014). It seems reasonable to expect that a combination of fiscal responsibility and content censorship would produce politically sanitised films that need a return on investment from large audiences. Therefore, the policy can be viewed as a mechanism that allows for both the production of dramatised identity narratives to appease the Chinese state and some variation, such as catering to diasporic audiences in terms of popularised everyday realism, to maximise profits.

The presence of Mike Tyson in *Ip Man 3* illustrates the seemingly paradoxical influence the CCP appears to have on popular culture productions. Tyson's fame is expected to garner attention and attract viewers, while his character in the film represents Western corruption. In the text, this contradiction is flexibly solved with a duel between Tyson and Ip, which ends in a tie.

Discussion and Conclusion

While in the past kung fu has acted as a restorative element when the national perception of China has been weak (Teo, 2016), now that this perception is strong, kung fu can be used as a platform for spreading CCP nationalism. In addition to traditionally focusing on the controversies between Chinese and foreigners, the combination of nationalism and commerciality makes the Hong Kong kung fu genre particularly fitting for the CCP's soft power push.

It is beyond the scope of this article to ascertain what, if anything, aside from the public statements and actions of the production team, provoked the boycott calls from the pro-democracy demonstrators. However, there appears to be a key difference between the presented racism of Twister in *Ip Man 2* and the people of San Francisco in *Ip Man 4*: while the former remains more a local Hong Kong post-colonial notion, the latter generalises racism as an issue of the liberal West. For this reason, *Ip Man 4*, in particular, can be considered an aspect of the CCP's soft power 'othering offensive' (e.g., Pan et al., 2020). While the highlighting of racism in the West problematises the political and epistemological choices of Hong Kong's pro-democracy activists, the larger audience of this othering offensive is the Global South in general. Amplifying existing social power hierarchies in the West, for instance through the Black Lives Matter movement, is another key tactic of the same offensive (e.g., Global Times, 2020).

In this article, a deconstruction of the texts from an identity formation perspective exposed a self/othering agenda, and a political recontextualisation linked this agenda to the politics of the CCP. An interesting aspect of popular culture, however, is that multiple interpretations can exist, as any reading is ultimately subjective and viewer-dependent. In methodological terms, this is what can be understood as polysemic reading (see Schulzke, 2017). Multivalent meanings of the *Ip Man* saga enable filmmakers to push an overtly simplistic, nationalistic message that aligns with CCP values, while allowing Hong Kongers to find local identities, through both absence and presence. Following Cheung and Law (2017), we can argue that what is important is not only what is there,

but also what is not said or represented. In a similar manner, blunt and binaristic readings can result in overly simplistic or reductive arguments: the political reading presented in this article may no doubt appear as such. Indeed, the ambivalence of Hong Kongers towards both constructing and viewing Chinese nationalism is something that outside commentators can only empathise with. For a story that is distinctly Hong Kong, however, the *Ip Man* saga leaves quite a bit out in terms of local cosmopolitan culture; in the films, the urban landscape of Hong Kong is comprised of only two demographics: corrupt Westerners and ethnic Chinese.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement

ORCID

Jukka Aukia 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3472-079X

References

Adler-Nissen, R., & Tsinovoi, A. (2018). International misrecognition: The politics of humour and national identity in Israel's public diplomacy. *European Journal of International Relations*, *25*(1), 3–29.

Aukia, J. (2019). Struggling for recognition? Strategic disrespect in China's pursuit of soft power. *East Asia*, *36*, 305–320.

Blanchard, B. (2017, 17 October). 'Crises and chaos': China state media slams Western democracy ahead of Communist Party Congress. *Business Insider*.

Callahan, W. (2010). *China: The pessoptimist nation*. Oxford University Press.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton University Press.

Chan, K. (2004). The global return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese sword-fighting movie): Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. *Cinema Journal*, *43*(4), 3–17.

Cheung, S. K., & Law, W. S. (2017). The colony writes back: Nationalism and collaborative coloniality in the Ip Man series. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*, *13*(2), 159–172.

