Caught between Success and Failure: Jing Tian and the
(Trans)national Chinese Female Stardom in the Wake of the
Changing Sino-Hollywood Relations in the 2010s

by

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Abstract

Title: Caught between Success and Failure: Jing Tian and the (Trans)national Chinese Female Stardom in the Wake of the Changing Sino-Hollywood Relations in the 2010s
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Chinese female star Jing Tian is a figure surrounded by a series of narratives of failure. Despite having a markedly high-profile career in both the Chinese film industry and Hollywood, she failed to attain popular acclaim in both contexts. Subsequently, she was given an epithet ‘the star who can’t be made famous’ (‘peng bu hong’) by the Chinese public. The narrative of peng bu hong, in a way, serves as a shorthand for her failed attempts to achieve (trans)national stardom in China and Hollywood between 2011 and 2016.

This narrative of failed stardom has seemingly positioned Jing as underserving of scholarly scrutiny. However, in taking Jing as its central focus, this thesis problematises this framing of failure surrounding her and redefines her as a star caught between success and failure, and between the structures of two competing film industries. It recognises the contradiction between the production and reception of her stardom – the perceived continuous industrial practices to ‘make her a star’ pose a stark contrast to the ongoing failures to attain popular acclaim – and takes it as a productive site to explore the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s. It rejects an individualistic perspective which blames these failures on her alone and positions her image and career within broader cultural and industrial contexts. It centrally argues that her ‘failure’ has been shaped by the ongoing negotiations between the Chinese film industry, the Chinese film market and Hollywood.

This thesis adopts a mixed methodology which combines textual analysis and industrial analysis. It concentrates on her onscreen persona and industrial positionality within Huallywood and Hollywood, her screen performance in the Sino-Hollywood coproduction The Great Wall (2016), her self-presentation on the national social media platform Weibo, and her agency in navigating and negotiating her image and labour in national, transnational, and Hollywood contexts. In so doing, it examines her intersected identity performances as a star, an actor, a celebrity, a woman, and a worker. This thesis demonstrates the value of Jing’s stardom in revealing the competitive and concessional transnationalisms (Lim, 2019, pp. 2-4) embraced by China and Hollywood in the 2010s.

Disparate from mainstream star studies which often attends to major, established stars, my research directs the attention to a less defined, seemingly insignificant star figure with a shorter career, primarily characterised by failure. In so doing, this thesis demonstrates how an understanding of Jing’s image, career and public reception can provide insights into the Sino-Hollywood dynamics in the 2010s and reveal how this relationship between China and Hollywood shaped the idea of transnational Chinese stardom during this period. This thesis consequently underlines the potential and significance of studying ‘small’ stars in understanding (female) stardom, transnationalism, and the film industry.
Chapter 1 Introduction

The 2010s saw an increased number of Chinese stars, particularly female stars, appearing in Hollywood blockbusters. At first glance, this seems to be advantageous for these stars to develop transnational stardom. First, given Hollywood’s global distribution and exhibition network, their presence in these films would contribute significantly to their international exposure. Second, their participation in Hollywood productions could potentially develop into a career in the Hollywood film industry. On both fronts, their presence in Hollywood blockbusters seems to indicate an increased likelihood of attaining transnational fame and stardom in Hollywood. In response to this increase of Chinese stars in Hollywood, Darren Boghosian, an agent at the United Talent Agency who represents Chinese stars including Li Bingbing and Angelababy (also known as Yang Ying) in Hollywood, remarked that ‘If you’re famous in America, you’re famous all over the world. If you’re famous in China, you’re only famous in China’ (quoted in Schwartzel, 2016). As an agent, he tended to see Chinese stars’ participation in Hollywood productions as their desire to attain transnational fame through Hollywood.

There is some truth in Boghosian’s words, but they also convey some degree of partiality. On the one hand, as the most prominent cinema in the global film economy, Hollywood has historically produced stars with transnational popularity and attracted and assimilated stars and actors from around the world. However, this view tends to centre around the United States (the US), equating Hollywood stardom to transnational or global stardom, and relegates stars from other film industries to just ‘national’. On the other, the rise of other national film industries such as India, Japan, South Korea, and China in the global marketplace provides conditions for their own stars and actors to crisscross national boundaries and achieve transnational exposure,

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1 The term ‘Chinese star’ in this thesis refers exclusively to mainland Chinese stars, unless otherwise specified. The distinction of ‘Chinese’ identity will be further explored in Chapter 2, where I discuss the concept of the national.
fame, and stardom in the age of globalisation. Additionally, the global consumption of these stars benefits from the development of digital communication technologies in the age of Web 2.0. As such, Hollywood no longer singularly controls the production and the pathway for transnational stardom, nor does it control the transnational circulation of all star texts. Moreover, the increased number of Chinese stars appearing in Hollywood blockbusters cannot solely be construed as their intention to seek fame and stardom in Hollywood. This account conveys an individualistic viewpoint which positions them as agentic subjects proactively pursuing a career to fulfil their personal desires. It overemphasises their agency, power, and personal will, therefore downplaying the environment that shapes and affects their choice and career move. In this sense, their presence in Hollywood blockbusters needs to be contextualised within the changing dynamics between China and Hollywood in the 2010s.

As Song Hwee Lim (2019) notes, the 2010s is a period marked by China and Hollywood seeking and practising competitive and concessional transnationalisms (pp. 2-4). China was more defined by its embrace of competitive transnationalism (despite concessions made in this process) (Lim, 2019, pp. 2-3). First, the Chinese film industry adopted ‘a decidedly transnational character’ that seeks to achieve the status of ‘global cinematic powerhouse’, evidenced by the development of a particular Huallywood cinema (Lim, 2019, p. 2).\(^2\) Second, China actively made inroads into Hollywood by acquiring studios and cinema chains, with Chinese conglomerate Wanda’s acquisition of Legendary and AMC Entertainment and Carmike being particularly noteworthy (Lim, 2019, p. 2). On the other hand, Hollywood was more defined by its concessional moves towards China, as the industry sought to maximise profits from the Chinese film market (Lim, 2019, p. 3). At this cultural moment, particularly considering the latter point, Chinese stars’ participation in Hollywood productions was no longer an individualistic move, but rather complicated by the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s. This impacted the ways in which Chinese stars were used by Hollywood and how we

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\(^2\) Huallywood is a portmanteau of ‘Hua’ (the pinyin romanticisation of ‘Chinese’) and Hollywood. I will explore the notion and industrial structure of Huallywood in detail in Chapter 4.
understand the idea of transnational Chinese stardom in Hollywood during this period. As such, it is not just Chinese stars negotiating with Hollywood as individuals, but rather a broader negotiation between China (the market, the industry, and the nation), Chinese stars, and Hollywood.

In light of the tug-of-war between China and Hollywood Lim (2019) has identified, as well as the impacts it has on Chinese stars, my research investigates the (trans)national Chinese female stardom in the 2010s. I choose female stardom, rather than male stardom, as the focus of my research for two reasons. First, in the 2010s, Chinese female stars tended to appear in Hollywood blockbusters in significantly greater numbers and draw more public attention in China compared to male stars. Second, existing literature on transnational Chinese stardom tends to focus more on stars who emerged from the Hong Kong film industry, particularly those who rose to prominence through the martial arts genre. These stars tended to be male stars and thus male stars have to date receive greater emphasis in this field. In this research, I take the Chinese female star Jing Tian – a star figure with a markedly high-profile career in the Chinese film industry and Hollywood during this period – as a central case study of this research. Jing’s rather unique positionality within and between the two industries, as I will demonstrate in detail later, serves as a prime example for exploring national and transnational Chinese female stardom in the 2010s. I examine the ways in which the two industries and markets inform the production and reception of her star images and labour (the way she was utilised and the outcome of such usage). I also explore how Jing navigated (and continues to navigate) her multiple identities, fame, and stardom in this process. In the main, this research investigates the ways in which the cultural, economic, social, political, ideological, and industrial dynamics within and between China and Hollywood (re)shape the contour and meanings of (trans)national Chinese female stardom in the 2010s.

This central question is handled by looking at the various production sites, including the industrial and performative ones, that create conditions for (trans)national
Chinese stardom. The industrial sites include a Chinese cinema targeting transnationalism (Huollywood) and a Hollywood cinema influenced by the Chinese investment and/or the Chinese market (for example, the sinicised studio Legendary and Chinese stars in Hollywood productions in general). The performative sites include the paradigm of acting (the transnational screen performance) and that of celebrity (where I take the Chinese social media Weibo as a site of celebrity practices). By investigating Jing’s images, career trajectories, and identity performances at all these production sites, this research seeks to account for (trans)national Chinese stardom in the wake of the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s, one that is characterised by competitions and collaborations, or in Lim’s (2019) words, competitive and concessional transnationalisms (pp. 2-4).

1.1 Stars as images, personae, capital, and labour

The rationale behind using a star figure to unveil the industrial and performative dimensions lies in stars’ duality as images and workers. It is this duality that connects ‘the traditionally divergent concerns of industry structure, narrative representation, and viewer identification’ (Clark, 1995, p. 2). In other words, the examinations of stars can articulate issues of the (film) text within which they are placed, the (film) industry which produces and circulates them, as well as the audience who watches and interprets them in a small and coherent focus (McDonald, 1995, p. 80; Willis, 2004, p. 1). Regarding specifically using a Chinese star to unearth the changing dynamics between China and Hollywood, it involves not only an understanding of stardom but also that of transnationalism as a critical concept and framework. As such, I will first discuss the dual roles stars play as images and workers to elucidate the methodological approach of this research here, before I outline the conceptual debates over transnationalism and transnational stardom which set the theoretical parameters in Chapter 2. In what follows, I will explain the concept of the star image and the star persona, as well as stars as a form of capital and a type of labour in the structure of
the (film) industry to lay the methodological foundation for my research.

The study of stars as images has been influenced by Richard Dyer’s seminal work *Stars* (1998). Prior to this, literature on stars tended to be approached in either sociological or semiotic terms, providing accounts for stardom as a social and cultural phenomenon and the function of stars in the meaning-making process (Dyer, 1998, p. 1). Sociological perspectives focused on the star as a social fact, and as such films only engender meanings when the star participates in them (Dyer, 1998, p. 1). Semiotic perspectives underlined the importance of the film text, and therefore stars only signify when they are in films (Dyer, 1998, p. 1). However, for Dyer, the two approaches, while seemingly of divided interests, are ‘mutually interdependent’, where the sociology of stardom (the question of why do stars signify) relies on the workings of semiotics which sees stars as existing in texts to be studied, and the semiotics of stardom (the question of how do stars signify) rests upon the sociological underpinning of stars as an existing fact (Dyer, 1998, pp. 1-2). Given the interdependence of the two approaches, Dyer proposed a sociosemiotic approach by seeing stars as texts, which allows stars to be studied as texts in their own right, and as an intertextual construct produced across different media and cultural practices (Gledhill, 1991, p. xiv).