Chu, K. (2019, 23 December). Hong Kong protestors boycott 'Ip Man 4' for Donnie Yen and producer's pro-Beijing stance. *Hollywood Reporter*.

Clapton, W., & Shepherd, L. (2016). Lessons from Westeros: Gender and power in *Game of Thrones*. *Politics*, *37*(1), 5–18.

Communist Party of China. (2018). *Documents of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*. Foreign Languages Press.

Coonan, C. (2011, 22 October). The Bruce Lee legend. *Independent*.

Davies, M. (2010). You can't charge innocent people for saving their lives! Work in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *International Political Sociology*, *4*(2), 178–195.

De Souza, L. (2012). Global Chinese cinema: The culture and politics of *Hero*. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *18*(3), 356–358.

De Zoysa, R., & Newman, O. (2002). Globalization, soft power, and the challenge of Hollywood. *Contemporary Politics*, *8*(3), 185–202.

Desser, D. (2000). The kung fu craze: Hong Kong cinema's first American reception. In P. Fu & D. Desser (Eds.), *The cinema of Hong Kong: History, arts, identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Dixit, P. (2002). Relating to difference: Aliens and alienness in *Doctor Who* and *International Relations*. *International Studies Perspectives*, 13, 289–306.

Drezner, D. (2014). *Theories of international politics and zombies*. Princeton University Press.

Edney, K. (2012). Soft power and the Chinese propaganda system. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(78), 899–914.

Eperjesi, J. (2004). *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Kung fu diplomacy and the dream of cultural China. *Asian Studies Review*, 28(1), 25–39.

Fey, M., Poppe, A., & Rauch, C. (2016). The nuclear taboo, *Battlestar Galactica*, and the real world: Illustrations from a science-fiction universe. *Security Dialogue*, 47(4), 348–365.

Friedman, E. (2008). Raising sheep on wolf milk: The politics and dangers of misremembering the past in China. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 9(2–3), 389–409.

Friend, J., & Thayer, B. (2017). The rise of Han-centrism and what it means for international politics. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 17(1), 91–114.

Fu, P. (2000a). The 1960s: Modernity, youth culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese cinema. In P. Fu & D. Desser (Eds.), *The cinema of Hong Kong: History, arts, identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Fu, P. (2000b). Between nationalism and colonialism: Mainland emigres, marginal culture, and Hong Kong cinema, 1937–1941. In P. Fu & D. Desser (Eds.), *The cinema of Hong Kong: History, arts, identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Gerth, K. (2010). *As China goes, so goes the world: How Chinese consumers are transforming everything*. Hill & Wang.

Global Times. (2020, May). 'I can't breathe': Black lives and white lies. *Global Times*.

Grayson, K., Davies, M., & Philpott, S. (2009). Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture–world politics continuum. *Politics*, 29(3), 155–163.

Gries, P. (2005). Chinese nationalism: Challenging the state? *Current History*, 104(683), 251–256.

Gustafsson, K. (2016). Routinised recognition and anxiety: Understanding the deterioration in Sino–Japanese relations. *Review of International Studies*, 42(4), 631–633.

He, Y. (2017). The impact of Chinese national identity on Sino–Japanese relations. *Joint US–Korea Studies*, 28, 81–94.

Hu, Z., & Ji, D. (2012). Ambiguities in communicating with the world: The 'going-out' policy of China's media and its multilayered contexts. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 5(1), 32–37.

Huang, C. (2013, 6 February). Just what is Xi Jinping's 'Chinese dream' and 'Chinese renaissance'? *South China Morning Post*.

Huddy, L., Sears, D., & Levy, J. (2013). Introduction: Theoretical foundations of political psychology. In L. Huddy, D. Sears, & J. Levy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Ip, C., & Heimberger, R. (2001). *Yip Man – Portrait of a kung fu master*. King Dragon Press.

Jacobs, A. (2014, 18 August). In China, myths of social cohesion. *New York Times*.