The star text of various kinds is articulated as ‘the star image’ by Dyer (1998), where the star becomes an image fabricated within the film industry and circulated via various forms of media. The star image is considered a complex totality comprised of texts derived from categories including promotion, publicity, films, criticisms and commentaries, as well as gossip (Dyer, 1998, pp. 60-63; McDonald, 2000, pp. 6-7). The intrinsic quality of the star image is its ‘structured polysemy’ (Dyer, 1998, p. 63). It suggests that in the image there exists a set of multiple but finite meanings and effects (what Dyer understands as ‘polysemy’), within which various elements of signification impact on each other, organised in a way that some meanings and effects are foregrounded, and others masked or displaced (as ‘structured’) (1998, pp. 3, 63). Importantly, the image Dyer refers to indicates not just the visual sign alone, but rather
‘a complex configuration of visual, verbal, and aural signs’ (1998, p. 34). In other words, a star’s image encompasses images, written texts, as well as voices and sounds which collectively form the identity of a star. As such, the star image is always ‘extensive, multimedia, [and] intertextual’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 3). Recognising stars as images enables this research to collect a star’s texts from a wide range of sources, but also across different media on which a star’s voice and body are stored and multifacetedly displayed.

Considering specifically film stars’ profession as actors in relation to the film as meaning-making apparatus, Barry King (1991) developed Dyer’s star image by introducing the concept of star persona. King (1991) expounded on the star’s relation to the film through character, person, and image. He referred to ‘person’ as an integration of the actor’s bodily presence in films that is coded by a set of cultural and social significations and the personality the actor plays that is prearranged to the character (King, 1991, p. 175). ‘Image’, he continued, is the visual impact of the film apparatus on the actor’s off-screen image (King, 1991, p. 175). The persona, King argues, is the composite of person and image – or in his words – ‘the intersection of cinematic and filmic discursive practices in an effort to realise a coherent subjectivity’ (1991, p. 175). As such, the star persona is a façade constructed within the process of film production and in particular through the significance of the film apparatus itself, with the effort of the signifier (the actor/star) being the signified (the image), or at his or her best to be the signified. The concept of star persona entails a star’s (and the industry’s) effort to maintain a certain level of coherence in his or her on- and off-screen image construction. The star persona constitutes a smaller unit of the star image, with an emphasis on its association with the filmic and cinematic production.

Both terms have often been used interchangeably in the scholarship of star studies, but in this thesis I will employ two terms in different situations based on the nuance of their meaning. Dyer’s (1998) notion of the star image suggests an intertextual totality of various texts combined. I refer to a singular star image as fragmented,
independent, and picked up from time to time in various forms of media. Then, star images collectively shape how a star is presented to, and received by, the public. Considering the persona’s association with filmic construction and the maintenance of the on- and off-screen coherence (to ensure stability and longevity), I refer to a persona as lasting, persistent, repeatedly obtained from (promotional) media, existing in comparative coherence and stability. The differentiation offers a clearer sense of not only the different ways in which a star’s image and persona are produced, maintained, and received, but also the industrial process of the transformation from an image to a persona.

Aside from seeing the star image as significations, the production of the star image and persona at the same time serves the economic interest of the film industry as a capitalist enterprise. In this sense, stars are manufactured commodities with economic value to attract the audience. It is the economic value of star image that makes the star a form of capital, or in McDonald’s words, ‘a form of asset deployed with the intention of gaining advantage in the entertainment market and making profits’ (2000, p. 5). This perspective situates stars in the organisation of the film industry, allowing an examination of the way in which stars are utilised by the industry, as well as stars’ labour in the process of making them into commodities. As Paul McDonald pertinently summarises,

[st]ars are texts, meaning, images and culture, but they are also more than this. Whether a star agrees to appear in a film or not will frequently influence if the film receives the financing to go into production. Stars are used to sell films through their appearance in marketing media and they are among the range of elements which can determine how well a film performs at the box office. In film culture, stars therefore form a point of intersection between meaning and money (2013, p. 3).

As a form of capital, stars hold crucial importance to the film industry across various
stages from production to exhibition. They play a key role in attracting investment, marketing films, and managing the risk associated with a film’s box office performance.

The economic value of stars has been realised and put into strategic use in Hollywood cinema since the studio era. The star system in the studio era effectively exemplified the economic significance of stars. Barry King (1986) explored the ways stars are involved with the economic rivalry and cooperation between studios in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. The star system ensured that stars were exclusively affiliated with the studio they were contracted to, who restricted them from freelancing without its approval and regulated the exploitation of stars’ services (i.e. stars’ contracted studio would determine how and by whom their services were exploited via the loan-out system) (King, 1986, p. 165). In the post-studio era, stars (continue to) function as ‘organic and living brands’ that differentiate a film product in the market, with an aim of ‘securing commercial advantage’ (McDonald, 2013, pp. 11, 46). In both industrial practices, stars have been exploited as capital and asset for the studios/film production companies to make money (by either maintaining tight control over the star’s labour or increasing the competitive power of the film product). As such, as King rightly notes, stardom is ‘an adaptive mechanism for coping with failures and capitalising on hits’ (1986, p. 166).

In this process of utilising stars as a form of capital to conduct business, what has been exchanged is the labour of the star. Hence, through the star’s economic function as capital, stars as images and stars as workers intersect. Stars constitute a part of the labour force in the architecture of the film industry. Pertaining to the department of performance specialists, stars execute tasks like all actors such as reading script, shooting at different locations, dubbing and sound re-recording in the process of filmmaking (McDonald, 2000, pp. 9-10). But what differentiates them from the rest of

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3 The disintegration of the studio system started with the Paramount Decree in 1948, in which the major studios were forced to relinquish ownership of their theatre chains (McDonald, 2013, p. 94). The star system survived into the 1950s and 1960s, but stars were gradually released from their contract with studios (McDonald, 2008, p. 167). As such, stars became part of a freelance labour market from the late 1960s/early 1970s.
actors is their place at the peak in the labour hierarchy (McDonald, 2000, p. 10). Through examining the star system in the studio era, Danae Clark (1995) identified ‘a hierarchical division of actors’ labor that allowed the studios to maintain economic and political control over the acting profession’ (p. 19). As she noted,

> [s]tars represented the smallest group because they were so costly, but due to their use in regulating the industry’s product and drawing audiences into the theaters, they were also extremely profitable to the studios. Character actors and bit players made up a somewhat larger group since they could be used repeatedly in films at lower wages than stars. Screen extras represented the largest group, sometimes estimated as high as 90 percent of the acting profession. Extras could be paid minimal wages, and their chances of repeated use by a studio often depended upon their willingness to work below current wage standards and outside established labor guidelines (Clark, 1995, p. 19).

Stars’ prominent position in the labour market is inherently entwined with their economic value as a form of capital. In essence, the employment of stars is not determined by their use value (i.e. stars as actors), but rather by their exchange value (i.e. stars as capital) (King, 1987, p. 157). This feature of stardom dictates the ways in which stars navigate in the film industry as workers. First, the emphasis on their exchange value demands stars to develop a personal brand that differentiates themselves in the market (King, 1991, p. 178). In this sense, the cultivation of individuality becomes crucial for achieving stardom in a labour market oversaturated with actors. Second, their economic significance provides stars with leverage to negotiate terms and conditions with studios regarding the control of their roles, star images, pay and working conditions, and so forth.

As such, seeing stars as a form of capital and a type of worker provides not only insights into the ways in which the industry uses them and shapes their images, identities and career, but also how stars, as agentic subjects, navigate and negotiate the constraints
and regulations set by the industry. In a general sense, the centrality of stars in cinematic terms increases their negotiating power for advantageous treatment. During the studio era, despite the fact that stars as contracted workers held limited autonomy against studios, it was still possible for stars to demand better pay and condition (McDonald, 2013, pp. 93-94). For instance, by tracking the contract terms between James Cagney and Warner Bros., McDonald noted that he negotiated a better renumeration with every contract renewal after he made an impact on box office takings (McDonald, 2013, pp. 90-91). Also, Cagney acted against Warner Bros. by not attending work to gain better pay and condition and by establishing his own production company (McDonald, 2013, p. 92). Following the collapse of the studio system, stars’ economic value became increasingly crucial to the market. With heightened market competition in Hollywood in the 1990s, the creation and ownership of identifiable brands and franchises became the preferred industrial practices (King, G., 2003, p. 68). Then, stars as branded product held more negotiating power. Moreover, the freelancing of stars enabled them to be the producer of their star persona, rather than being produced by the studios. In this sense, stars as workers added a new layer of identity – stars as entrepreneurs, ‘ready to switch roles as business opportunities arise’ (King, B., 2003, p. 49). As McDonald neatly summarises, in the post-studio era, ‘stars not only gained a greater say in creative decision making but also actively participated in the development of the film project as they combined the roles of actor and producer’ (2013, p. 109). Therefore, stars possess the agency to navigate the industry and negotiate the terms and conditions to their advantage.

Considering stars as workers is equally useful in unveiling the oppressive aspects of labour exploitation within an industrial structure, especially in examinations of stars with intersectional identities. Emily Carman’s research on the freelancing female stars in the studio era revealed how the industry policies and structural oppression affected the image and career of ethnic stars Anna May Wong and Lupe Vélez (2016, pp. 78-91). While A-list stars like Carole Lombard engaged in freelancing to attain greater creative control, increased influence over their image, higher pay and more visibility
in the industry, minority stars like Wong and Vélez were forced to freelance, working for different studios due to the limited availability of roles for them (Carman, 2016, p. 78). Additionally, the roles available were constrained by industrial policies, leading to the confinement of minority stars to stereotypes and consequently restricting their screen representation and star image (Carman, 2016, p. 78). Nevertheless, as workers stars are enabled to negotiate the oppressive conditions of employment in the Hollywood film industry. For instance, Wong strategically utilised her linguistic virtuosity to resist the racist practices in Hollywood and develop a career in Europe (Wang, 2017). By deploying a performative strategy of ‘speaking in a forked tongue’, she created a vocal-visual mismatch that challenged Orientalist stereotypes and established stardom in Europe (Wang, 2017, p. 67). As such, investigating ethnic stars like Wong and Vélez as workers brings to light not only the institutionalised and discriminatory business practices in Hollywood, but also their agency to negotiate within the industry.

The duality of stars as both images and workers provides methodological instructions regarding the ways in which a star can be studied, be it the case of a Hollywood star, a national star, or a transnational star. In this research, I examine my case study Jing Tian as images and personae dispersed across various media, as well as a form of capital and a type of worker in the entertainment industries. Specifically, I see Jing as a star, an actor, a celebrity, and a type of labour, and a woman and examine her performances around these identities in both national and transnational contexts, in both the Chinese entertainment industries and Hollywood cinema. Among the five forms of identity performances, my adoption of the star and the celebrity as two separate identity performances merits a closer look, as these two terms are often treated as synonyms and therefore used interchangeably. Thus, before I account for why Jing is chosen for this research, it is worth unpacking the nuances of the two terms and elucidating my own adoption of them.

To use stars and celebrities as two separate terms is often very difficult, for they share
similar features and qualities in many aspects. Notwithstanding, scholarly effort has been made to distinguish stars from celebrities. For some scholars, professional excellence imposes a hierarchical order based on craft that separates stars from celebrities, reserving the designation of stars for only a handful possessing exceptional skills. For example, Barry King considers stardom ‘a condition of fame that rests on excellence in a particular field of human endeavour’, whereas celebrity ‘without any necessary or demonstrable link to specific achievements’ (2015, p. 5). In a similar vein, Christine Geraghty highlighted that stars’ proficiency in acting is what distinguishes them ‘in the overcrowded world of celebrity status’ (2007, p. 103). For some scholars, stars’ economic significance is a key marker of distinction. Star power is a notion widely applied in the film industry to indicate stars’ ‘marquee value’ in getting films made and seen (King, 2002, pp. 158-159). As such, this idea of power, or ‘bankability’ (McDonald, 2013, p. 23), establishes a hierarchical order based on economic value that separates stars from celebrities, underlining stars’ possession of influence that is not shared by their celebrity counterparts. In this sense, stars pertain to a sub-group at the apex of this hierarchy (Sullivan and Kehoe, 2019, p. 242). In both readings, stars are perceived as an exclusive group of ‘elites’ within the overarching category of celebrities.

However, neither of the readings addresses the conceptual difference between stars and celebrities. Rather, by placing stars into a smaller group of celebrities, they suggest that the two terms are in fact conceptually similar. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (2010) attributed the different adoptions to disciplinary traditions. The adoption of stars, as they suggest, adheres to a nomenclatural tradition in film studies, in which the term was employed to indicate ‘a representational interaction between the on/off-screen persona’ (Holmes and Redmond, 2010, p. 4). The term celebrity is often adopted outside of film studies, encompassing a broad category ‘which defines the contemporary state of being famous’ (Holmes and Redmond, 2010, p. 4). For many celebrity studies scholars, the media plays a central part in the process of celebrification, and celebrities are figures constantly negotiate with the media (Gamson, 1994; Cashmore, 2006; Turner, 2010; Marshall, 2014; Turner, 2014). From
this perspective, the film as a particular medium marks a specific territory for the adoption of the term star.

The capacity of cinema in creating a filmic persona is a particular quality that is not shared by celebrities in other fields such as music, reality shows, social media, sports, politics, and beyond. Albeit all are mediated figures, film stars possess one more layer of mediation: they are mediated as fictional beings through the cinema, apart from their off-screen persona through the media. In contrast, celebrities are mediated by the media, where the balance between artificiality and authenticity in just themselves is foregrounded and pursued. In this sense, as Barry King argues, stars construct and sustain a persona that is ‘interfilmic and extracinematic’, yet for celebrities, even if they appear in films, their persona is to be ‘semantically [understood as] extracinematic and transmedial’ (2010, p. 8). Due to this, star studies scholars often show more interest in uncovering the intricate relationship between the star and the character s/he plays, the discursive power of performance in the establishment and maintenance of stardom, as well as the industrial mechanism that separate stars from actors – a focus that is not necessarily shared by celebrity studies scholars.

Ultimately, the scholarly debates over the two terms, as Martin Shingler and Lindsay Steenberg note, are essentially founded on ‘a perceived dichotomy between stardom and celebrity – an opposition born of historical and hierarchical assumptions about how fame is earned or deserved’ (2019, p. 446, my emphasis). It is the hierarchical order of cultural and economic values imposed on understanding the concept of stars and celebrities that positions stars above celebrities, and therefore it is not possible to use these two terms objectively (Redmond and Holmes, 2007, pp. 8-9). Given this, rather than separating stars from celebrities, it is more conducive to mobilise the nuances in each term, whereby to examine the different pathways to stardom/celebritydom and different types of fame. As mentioned earlier, I will analyse Jing’s identity as a star and a celebrity as two separate performances. Thus, the adoption of stars and celebrities based on the specific contexts allows for a nuanced,
comprehensive analysis of the production and reception of her stardom/celebritydom. Given the speciality of the film medium at creating fictional figures, I will mainly adopt the term star for chapters that explore Jing’s positionality and her performances in her capacity as an actor in Hollywood and the Chinese film industry. Considering celebrity as a form of pervasive fame driven by media (Rojek, 2001, p. 18; Cashmore, 2006, p. 7), I will mainly employ the term celebrity for the specific chapter that investigates her extracinematic persona on the Chinese social media Weibo.

1.2 Why Jing Tian? A star caught between success and failure

My decision to focus on the Chinese female star Jing Tian as a case study is, in many ways, at odds with the mainstream, popular choices of stars in star studies scholarship, be it in Hollywood or other national contexts, or in historical or contemporary times. The preferred case studies in star studies have historically tended to be the ones with significant economic value, mainstream popularity, and/or critical acclaim. It appears natural and logical to select prominent figures, as their impact and recognisability aptly correspond with the idea of a ‘star’. However, this concentration on exceptional, well-known and influential names inadvertently marginalises the study of smaller, lesser-known stars.

Scholarly attempt has been made to redress this balance and proffer evidence of small stars’ values in understanding films, industries, and star studies. For instance, Diane Negra’s (2001) research on female stardom in Hollywood history moves beyond the canonised stars and addresses the ethic female who are not necessarily in possession of that central status. Negra cautions against the danger of relegating them to stereotypes and underlines their value in exploring the operation of gender and ethnicity in shaping their image and career (2001, pp. 3-4). In a similar vein, Hye Seung Chung’s case study of Hollywood’s ethnic star Philip Ahn shows how an examination of Ahn can reflect the transformation of Asian and Asian American onscreen
representations during the 1930s and 1970s, as well as the industrial limits imposed on ethnic stars at this historical moment (2006, p. xii). Aside from revealing the sociocultural aspects of the industrial culture (in Hollywood), ‘small stars’ cases can challenge the established paradigms in star studies. For instance, Sarah Thomas’s work on Hollywood’s émigré star Peter Lorre’s screen performances and conditions of employment in Europe and Hollywood shows how a persona-led approach of stars can be reductive in understanding a star’s screen labour in the industry (2012, p. 3). Also, in their edited book *Cult Film Stardom*, Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas (2013) anthologise a series of case studies of stars who were deemed unconventional and challenge the often taken-for-granted notion of stardom. As evidenced by these case studies, while the stars concerned may be perceived by certain standard as ‘minor figures’, their significance should not be underestimated.

My own research of Jing Tian belongs to the growing scholarship which takes ‘minor figures’ as case studies. In direct contrast to the major stars with A-list status in the Chinese film industry, well-established fame and national popularity in the Chinese public, and a long career with decades of acting experience, Jing appears to be a lesser-known, less defined star with a much shorter career. Debuting in 2006 as a singer, she has only been active in the Chinese entertainment industries for seventeen years (by the time of writing). Despite (once) having a markedly high-profile career, in the popular perception among Chinese audiences she was never considered one of the A-list names in the contemporary Chinese entertainment industries. In addition to this, rather than demonstrating stability, her fame and celebrity have been erratic and constantly subject to questions.

Furthermore, the preference for major stars in conducting case studies tends to highlight their popularity and influence in reception, which, in turn, overlooks the production of stardom in this equation (Thomas, 2012, p. 10). As Sarah Thomas notes, the focus on the consumption of stars as mythic figures and texts encapsulated with cultural, social, and ideological meanings was influenced by Dyer’s approach in *Stars*
(1979) and the Dyerisque research tradition (2012, p. 10). This approach, however, encouraged a separation of ‘stars’ from other actors ‘through the significance they hold for an audience and through their economic value’ (Thomas, 2012, p. 10). As a result, the emphasis on consumption (the audience) over production (the film industry as the producer of stars) narrows the research scope of stardom, precluding the examination of stars to those who ‘achieved a certain level of fame or notoriety, or who even had a “star” persona of sorts, but who tend not to be termed “stars” because of the economic status they held within the industry in which they worked’ (Thomas, 2012, p. 10). Similarly, the evidence which suggests the smallness of Jing’s stardom also stems from an emphasis on consumption (audience). Despite being promoted as a (transnational) star in the industry (e.g. taking lead roles, participating in large-budget film productions), Jing was never considered a star proper, as she failed to attain popular acclaim in the Chinese public prior to 2017 (see Sina Feature, 2016). Even after attaining popular acclaim since 2017, Jing was never ranked among the top 30 most influential Chinese celebrities in *Forbes China Celebrity 100*, a list based on celebrities’ income and popularity (see Flannery, 2017; Ifeng Entertainment, 2019; Sohu Entertainment, 2020).

In the study of transnational Chinese stars, this propensity to select examples of the ‘large-scale’ stars by the standards of consumption is also evident. The names such as Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen for male stars, and Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi, and Gong Li for female stars tended to dominate the territory of discussion in numerous journal articles, book chapters and sometimes book-length monographs. Specific to the mainland Chinese stars in the 2010s, Fan Bingbing, Liu Yifei and Tang Wei – figures with significant economic value, mainstream popularity, and/or critical acclaim – tended to attract scholarly attention. The transnational stardom of Fan, Liu and Tang were examined in Dorothy Wai Sim Lau’s *Reorienting Chinese Stars in Global Polyphonic Networks* (2021), and Tang’s performance was examined in Sabrina Yu’s

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4 Jing ranked 35 in 2017 (Flannery, 2017), 70 in 2019 (Ifeng Entertainment, 2019), and 92 in 2020 (Sohu Entertainment, 2020).
article (2014) and Mila Zuo’s book (2022). This preference over consumption, however, excludes figures such as Jing Tian, who, as this research will demonstrate, is also an illustrative case that contributes to the understanding of transnational Chinese stardom in the 2010s.

Since her cinematic debut in 2008, Jing Tian’s career trajectory between 2011 and 2021 is the primary reason I choose her as a case study to explore the national and transnational Chinese female stardom in the wake of the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s. Born in 1988, Jing is a graduate from one of China’s leading institutions of performing arts, Beijing Film Academy. Prior to 2011, she debuted as the female lead in a low-budget horror film *Anaconda Frightened* (2008) and began her acting career in the Chinese film and television industries. Subsequently, she played a supporting role in the television drama *The Epic of a Woman* (2009) and took on the female lead in the mid-budget rom-com film *My Belle Boss* (2010). Starting from 2011, she garnered increasing attention in the Chinese public for her presence in four Huallywood films and three Hollywood blockbusters. It is also from 2011 onwards that her career became indicative of the competitive and concessional moves taken by the Chinese film industry and Hollywood. As such, to better account for her value and significance in unravelling the Sino-Hollywood dynamics in the 2010s, I divide her career over the span of the ten years (2011-2021) into three stages – Huuallywood years (2011-2014), Hollywood years (2015-2017) and the return home years (2018-2021).