Keane, M. (2010). Keeping up with the neighbors: China's soft power ambitions. *Cinema Journal*, 49(3), 130–135.

Lams, L. (2018). Examining strategic narratives in Chinese official discourse under Xi Jinping. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 23, 387–411.

Larson, W. (2014). Zhang Yimou's *Hero*: Dismantling the myth of cultural power. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 2(3), 181–196.

Lee Myers, S. (2018, 26 February). With Xi's power grab, China joins new era of strongmen. *New York Times*.

Leung, P.-K. (2000). Urban cinema and the cultural identity of Hong Kong. In P. Fu & D. Desser (Eds.), *The cinema of Hong Kong: History, arts, identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Li, S. L. (2001). Kung fu: Negotiating nationalism and modernity. *Cultural Studies*, 15(3/4), 515–542.

Li, H. Y., & Wong, S. (2018). The evolution of Chinese public diplomacy and the rise of think tanks. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 14, 36–46.

Lu, Z., Qi, Z., & Fan, H. (2014). Projecting the 'Chineseness': Nationalism, identity, and Chinese martial arts films. *International Journal of the History of Sport*, *31*(3), 320–335.

Lu, S., & Yeh, E. Y. (2007). Introduction: Mapping the field of Chinese language cinema. In E. Y. Yeh & S. Lu (Eds.), *Chinese-language film: Historiography, poetics, politics*. University of Hawaii Press.

May, A., & Ma, X. (2014). Hong Kong and the CEPA: The changing fortunes of Hong Kong film production. *Continuum*, *28*(1), 43–51.

McEvoy-Levy, S. (2018). *Peace and resistance in youth cultures: Reading the politics of peace-building from* Harry Potter *to* The Hunger Games. Springer.

Nye, J. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, *80*, 155–171.

Pan, C., Isakhan, B., & Nwokora, Z. (2020). Othering as soft-power discursive practice: *China Daily*'s construction of Trump's America in the 2016 presidential election. *Politics*, *40*(1), 54–69.

Peng, W., & Keane, M. (2019). China's soft power conundrum, film coproduction, and visions of shared prosperity. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *25*(7), 904–916.

Rawnsley, G. (2007). The political narrative(s) of *Hero*. *Media Asia*, *34*(1), 20–26.

Sala, I. (2003). CEPA and Hong Kong film: The mixed blessing of market access. *China Fights Forum*.

Schulzke, M. (2017). Interpreting and reinterpreting the political significance of popular media: The importance of seeing from a range of perspectives. *Political Studies*, *65*(4), 930–946.

Su, W. (2010). New strategies of China's film industry as soft power. *Global Media and Communication*, *6*(3), 317–322.

Teo, S. (2016). *Chinese martial arts cinema: The Wuxia tradition* (2nd edn .). Edinburgh University Press.

Wan, J., & Kraus, R. (2002). Hollywood and China as adversaries and allies. *Pacific Affairs*, *75*(3), 419–434.

Wang, H. (2003). National image building and Chinese foreign policy. *China: An International Journal*, *1*(1), 46–72.

Wang, C. (2018, 8 August). Xi Jinping's strong leadership style has its risks, but also advantages. *South China Morning Post*.

Weldes, J. (Ed.). (2003). *To seek out new worlds: Exploring links between science fiction and world politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wu, H., & Chan, J. (2007). Globalizing Chinese martial arts cinema: The global–local alliance and the production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. *Media, Culture, & Society*, *29*(2), 195–217.

Xinhua News. (2017, October). Enlightened Chinese democracy puts the West in the shade. *Xinhua News*.

Yau, E. (2019, 19 December). Bruce Lee's story next for us, says *Ip Man 4* producer, as Donnie Yen calls film 'a very good ending' to his kung fu acting career. *South China Morning Post*.

Zhang, Y., Gries, P., Ming, C. G., & Shook, D. (2007). Chinese cinema in the new century: Prospects and problems. *World Literature Today*, *81*(4), 36–41.