In her Huuallywood years (2011-2014), while Jing participated in a number of films and a television drama, it is her leading female roles in four Huuallywood films *The Warring States* (2011), *Special ID* (2013), *Police Story 2013* (2013) and *The Man from Macau* (2014) that centrally define her persona and public image at this stage. It is these four

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5 Between 2011 and 2014, apart from her Huuallywood films, Jing appeared in three mid-budget rom-com films *Ultra Reinforcement* (2012), *Shadows of Love* (2012), and *Tears in Heaven* (2012), a comedy film *Better and Better* (2013) and a television drama *Biography of Sun Tzu* (2011). Additionally, she participated in the television drama *Banshu Legend* (2015) in 2014. In these screen works she mainly played the leading female characters (except *Shadows of Love* and *Better and Better*). A full list of her screen works can be found on her Douban page.
films that firmly established and reinforced a coherent on- and off-screen persona of Jing, yet it is also these four films that established and perpetuated the national notoriety around her stardom in Chinese reception. Jing’s promoted persona in Huallywood cinema encountered strong resistance from the Chinese public. For many audiences, neither did she have enough star power to be cast in leading roles in these films, nor did she possess a comparable star status to co-star alongside the male leads. Consequently, in her Huallywood years, Jing’s promoted persona was marred by a public discourse of ‘unworthiness’, and her career success was associated with a prevailing narrative of her dependence on a male businessman in the Chinese public. Jing’s onscreen persona and positionality in a cinema that is ‘decidedly transnational’ (Lim, 2019, p. 2) offer rich information in unravelling Huallywood as a producer of star image and fame against the background of Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s. Moreover, the resistance and criticism from the Chinese public which indicate the ‘consequences’ of pursuing a transnational construct through Huallywood will also shed light on the contemporary Chinese stardom, particularly in relation to issues of gender and class. As such, she is valuable in exploring the structure and workings of Huallywood as a transnational Chinese cinema and the landscape of Chinese (female) stardom in the Reform era.

In her Hollywood years (2015-2017), her career is centrally marked by her participation in three Hollywood blockbusters *The Great Wall* (2016), *Kong: Skull Island* (2017) and *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018), as well as her attainment of popular acclaim in the Chinese public. But these two defining moments are not causally related to each other, i.e. it is not her presence in Hollywood films that contributes to her popular acclaim in China, and vice versa. On the one hand, her venture into the mainstream Hollywood productions – notably her female lead role in *The Great Wall* – drew increased public criticism in China, further solidifying the narrative of ‘unworthiness’ in her public image. The Chinese audience’s resistance became more evident, which resulted in her being labelled ‘China’s most hated actress’ (Liu, 2017). Because of her continued failure in gaining popularity in the Chinese public, she was also mocked as ‘the star
who can’t be made famous’ (‘peng bu hong’) (Sina Feature, 2016). On the other hand, by a strategic (re)navigation of the industry and the public discourses around her stardom, Jing managed to construct an ‘authentic’ self-presentation on China’s social media platform Weibo circa February 2017. It is a stage mixed with heightened controversy and a turnaround of her fame in the Chinese public. Jing’s Hollywood career – including her onscreen representation of a Chinese woman and her positionality as a transnational actor in the Hollywood film industry – belongs to a part of the wider Sino-Hollywood negotiations and provides valuable insights into transnational Chinese female stardom in Hollywood in the 2010s. From being a highly criticised star to an acclaimed celebrity, Jing’s shifting public image entails rich information in understanding the (gendered) celebrity culture in contemporary China.

In her return home years (2018-2021), Jing appears to have withdrawn completely from Hollywood and continues her acting career in the domestic film and television industry. It is a stage marked by the fickleness of her celebrity status. Her celebrity continued to grow in 2017 and 2018 since her attainment of popular acclaim, but it was followed by a prolonged decline in 2019 and 2020. It was not until the success of the net drama Rattan (2021) in March 2021 that she regained her celebrity in the domestic market. Her withdrawal after Pacific Rim: Uprising was in tandem with the wider diplomatic tensions between China and the US between 2017 and 2018, in which the Chinese government tightened its control over Wanda’s overseas investment in 2017 and the Trump administration waged a trade war against China in 2018 (Su, 2019, p. 134). In a sense, her career shift signals the decoupling between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood. An examination of her career between 2018 and 2021 not only offers insights into her ongoing navigation in the domestic industry, but also allows for ruminations on how her image and career in Huallywood and Hollywood continue to influence her later career, and how the disjuncture caused by her transnational career may connect to the fickleness of her celebrity at this stage. Ultimately, she presents a valuable case to rethink the label ‘transnational Chinese star’ and its impact on individual stars in the context of Sino-Hollywood (de)coupling in the
Jing’s career between 2011 and 2021 can be succinctly summarised as caught between success and failure, and between the structures of two competing film industries. It is these awkward positionalities she occupies that makes her a useful indicator of the power dynamics that impose limits and restrictions on her image and career. She is a unique case which epitomises the competition, collaboration, and negotiation – in cultural, economic, ideological, and industrial dimensions – between China and Hollywood in the 2010s. At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, she is also a typical case that informs not only the structural constraints in the contemporary Hollywood film industry, but also the celebrity culture that influences the consumption of contemporary Chinese female stardom. While Jing may not be a major star with transnational renown, her career between 2011 and 2021 offers valuable insights into understanding Huallywood cinema, the star culture in China, Hollywood cinema, Sino-Hollywood relations, as well as Chinese female stars as transmedia figures in the 2010s.

1.3 Research methods: A combination of textual and industrial analysis

To examine stars as text and labour requires a mixed methodological approach which combines the analysis of texts and the industry. The star image is constructed out of ‘a mixture of the off-screen characters of the actors, their on-screen personas, how publicity defines both of these, and how the general public interprets and fuses all the foregoing elements into assimilable phenomena which it then labels with, and thereafter identifies by, the stars’ names’ (Damico, 1991, p. 244). As such, my research collects Jing’s texts from a wide range of sources, organised according to the categories proposed by Richard Dyer (1998, pp. 60-63) and Paul McDonald (2000, pp. 6-7): promotion, publicity, films, criticism and commentaries (including both professional observers such as trade press journalists and critics and the general audience), as well as gossip. Given this research’s focus on Chinese stardom and transnational Chinese
stardom in Hollywood, these texts are gleaned from both Chinese and English language sources. Importantly, while the texts of Jing cover a wide variety of terrains ranging from the filmic (e.g. characters on screen) to the extracinematic (e.g. celebrity endorsement and philanthropy), this research only selects and analyses those texts that are relevant to unpacking aspects of Huallywood, Hollywood, the Sino-Hollywood relationship, and female stardom and celebrity culture in China. In line with this provision, I pay close attention to the production, distribution, and reception of her images in Chinese and Hollywood contexts, especially the adaptive ways these images are presented and the potentially disparate ways they are consumed in different contexts.

These texts are grouped broadly into three types: the ones on the production end that associate with the promotional industry (e.g. the film industry that intentionally produces and promotes film stars), the ones on the consumption end that associate with the audience, and the ones that fall in between (e.g. critics’ reviews, entertainment journalism and paparazzi in commercial media [see Driessens, 2013, p. 546]). On the production end, the filmic representation composes a ‘distinct and privileged’ site that constructs a star’s image (Dyer, 1998, p. 61). I consider Jing’s filmic and interfilmic representation in both Huallywood films and Hollywood films a key source in the construction of her star persona on screen. Then, I take into account the film-related texts which promote her persona to the Chinese and international markets such as posters, trailers, and behind-the-scenes featurettes, marketing campaigns including press conferences, premiere interviews, magazine interviews, red carpet, social media posts, and other forms of promotional activities that Jing was involved with. At one level, these texts, multifarious in categories and contents, interact with the star’s onscreen persona and collectively reinforce that construction by connecting the star’s extrafilmic presence with the character. At another level, they inform the different marketing strategies used on the same kind of promotional materials for different markets and the ways Jing is used by the two industries. Equally important, I also collect Jing’s posts on her own Weibo account, as it serves not only
as a crucial site for self-presentation/promotion, but also interacts with all the promotional texts around her.

On the consumption end, the views of audiences constitute the main source of evaluating how a star image has worked in economic, cultural, and ideological terms. As Dyer points out, while it is the industry that produces stars, audiences’ idea of a star can ‘act back on the media producers of the star’s image’, as they ‘select from the complexity of the image, the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions that work for them’ (2004, p. 4). In other words, audiences actively participate in negotiating and creating the cultural meaning of a star image (Holmes, 2007, p. 3). Given this, the audience’s relationship with the star can be both susceptible and resistant. On the one hand, audiences, albeit perceptive in recognising the artificiality/authenticity in star images, are not impervious to these constructed images and the promotional strategies of selling them (Damico, 1991, p. 244). On the other hand, when the star image constructed does not fulfil audiences’ expectation, or later turns out to be misleading and dishonest, audiences will reject the star (Damico, 1991, p. 247). In a contemporary setting where audiences actively engage with commenting upon star images through Internet (online forums, social media, etc.), their agency continues to increase in terms of responding to, and potentially reshaping, the star image produced by the industry.

In terms of Chinese audiences’ reception of Jing’s promoted image, I mainly rely on user comments and reviews of her Huallywood and Hollywood films on Douban, a Chinese film database with features comparable to IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes in the West. I collect user comments and reviews mentioning her and pay particular attention to those that specifically relate to her images, personae, and performances. Comparing to other film and television review sites such as Mtime, Douban is chosen for its scale, influence, and popularity amongst audiences in China, but also its

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6 On Douban, general users adopt pseudonyms, making it difficult to distinguish between critics and audiences.
classification of contents (sections of ratings, short comments and long reviews) and permutation of contents (un/helpful clicks). The rich information on Douban offers a sense of how Jing’s promoted images are received, interpreted, and reconstructed by Chinese audiences. In terms of how Jing’s promoted image was received in a Western context, I decide to only look at the texts produced by trade press critics and journalists (that pertain to the texts between production and consumption) for the reality that there is limited audience engagement with her as a star in the West.

The texts produced by media workers such as critics, entertainment journalists and paparazzi occupy an intersectional space between the audience and the industry, as these workers can be considered as both consumers and producers of a star image. On the one hand, the type of texts they produce such as reviews, gossip, and candid photos suggest that they are the consumer of the star (see Dyer, 1998, p. 63). On the other hand, unlike general audiences, they are positioned within a wider production mechanism that generates star texts (see Dyer, 1998, p. 63). The ambiguity of this type of texts, as Olivier Driessens argues, lies in the fact that the interest of (commercial) media is not necessarily in line with the interest of the industry, which intentionally constructs and promotes saleable star texts (2013, p. 546). Due to this nature, this type of texts can be considered representing the reception of a star in some way (see Dyer, 1998, p. 63).

These texts also play a crucial role in (re)shaping Jing’s star images. I draw on the news articles from major portals NetEase, Sina, Sohu, Tencent, and Ifeng, and (the entertainment section of) the local newspapers such as People, Beijing News, Xinhua News, and Jie Mian from the Chinese language sources. It is worth mentioning that due to the dual identity of media workers as producers and consumers and the intertextual nature of star texts, promotional texts can also be found on these portals and news channels. However, the stylistic differences between reporting and commenting on stars can serve as indicators for distinguishing between these two types of texts.
articles from trade press such as Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, and The New York Times which aim at Western audiences (but which are also accessible to global English speakers) in the English language sources. These texts, based on their respective background and context, are illustrative of not only how Jing is received in different cultural contexts, but also how these images generated in reception conforms or contradicts to her promoted images.

As Paul McDonald (2000) pertinently addresses, while the intertextuality of images constructs the star as a particular identity, the industry sets conditions for the production and use of this identity (p. 3). Therefore, apart from collecting relevant texts about Jing, I also draw on academic literature and industry-related articles and reports with regards to the Chinese film industry and market, the Hollywood film industry, and the Sino-Hollywood relations to explore the industrial environment Jing is situated. In doing so, I am able to examine Jing’s positionality within the two industrial structures, as well as how her labour is exploited and how she negotiates with such usage. On the whole, the methodological approach in this research echoes McDonald’s (2000, p. 3) observation and combines a textual analysis and industrial analysis to explore Jing’s image and career between 2011 and 2021. Given the multiple themes and topics covered in this research, each chapter employs its own framework to address specific questions. I will delineate my approaches and discuss relevant literature at the beginning of each chapter.

1.4 Thesis structure and chapter layout

As I have elucidated in Section 1.2, I have periodised Jing’s career between 2011 and 2021 into three stages – Huallywood years (2011-2014), Hollywood years (2015-2017), and the return home years (2018-2021). The analytical chapters of Jing in this thesis are organised in chronological order following her career during these ten years. At the same time, they are thematically indexed by the keyword ‘pathway’, which
succinctly summarises the production sites that create conditions to (trans)national Chinese stardom and her various approaches to attain and/or maintain national and transnational stardom. These pathways, including two industrial sites (Huallywood cinema and Hollywood cinema), two performative sites (acting in *The Great Wall* [2016] and celebrity practices on the Chinese social media platform Weibo), correspond with her identity performances as a star, an actor, a worker, a woman and finally a celebrity.

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of Jing, this thesis first introduces its theoretical framework for understanding (trans)national stardom and revisits the transnational paths Chinese female stars have taken since the 1990s. Chapter 2 reviews the scholarship on the concepts of nationalism and transnationalism and the ways in which these ideas have applied to the readings of (trans)national Chinese stardom. By taking an eclectic approach that mobilises particular sets of ideas around (trans)nationalism and transnational stardom, I create a useful analytical framework for the rest of chapters. In doing so, I also elucidate how Jing’s particularity as a mainland Chinese star crossing over to Hollywood will shape her transnational journey.

Chapter 3 maps out the ways in which the industrial conditions and Sino-Hollywood dynamics at a given time have shaped the transnational paths Chinese female stars have taken since the 1990s. I use two prominent transnational Chinese female stars Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi as representative cases to illustrate the transnational paths in the 1990s and 2000s, identifying how their association with film festivals and indiewood have led to their stardom in Hollywood. I also discuss the situation for contemporary Chinese female stars and unpack how their association with Hollywood blockbusters have not led them to transnational stardom. By comparison, I identify that Hollywood’s investment, or lack thereof, in these Chinese female stars is the fundamental reason that led the success of Gong and Zhang and the failure of those in the 2010s. Additionally, in these Sino-Hollywood encounters, I also trace the different approaches the Chinese film industry have taken to push Chinese female stars on the international stage, following the development of the industry since the mid-
1980s. This chapter offers much-needed industrial context for understanding Jing’s career in China and Hollywood between 2011 and 2021.

The specific analyses of Jing as a case study start from Chapter 4. This chapter focuses on Jing’s Huallywood years (2011-2014) and explores her failure in achieving either national or transnational stardom through Huallywood cinema. It considers Huallywood as a particular transnational Chinese cinema that emerges from the development of the Chinese film industry, as well as a producer that promotes Jing as a (trans)national star in both the Chinese and the US market. It explores Jing’s persona and industrial positionality in Huallywood and how she was received by both markets. This chapter argues that while Huallywood cinema appears to be a pathway for transnational stardom, it remains contestable in the face of imbalanced transnational dynamics between China and Hollywood. It also contends that Huallywood cinema is simultaneously a contestable site for making a star in a national context, particularly at a cultural moment marked by the prevailing influence of neoliberalism. As such, it is Jing’s misplacement in Huallywood cinema that inhibited her from attaining either national acclaim or transnational stardom.

Chapter 5 concentrates on Jing’s Hollywood years (2015-2017) and explores her failure in achieving transnational stardom through mainstream Hollywood blockbusters. In this chapter, Jing’s intersectional identities – as a Chinese national, a female, and an Asian (a racial minority within the Hollywood acting labour force) – are regarded as crucial in understanding the industrial considerations over the production of her filmic images in the three Legendary blockbuster films. It examines Jing’s status as a transnational worker within a Hollywood industrial structure affected by its own politics of race and gender as well as its negotiations with China. In the main, this chapter explores the structural issues that inhibited her from attaining transnational stardom in Hollywood and challenges the narratives that seek to blame these failed attempts directly on her as a star.
Rather than being mere pawns, stars are capable of navigating and negotiating within the constraints and regulations set by the industry. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 concentrate on the star’s agency and examine Jing’s negotiation with the wider environments. Chapter 6 focuses on Jing’s identity as an actor and investigates her performances in the Sino-Hollywood coproduction *The Great Wall*, in which she plays the female lead opposed to Matt Damon and shares one third of the screen time. Different from the examination of Jing’s Hollywood characters in Chapter 5, where I mainly placed focus on the repressive forces in Hollywood structure and read Jing in a Hollywood context, Chapter 6 takes a transnational perspective and focuses on *The Great Wall* as a Sino-Hollywood project. By examining her screen performance and the exogenous factors that shape her performance, it reveals the ways in which the transnational sensitivity of *The Great Wall* impacts Jing’s career and how she reacts to these industrial constraints when seeking to achieve transnational stardom in Hollywood.

Chapter 7 looks at Jing’s employment of Weibo, one of China’s most used and influential social media platforms. I examine her celebrity practices over the ten years in her career between 2011 and 2021. Jing’s Weibo posts reflect the star’s agency to actively manage her images and career through corresponding and interacting with her onscreen persona and offscreen images. Her attainment of celebrity on and through Weibo shows the star’s capacity in making adaptive adjustments which respond to her negative reception in China. This chapter provides insights into the ways in which social media contributes to the establishment and preservation of traditional stars’ fame and stardom. From the star’s attainment of celebrity, it reveals how those failure narratives around the star in previous years might have been connected to the transnational narratives around her stardom, which estranged her from a Chinese audience.

Finally, Chapter 8 consolidates the findings of each chapter and provides the conclusion for this research. It summarises Jing’s career and star images between 2011
and 2021 by drawing on the various aspects of her stardom that have been informed by the competing and cooperating dynamics in and between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood. It highlights her value and significance as an object of study for unpacking the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s and how the Chinese film industry and market have impacted on (re)shaping the idea of transnational Chinese stardom that traditionally centralises Hollywood.
Chapter 2 Framing (trans)national stardom: An eclectic approach

Introduction

Jing’s career trajectory from China to Hollywood and back is characterised by the idea of (trans)nationalism. First, the two cinemas she was associated with – Huallywood and Hollywood – are notably marked by their transnational properties. Second, the Sino-Hollywood coproduction *The Great Wall* in which she participated as an actor, is teeming with transnational features. Third, the social media platform Weibo through which she attained celebrity, though putatively transnational (as social media), is imbued with characteristics of the national. More importantly, Jing’s careers and identity performances have been closely linked to the pursuit of (trans)national stardom. As such, it is crucial to thoroughly explore transnationalism as a critical, conceptual term and its contextual relevance to her engagements in Huallywood, Hollywood, *The Great Wall* and Weibo.

In this chapter, I will employ the term transnationalism to establish the theoretical framework for this research. First, I deconstruct the term into two meaningful units – the prefix ‘trans-’ and the notional part ‘nation(al)’ – and explore the importance of both components by bringing together scholarly discussions. While doing so, I particularly highlight the importance of Jing’s mainland Chinese identity in understanding her career in Hollywood. Building on a clear sense of transnationalism, I explore how the term, when combined with the concept of stardom, influences the readings of transnational stardom. I will elucidate how scholars conceptualise the flow of stars as both texts and labour that cross national boundaries. Then, I will take an eclectic approach that mobilises particular sets of ideas around transnationalism and transnational stardom to create an analytical framework for my examination of Jing’s image, persona and career in both national and transnational contexts. Different from
existing research paradigms that often consider the transnational star status as a starting point for investigation, my approach will centralise the transnational journey of Jing (and other stars included in this thesis). Through this lens, I am enabled to examine how power dynamics and inequalities have shaped her transnational journey.

2.1 Unpacking the national: Defining a ‘Chinese’ star in the national paradigm

With the process of globalisation sweeping around the world since the 1980s,\(^8\) the meaning of the national in cultural texts seemed to be destabilised and sometimes rendered redundant, especially considering the contemporary landscape of cultural flows which increasingly foreground interactions between nation-states. Despite this, the national remains an intrinsic component, in its literal and conceptual ways, of a variety of alternative terms such as international, multinational, postnational, paranational, supranational, and of course transnational (Zhang, 2010a, p. 123). Considering the national is embedded in transnationalism, in a general sense, one cannot comprehensively capture the meanings of transnationalism and transnational stardom if the national is left unattended. Specifically, when thinking of the national in a Chinese context, the concept of ‘China’ is comprised of four sociocultural localities (mainland China, Hong Kong/ Hong Kong SAR in post-1997 era [thereinafter Hong Kong], Taiwan, and Chinese diasporas). A careful perusal of the national is necessitated to fully recognise how the concept is related to the particularities of the mainland Chinese stardom, and how that could also affect the transnationalisation of mainland Chinese stars as texts and labour.

Whilst the notion of national has certainly been destabilised by contemporary

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\(^8\) I do not mean that the process of globalisation only started since the 1980s but refer to a point of time – the 1980s – where its patterns have surpassed those of earlier epochs (see Held et. al., 1999; Robinson, 2004). The globalisation as an area of academic enquiry is a response to the cultural imperialism thesis, which was prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 378-379).
globalisation, the term has long been considered problematic in historical accounts, both in terms of defining it (what is national) and describing it (how it is articulated). As Susan Hayward (2005) notes, the difficulty lies in two aspects: first, the tautology of its existence as ‘it’s there because it’s there’ without a hypostasised founder, and second, the propensity of connecting it to the promulgation of nationhood and its efficacy in maintaining social order without further complication (p. 1). Benedict Anderson (2006) conceived of a definition of the nation, which to some extent can be considered an illuminating response. He proposed that the nation is ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ (p. 6). Specifically, ‘imagined’ denotes a sense of communion or identification amongst its members without necessitating face-to-face interactions; ‘limited’ suggests the nation’s finite boundaries of impact; ‘sovereign’ indicates the nation’s freedom and autonomy executed by the sovereign state; and ‘community’ conveys a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ amongst its members which unites them, despite internal conflicts and contradictions (Anderson, 2006, pp. 6-7).

Anderson’s concept succinctly enunciates the geographical/ideological border and the political autonomy that mark a nation, as well as a kind of shared kinship or identification of peoples which unites it. First, the national encapsulates a sense of boundary and the power of defending the territory within that boundary, and therefore implies a kind of resistance to the external power (Higson, 2002, p. 54). Second, the national is constructed through a sense of ‘coherence and unity’ within the national boundary, and it calls for ‘a unique identity and a stable set of meanings’ (Higson, 2002, pp. 53-54). According to Andrew Higson, the process of identification is a process of hegemonising and mythologising, comprising not only the production and promotion of a particular set of meanings, but also the repression or prohibition of other meanings (2002, p. 54), which, in so doing, the promoted comes to represent the collective or national interest, prefiguring Anderson’s ‘imagined community of the nation’ (Higson, 2002, p. 63). As far as these two respects are concerned, the national operates within the internal and external paradigms, manifested as ‘histories of crisis
and conflict [within the nation], and of resistance and negotiation [with the outside powers]’ (Higson, 2002, p. 54).

Identified as ‘processes’ and ‘histories’, the concept of the national is configured not just in terms of spatiality, but also temporality. Given the internal conflicts and crises that divide the national into the centre-periphery binary as Higson remarked, the national is not merely established, but involves an ongoing effort of maintaining that central meaning (Williams, 2002, p. 3). As Susan Hayward (2005) points out, while the dominant construction of the national ‘reinforces the popular myth of cultural specificity […]’, that specificity will necessarily change over the course of history […] because the signification of the term “national” changes according to political, social and economic pressures and mutations’ (p. 16). In this way, the national is best understood as a site where conflicts of different interest groups take place in a perpetually dynamic and unfinished manner (Williams, 2002, pp. 5-6). Therefore, the issues around the national can be read through the spatial and temporal dimensions.

The concept of the national can be usefully applied to the case of China, considering what makes a Chinese star is also accompanied with such internal ambivalence in this spatial-temporal duality. The national sense of ‘China’ is inherently replete with heterogeneity inside, where the four ‘Chinese’ localities – mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diasporas, each with their own geographical locations, sociocultural formations, and political histories – suggest different definitions and diverse interpretative strategies of a ‘Chinese’ identity (Chan and Hoon, 2021, p. 3). In other words, while bearing the name ‘Chinese’, each locality conveys its own nuanced meaning and representation of Chineseness. This awareness is crucial, as the

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9 The Chineseness of mainland China has been shaped by the nation’s socialist ideologies and the socialist market economy in the Reform era. Hong Kong represents a distinctive variation on the thematic construction of Chineseness, with its society and culture defined by ‘its displacement from the Chinese political mainstream [and] its caste-like status in the colonial system’ (Chun, 1996, p. 121). Taiwan’s Chineseness has been influenced by its history of Japanese colonisation and the subsequent governance under the Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party) after 1945 (Chun, 1996, p. 116; Chan and Hoon, 2021, p. 10). The Chinese identities among diasporic Chinese are moulded by ‘the local circumstances in different parts of the world where people of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living’ (Ang, 1998, p. 225).
national shapes the ways in which Chinese stars are produced and represented in national cinemas and read by a national audience, as well as the career they develop. The neglection of this specificity would not only cause imprecision while analysing stars as text and labour, but also risks omissions of the nuances and complex dynamics when these stars – as text and/or labour – crisscross national borders.

In existing Chinese star scholarship, the concept of the national serves as a useful framework in approaching Chinese stars from four localities. Some scholars paid attention to the diverse coverage that charts Chinese stardom, especially when discussed within a national paradigm. For example, Farquhar and Zhang’s edited collection *Chinese Film Stars* (2010a) compiled chapters of Chinese stars from four localities and arranged them in a diachronic and geographical order. Mila Zuo’s (2015) essay on female stars’ performance anxiety pointed to the specific situation in mainland China. Similarly, Sabrina Yu’s (2012a) discussion on the vulnerability of Chinese stars also applied particularly to the stars in mainland China. Alternatively, some scholars used ‘Chinese star’ as an umbrella term, especially when it came to the topics beyond the national remit. For instance, Dorothy Lau’s monographs *Chinese Stardom in Participatory Cyberculture* (2019) and *Reorienting Chinese Stars in Global Polyphonic Networks* (2021) respectively included star examples from all four localities in order to address questions of Web 2.0’s impact and the aural persona of Chinese stars on a global stage. Zuo’s (2022) book used star examples in an analogical way to articulate their performances of Chineseness. On the one hand, the variegated articulations reflect that Chinese stardom is a productive site which is, as Farquhar and Zhang (2010b) observed, ‘multifaceted, long-lived and complicated by history, spectatorship, gender and politics’ (p. 12). On the other hand, as Sabrina Yu (2012a) cautions, this inclusivity implies the ‘tricky and elusive’ nature of Chinese stardom (p. 220), which may lead to difficulty in defining a ‘Chinese star’. In this sense, the internal contestations of ‘Chinese’ as a national conceptualisation dictates an approach of understanding the ‘Chinese’ in plural form. In other words, to fully capture the nuances in their ‘Chinese’ identity, the study of Chinese stardom must first compartmentalise
Chinese stars predicated on their sociocultural and political background.

This recognition of identity difference is essential when examining Jing’s images and career trajectories. As a mainland Chinese star, the sociocultural and political specificity of the mainland China as a constructed ‘nation’ would distinguish her from the stars with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diasporic Chinese origins. Specifically, her Chinese identity as a mainlander to a large extent determines the ways in which her star images are produced and consumed, as well as the ways her labour is exploited. In other words, as a mainland Chinese star, Jing is coded and prescribed by the sociocultural and political context she is situated. Furthermore, when she is placed in a different cultural and industrial context, the specific conditions she faces would be different from the Chinese stars from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diasporic groups. This is particularly relevant to the examination of her ‘Chinese femininity’ in her Hollywood works – in which China has certain discursive power – and in her ability to transnationalise her stardom to Hollywood as a performer who received acting training in China, with English being her second language.

The diachronic feature in the concept of the national is also useful in capturing the dominant values and ideologies in a given time period, as well as the industrial dynamics and forces that concurrently shape the contours of mainland Chinese stardom in that particular period. Since the discourse of film stardom emerged in the early 1900s, mainland Chinese stardom has mainly gone through three stages of development: from the period of Republic of China (1912-1949), where the star phenomenon was budding and functioned in a capitalist mode, to the socialist phase between 1949 and 1978 when the star discourse was officially (yet nominally) negated and replaced by the ‘film worker’ in service of promoting nationalism, and to the latest phase – the Reform era (from 1978 onwards), in which the neoliberal star culture has been proliferating and vigorous. In each phase, national stardom bears distinctive features and reflects the core values, canonised ideologies, and the industrial codes practised at the time. To examine stardom within a national framework can expose
these cultural, ideological, and industrial occurrences. As will be shown in the following chapters, China’s employment of neoliberalism with ‘Chinese characteristics’ (see Harvey, 2005, p. 120) and its economic rise on the global stage to a large extent dictate how Chinese stars have been received in a national context and how Chinese stars are exploited to serve its national agenda of competitive transnationalism. The concept of the national will contribute to understanding why Jing is constructed and received in a certain way, both in a national context and in a cross-cultural context such as Hollywood.

In a Chinese context, the national is apparently a useful term in expounding the complexity of Chinese stardom as well as the nuances of mainland Chinese stars. Notwithstanding, the term ‘national’ appears to gradually lose its momentum due to its incapacity to address the contested actors within the nation-state accurately and its limited application in a world that has increasingly been engulfed by processes of globalisation. When it comes to national cinema, for example, given the emphasis on coherence and unity in the concept of the national, those marginalised, ostracised cinemas which often signal complexity and complication cannot be accommodated unproblematically within the national paradigm (see Naficy, 2006). Additionally, the antithesis between the self and the other (through foregrounding its distinctiveness and difference) that marks a national cinema is increasingly challenged, as a national framework cannot account for the porosity of the ‘indigenous’ in a national cinema, the possible resemblances of the film products made in different nation-states, the coproduction films and so on (Higson, 2006, p. 19). As such, Higson argues that the national paradigm is ‘hardly able to do justice either to the internal diversity of contemporary cultural formations or to the overlaps and interpretations between different formations’ (Higson, 2006, p. 20), and suggests a local or transnational perspective to examine the cultural specificity and diversity in a nation-state (Higson, 2006, p. 23).

Likewise, the investigation of Chinese stardom in contemporary times will inevitably
encounter situations that cannot be contained in only a national scope, especially considering the border-crossing circulation and reception of star texts and the employment of star labour, as well as the maintenance of a consistent star persona in this process. From this angle, albeit useful, the national paradigm cannot fully articulate these trajectories, changes, and processes regarding stardom; a different term is required for this. There has already been a myriad of alternative terms used by different scholars such as international, crossover, and global to attend to the national and the beyond-the-national elements. In this thesis, I will utilise the term transnationalism to frame my investigation of Jing’s star image, career, and reception in the contemporary context of globalisation.

2.2 Transnationalism under microscope: Framing transnational stardom

Transnationalism was advanced in film studies during the 1990s as one of the conceptual responses to the inadequacy of the national paradigm in an era of globalisation (Higbee and Lim, 2010, p. 8). As a precondition that facilitates the uptake of transnationalism, globalisation – identified by social theorists like Giddens and Robertson – intends to ‘capture the increasing interconnectedness of different parts of the world’ and elucidate ‘a wide variety of economic, cultural and political practices’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 377). The interconnectedness of the world can be argued to have been accelerated by the ‘global culture flow’ of people, machinery, money, images, and ideas – what Arjun Appadurai (1990) termed the five landscapes composed of ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes. The global circulation of money, commodities, information, and labour, as Ezra and Rowden (2006) noted, prepares the emergence and accruing adoption of the transnational as a conceptual framework to examine texts (cinemas) under new conditions of financing, production, distribution and reception today (p. 1). Given that film studies generally informs the study of stars in relation to historical traditions and meaning-making process, I will unpack transnational stardom by starting with the
deconstruction of transnational cinema first.

In terms of the word’s morphology, the transnational keeps the national as the notional part, and the prefix ‘trans-’ plays a functional role in modulating the meaning of the national. In this respect, as Nataša Durovičová (2010) writes,

the [...] ‘transnational’ acknowledges the persistent agency of the state, in a varying but fundamentally legitimizing relationship to the scale of ‘the nation’. At the same time, the prefix ‘trans-’ implies relations of unevenness and mobility. It is this relative openness to modalities of geopolitical forms, social relations and especially to the variant scale on which relations in film history have occurred that gives this key term its dynamic force, and its utility as a frame for hypotheses about emergent forms (p. x, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, Durovičová praised its elegance of intermediateness and openness by comparing the transnational with the term ‘international’, which implies a sense of political parity through the prefix ‘inter-’, as well as ‘global’, which indicates a philosophical designation of totality (Durovičová, 2010, pp. ix-x). According to Oxford English Dictionary, the prefix ‘trans-’ is chiefly appointed to verbs and their derivative nouns and adjectives to denote the sense of ‘across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another’ (December 2022, n. p.). With ‘trans-’, the national in transnational, then, is reinvigorated with acts and meanings of border-crossing and state-changing. At one level, the transnational notices both freedom and inequality in the process of the border-crossing activities, as Durovičová pertinently addressed; at another level, it implicates a change of state or quality of the national subject concerned in this process, accompanied by the consequential effects arising from the imbalance of power between the nation-states involved.

The transnational was quickly adopted by scholars as a useful theoretical concept to
tackle the increasingly complex, intricate situations regarding a film’s production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. The openness of the term mandates an inclusivity that ‘comprises both globalization – in cinematic terms, Hollywood’s domination of world film markets – and the counterhegemonic responses of filmmakers from former colonial and Third World countries’ (Ezra and Rowden, 2006, p. 1). Also, its intermediateness accommodates well those texts that are made and received in the spaces between the local and the global (Ezra and Rowden, 2006, p. 4). Importantly, since the inequality between the nation-states is recognised in these spaces, the term simultaneously attends to critiquing the ways in which the imbalance of power shapes ‘the particular places and times in which [the transnational texts] operate, the particular people they affect, and the particular ways they are constituted and maintained’ (Berry and Farquhar, 2006, p. 4). From this perspective, the transnational seems to be a panacea for texts that are difficult to be labelled as ‘national’ in the contemporary context of globalisation.

As I suggested earlier that the national can be read through a spatial-temporal duality, the concept of the transnational can similarly be elucidated within this spatial-temporal framework. In terms of spatial movement, the transnational nature of a film text is contingent on the power dynamics between the two or more nation states that are involved in its production, circulation, and exhibition. Mette Hjort (2010a) outlined a typology of the uneven exchange in transnational cinemas, grading the transnationality of a film text from strong to weak, from marked to unmarked, and from filmic representation to broader cinematic, industrial context (pp. 13-14). Different forms of transnationalism can then be discerned through manifest and/or latent features, determined by the economic (e.g. capital and financing), cultural (e.g. sense of belonging and affinity), political (e.g. government-based/approved projects), social (e.g. ethnicity), as well as aesthetic expressions (e.g. auteurism) (Hjort, 2010a, pp. 16-30). Hjort’s (2010a) model is useful in tackling a wide range of transnational cinematic practices, including not only mainstream productions such as transnational Hollywood but also marginal, alternative production modes such as Accented Cinema.
(see Naficy, 2006) and Third Cinema (see Guneratne and Dissayanake, 2003). More specifically, it enables me to discuss the power dynamics behind different type of film texts in this thesis, ranging from the transnational Hollywood productions such as Legendary’s blockbuster films to the Chinese arthouse productions exhibited at European film festivals.

As far as temporality is concerned, the meaning of transnational cinema is reshaped by the process of globalisation since the 1980s. As Chris Berry (2010) notes, the cinemas that cross national borders have structurally shifted from operating in what he terms an ‘international’ order to a ‘transnational’ order, with the rollback of the nation’s absolute power being the key signal that marks this transition (p. 120). He argues that transnational cinema needs to be understood as ‘growing out of the conditions of globalisation, shaped by neo-liberalism, “free trade”, the collapse of socialism, and post-Fordist mode of production’ (Berry, 2010, p. 112). Berry’s (2010) approach to transnational cinema proffers a more contextually based reading, compared to other readings proposed by scholars such as Sheldon Lu (1997). In Transnational Chinese Cinemas (1997), Lu suggested that Chinese cinemas have historically been transnational, evidenced by, for instance, the film being a technology imported in 1896 and the first Chinese film being produced by an American studio in 1905 and screened in the US (pp. 2, 4). In this sense, the transnationalism mobilised by the process of globalisation is different from the transnationalism marked by (ostensible) border transfer prior to the 1980s.

The spatial-temporal duality of transnational cinema is useful and applicable to my own research on the changing relationship between China and Hollywood in the 2010s. Given that the 2010s is a period characterised by the deepening of globalisation, my focus on the Chinese film industry, Hollywood and the competition and collaboration between the two industries need to be contextualised within the transnational order which Berry (2010) has identified. Specifically, the transnational film texts, including Huallywood films (Chapter 4) and Legendary films (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6), as well
as their respective production context, distribution network, and target audiences need to be examined within a cultural moment where a) the Chinese film industry sought to expand its soft power overseas and b) Hollywood took an increased interest in the growing Chinese film market.

The discussions surrounding transnational stardom share important similarities with that of transnational cinema (e.g. discussion on the imbalance of power in the process of transnationalisation). However, its definition – what is a transnational star – remains a subject of ongoing debate, as stars – more than (film) texts – are a type of above-the-line labour in the industry. The star as worker complicates the concept of transnational stardom and draws disparate views on the definition and use of the term. Given that my own research centres on Jing’s shifting positionings (as a star, actor, and transnational worker) between the structures of the Chinese film industry and Hollywood, it is imperative to articulate how the concept of transnational stardom is used in this thesis. In what follows, I will review the transnational star scholarship and draw on particular sets of ideas to establish an analytical framework for my own research.

In existing scholarship, the term transnational star has been applied in a wide array of occasions. Despite this, there appears to be two discernible strands of adoption, with different emphases on the transnational production and consumption of stardom. First, when the transnational production of stardom is highlighted, stars tend to be perceived as transnational workers, wherein their image and labour (in producing that image) are utilised by a different industry. In this sense, the transnational star, as Sabrina Yu (2012b) defines, is characterised by a ‘physical transfer from one film industry to another to make films, often in a different language from his or her own’ (p. 2). This understanding of transnational stardom has often been applied to describe the ethnic (often but not exclusively non-white) stars who come from a different nation and work in Hollywood, including book-length studies, such as Miyao’s (2007) work on the Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa who gained stardom in silent Hollywood,
Bishop-Sanchez’s (2016) monograph about Brazilian actress Carmen Miranda who was already a star in Brazil and developed a career in classical Hollywood, Yu’s (2012b) case study of the mainland-born Chinese star Jet Li who worked in the twenty-first-century Hollywood, and Feng’s (2017) work on Hong Kong star Chow Yun-fat who ventured into Hollywood after attaining national stardom, as well as journal articles with star case studies who followed similar trajectory (e.g. Howard, 2014; Lee, 2014; Zhang, J., 2014; Lau, 2018).

In these examples, some stars have achieved stardom in their own national context prior to their employment in Hollywood, whereas others gained stardom through/in the Hollywood system. The uneven exchange and imbalance of power articulated in Durovičová’s (2010) conceptualisation of transnationalism is evident in these stars’ transnational journey, in the way that Hollywood tends to occupy the desirable centre and the destination for them. Given that there seems to be an ever-present imbalanced power structure between Hollywood and the nation these stars originate, this transnational journey is often a one-way traffic, in which it is Hollywood that usually assimilates and takes control over foreign talent (Yu, 2012b, p. 2). Nevertheless, while Hollywood tends to dominate the limelight of stars’ transnational journeys, there is research work that adopts the term which does not particularly highlight their transnational journey to Hollywood. For example, Lisa Funnell’s (2014) study focuses on the transnational ethnic Chinese female action stars whose careers traverse Hong Kong, Hollywood, and Canada.

On the other hand, the other strand of adoption tends to highlight the transnational consumption of stardom, in which case the stars tend to be viewed as images that circulate transnationally and engender impact on an audience from a different nation-state. In this light, as Meeuf and Raphael (2013) note, the phenomenon of transnational stardom emerges as the result of ‘the transnational mobility of popular media (and its audiences) throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ (p. 2). This understanding of transnational stardom tends to lay more emphasis on stars’
ideological functions and transcultural impact. As such, the transnational star (as text) constructs what Meeuf and Raphael call a ‘contact zone’ which soothes ideological confrontation and negotiates the global and local, acting as ‘sources of pleasure and identification of their audiences’ (2013, pp. 4-5). Following this recognition, Hollywood star Johnny Depp and Thai action star Tony Jaa can both be treated as transnational stars, as their star image is disseminated and consumed around various parts of the world (Meeuf and Raphael, 2013, p. 2). Without a doubt, this perspective encompasses a wider variety of stars. For example, Meeuf (2013) takes the Hollywood star John Wayne’s international popularity as a means of cultural negotiation with Japan. Raphael (2013) examines the cultural power of American pop star Michael Jackson’s global celebrity. In addition, as the status of transnational stars as workers is downplayed, this perspective allows for an examination of the transnational impact of those stars without corporeal substance, such as animated stars (see Wells, 2003) and synthespians (see Desjardins, 2016).

From this perspective, this understanding of transnational stardom is more inclusive, especially within the contemporary context of globalisation. As Russell Meeuf (2017) remarks, the imposition of a set of ostensible markers associated with ‘national borders, national identities, and national cinemas’ only creates hurdles in understanding transnational stars within the ‘nebulous realities of globalisation’ (p. 195). Given this, Meeuf (2017) argues that it would be more productive to think of transnational stars as not just labour but ‘a contact zone’ which ‘prioritizes the idea of exchange and intimate connections’ (p. 196) and evokes ‘cultural resonance’ (p. 197). However, by highlighting the transnational consumption of stars in the context of globalisation, it raises an interesting question in terms of whether the audience in the recipient country consumes the transnational images of a star or the national images of a star that happen to cross national borders. The transnational images of a star, as noted by Lin Feng (2017), necessitate a continuous adjustment and adaptation to cater to the preferences and sensitivities of each specific audience when circulated in different cultural markets (p. 112). In this process, a transnational image is a product
of negotiation between the star’s home country and the country where their image is received. But in the case where the consumption of a star’s national image is facilitated by the transnational mobility of media, there is no such negotiation in the production of that image.

Different emphases on the transnational production and consumption of stars engenders different interpretations of transnational stars. However, it is important to note that this academic disagreement does not suggest that the concept of transnational stars should only be read in one way or another. Rather, it highlights how, by taking different angles, a star’s transnational journey, whether as images, workers, or both, can be read in the most productive way. In other words, these understandings of transnational stardom reflect different emphases, rather than establishing boundaries. Particularly, among scholars who focus on transnational stars in Hollywood, both considerations – the transnational production and consumption of stars – have often been integrated into their work, wherein the stars’ status as the transnational worker and images are subject to negotiations within the Hollywood industry.

As this research will utilise Jing as a tool to unravel the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s, I will not engage in a debate over her status as a transnational star. Rather, I will make an eclectic use of these discussions on (trans)nationalism and transnational stardom to analyse her transnational journey by seeing her as both texts and labour. In my own research, there are two transnational cinemas (Huallywood and Hollywood) and two discursive (trans)national sites (The Great Wall and Weibo) where Jing is situated. As such, while I recognise Jing’s positionality in the industrial structures throughout this research, the examination of Jing in each (trans)national domain requires its own emphasis. First, when examining her presence in Huallywood cinema, I will place more emphasis on her status as images. I will focus on her onscreen persona and examine how it is shaped by the transnational agenda of Huallywood. Specifically, I will explore the transnational properties in her persona, investigating how it caters to
a wider audience beyond the national market. The border-crossing of these Huallywood films will then be considered within the (imbalanced) power relations between China and Hollywood. Second, when examining her presence in Hollywood, I will give equal consideration to her status as a transnational worker and her persona. I will focus on her onscreen personas in these Hollywood films and examine how they are informed by not only the politics of gender and race in the Hollywood film industry but also the involvement of the Chinese film industry. At the same time, I will explore how her positionality in/between the two industries is shaped by the negotiations between the Chinese film industry, the Chinese market, and Hollywood. Third, when examining her performance in *The Great Wall*, I will prioritise her status as a transnational worker (actor). I will focus on how the transnational sensitivity of the film project itself shapes her acting labour and employment conditions. Her transnational journey, as both workers and personas, will be contextualised in the competing and collaborating dynamics between China and Hollywood. Fourth, when examining her performance on the national social media platform Weibo, I will place more consideration on her status as a worker (celebrity). I will examine how she manages the transnational elements in her Huallywood and Hollywood journey for a home audience.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the concept of transnationalism and transnational stardom. Through mobilising particular sets of ideas and approaches, I have established the theoretical framework for this research. As will be demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, the concept of the national and the transnational as well as their interactions have impacted the construction of Jing’s persona in Huallywood and Hollywood, her acting labour in *The Great Wall*, and her presentational performances on Weibo.

Diverging from existing transnational star studies that regards the possession of
certain transnational star status as a starting point for research, I prioritise how the transnational journey itself shapes the meaning of transnational stardom. As Jing’s transnational star status is rendered secondary, I am enabled to utilise her transnational journey to explore wider cultural and industrial contexts that shape the meaning and landscape of transnational Chinese stardom in the 2010s. In the next chapter, I will highlight the idea of journey and explore the transnational paths Chinese female stars have taken since the 1990s. I will observe the transnational dynamics between China and Hollywood through examining their paths and contextualise Jing’s positionality within the (changed) cultural and industrial landscape.
Chapter 3 From art films to blockbusters: Charting the transnational paths of Chinese female stars since the 1990s

Introduction

Viewing Jing Tian as a star caught in the tensions and negotiations between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood, my research recognises the positionality of individual stars within wider industrial structures. To a large degree, Chinese (female) stars’ transnational journey to Hollywood is closely tied to the power relations between China and Hollywood at a given time. The past three decades between the 1990s and 2010s witnessed rapid contextual changes in both China and Hollywood, which led to a shifting dynamic between the two industries and markets. To better capture the ways in which the (changed) industrial conditions have inhibited Jing (and other Chinese female stars of her time) from attaining transnational stardom in Hollywood in the 2010s, a close look at the transnational paths Chinese female stars have taken in recent history (I choose the period starting from the 1990s, as the Chinese market was reopened to Hollywood since 1994) and the industrial conditions that facilitated these paths will be beneficial. In doing so, it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the changing industrial conditions that have shaped how the Chinese female stars have been utilised by Hollywood, thereby shedding light on Jing’s failure in the 2010s.

This chapter examines the transnational paths to Hollywood Chinese female stars have taken since the 1990s, with a particular focus on the transnational career of the two most successful and prominent transnational Chinese female stars – Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi – to compare and contrast that of Jing and her contemporaries in the 2010s.10 In

10 It should be noted that Gong and Zhang were not amongst the first batch of Chinese female stars who sought a transnational career in Hollywood in China’s Reform era (from 1978 onwards). There were two notable female stars Joan Chen (also known as Chen Chong) and Vivian Wu (Wu Junmei) who managed to achieve a certain level of fame in Hollywood through their roles in, for example, The Last Emperor (1987), Tai-Pan (1986), and The Joy Luck Club (1993). They were not included in this thesis because their transnational journey was more individual
so doing, it aims to map the changing landscape of the ways open to Chinese actresses to pursue a transnational film career. Specifically, I focus on Gong’s primary association with the Chinese art films within the film festival circuit in the 1990s and Zhang’s connection with the indiewood film (a term I will return to later in this chapter) *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and her ensuing association with more commercial Hollywood productions in the 2000s. Finally, I discuss the Chinese female stars’ association with the typical big-budget, blockbuster films that pertain to the mainstream Hollywood cinema in the 2010s, which also typifies much of Jing’s transnational career.

I look at these female stars’ positionality in the broader industrial contexts to uncover how the paths taken by Gong and Zhang have led to their transnational fame and stardom in Hollywood, and by contrast how the path taken by Chinese female stars in the 2010s has not resulted in the attainment of transnational stardom, despite the fact that their participations in Hollywood blockbusters were seemingly in/of Hollywood industry. In doing so, I pay close attention to the shifting ways of how Hollywood have used these stars emerging from these production sites between the 1990s and the 2010s. Finally, I contextualise Jing’s transnational journey within the industrial and market conditions that inform this non-viable path her contemporaries have taken in the 2010s and highlight the overlaps and differences of Hollywood’s employment and exploitation of their stardom and labour. I will end up this chapter with my argument that while the differences exist in the specific ways Hollywood uses Jing, the industry’s commercial agenda towards the Chinese market in the 2010s predestines that neither she nor her contemporaries could build transnational stardom during this period.

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Based (i.e. their journey to the US was driven by personal career pursuits [see Khoo, 2013, p. 71]), without visible active engagement of the Chinese film industry or the Chinese market. While they are valuable figures in examining Chinese female stars’ image and career in Hollywood (see for example Jie Zhang’s article on Joan Chen [2014]), they do not serve as the representative examples for my research, which examines the Sino-Hollywood negations on an industrial level.
3.1 The 1990s: Gong Li, Chinese art films, and international film festivals

Looking at Gong Li’s career in the late 1980s to the 1990s, it is discernible that her stardom was established and perpetuated through her roles in the art films of the Fifth Generation directors, particularly in the works of Zhang Yimou. Significantly, these art films were noted for being exhibited at Cannes, Venice, or Berlin international film festivals, with most of them receiving nominations for and/or winning awards. Gong debuted as Jiu’er in Zhang’s Red Sorghum (1987), which won a Golden Bear at Berlin Film Festival. It marked the beginning of an eight-year star-director pairing, where she was cast as the female lead and often positioned front and centre in the narratives of Zhang’s work. His works such as Ju Dou (1990), Raise the Red Lantern (1991), The Story of Qiu Ju (1992), To Live (1994) and Shanghai Triad (1995) were critically acclaimed at the three film festivals, earning nominations and/or awards including Palme d’Or, Golden Lion, Silver Lion and Grand Prix. Notably, through playing Qiu Ju in The Story of Qiu Ju (1992), Gong was awarded Best Actress at Venice Film Festival. As a result, these art films cemented her prominent transnational presence and her reputation as an actor at the European film festivals.

As Gong’s career profile in the late 1980s to the 1990s has made clear, her transnational stardom was attained and solidified at the film festivals that accommodated and more importantly recognised the Fifth Generation art films. Through Cannes, Venice, and Berlin international film festivals, Gong acquired substantial transnational exposure, leading to her increased recognisability amongst certain Western audiences. Furthermore, more than just an exhibition venue and a celebration of the cinematic form, the film festival functions a site of power, a distribution network, a shaper of global film culture, and a film business to be carefully

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11 It refers to a cohort of Chinese filmmakers who received education at, and graduated from, the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), including noted names such as Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou. The films they made during the late 1980s to the mid-1990s were marked by a visually emphatic filmic language and reflections of Chinese culture and history (Yang, 2018, p. 21). See more in Ni’s Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China’s Fifth Generation (2002), and Yang’s The Formation of Chinese Art Cinema: 1990-2003 (2018) for the cultural, economic, political and industrial backdrop that fertilised their work.
handled. An understanding of the working of film festivals and Gong’s positionality within it are important, as her subsequent employment by Hollywood in the 2000s was built upon the fame and stardom she established in the film festival circuit.

Gong’s association with Cannes, Venice and Berlin is crucial to address, as these three sites hold the greatest potential to bolster her transnational career in Hollywood. As Marijke de Valck (2016a) notes, size and outreach are two importance determinants to distinguish a film festival (pp. 2-3). While the landscape of film festivals stretches across the world, Cannes, Venice and Berlin have remained most influential, competitive and authoritative in the world’s film festival circuit. They have a considerable scale in terms of events, screenings, programme range and international outreach of attendees. Additionally, they have been historically renowned globally, with a validation of their A-list status from the authoritative regulator of film festivals, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (Chan, 2011, p. 256; Loist, 2016, pp. 54-55). The reputation of these three film festivals plays an important role in adding up the cultural and economic value to Gong’s stardom and her film work. As Thomas Elsaesser (2013) observes, one defining function of the international film festival is to ‘categorise, classify, sort and sift’ films on an international scale through a process of ‘supporting, selecting, celebrating and rewarding’ (p. 84). Functioning as gatekeepers, these film festivals work to ‘add value and cultural capital’ on the top of the participating films (Elsaesser, 2013, p. 84). Marijke de Valck (2016b) considers the film festival a site of cultural legitimisation, where filmmakers (and I would add actors) obtain symbolic capital – prestige, honour, and recognition – in the form of awards and nominations (pp. 105, 107). In return, the symbolic capital can be converted to economic capital, in which a film with prestigious prizes creates stronger economic appeal for wider theatrical distribution (de Valck, 2016b, pp. 107-108). Given the rarity of awards and nominations, the prizes and critical acclaim Gong’s films attained at

12 It is worth noting that the prestige of Cannes, Venice and Berlin film festivals is critiqued by Nornes (2013) for coming from a Eurocentric perspective, where an order predicated upon ‘first Europe, then elsewhere’ problematically situates Europe at the top of the culture hierarchy (p. 151).
Cannes, Venice and Berlin made them coveted goods in the art film market.

Importantly, the film festival’s distribution network facilitated the transnational circulation and consumption of Gong’s films and star image. As Dina Inordanova (2016) points out, the transnational nature of film festivals lies not only in its inclusion of divergent nationalist agendas, but also its capacity to bring together global industry players (p. xiv). More than exhibition venues, film festivals have developed into ‘multi-layered global industrial events that link different players and entities in getting films made and shown by assembling necessary financing, nurturing talents, facilitating coproduction, and finding global distributors’ (Wong, 2011, pp. 129-130). Additionally, the film market has become a well-established practice/event for transaction of films within film festivals, since the organisation of Cannes’ first Marché du Film in 1959 (Wong, 2011, pp. 136-141). As such, film festivals function as the ‘market’ for films – in metaphoric and literal senses – where distributors attend film festivals and their accompanying markets, seeking films with sales potential. Together with the quality labels bestowed by Cannes, Venice or Berlin, Gong’s art films with the Fifth Generation directors in the late 1980s and the 1990s found American distributors and entered the US film market (see Table 3.1). These films, after their premiere at one of the three film festivals, were soon released in the same year or a year after in the US. While the box office takings were generally meagre, they nevertheless suggested Gong’s star image reached and was consumed by certain Western audiences.
Table 3.1 The US release of the Chinese art films starring Gong Li (1987-1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Year(s) of release</th>
<th>US distributor</th>
<th>Box office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Story of Qiu Ju</em></td>
<td>Zhang Yimou</td>
<td>1992/1993(US)</td>
<td>Sony Pictures Classics</td>
<td>$1,890,247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Farewell My Concubine</em></td>
<td>Chen Kaige</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Miramax</td>
<td>$5,216,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To Live</em></td>
<td>Zhang Yimou</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>The Samuel Goldwyn Company</td>
<td>$2,332,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shanghai Triad</em></td>
<td>Zhang Yimou</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Sony Pictures Classics</td>
<td>$2,086,101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Temptress Moon</em></td>
<td>Chen Kaige</td>
<td>1996/1997(US)</td>
<td>Miramax</td>
<td>$1,100,788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Emperor and the Assassin</em></td>
<td>Chen Kaige</td>
<td>1998/1999(US)</td>
<td>Sony Pictures Classics</td>
<td>$1,267,239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The box office reveals the US grossing and does not count in the revenues of re-release.

The particular demographics in the US that consumed Gong’s image and films informed the kind of transnational stardom she maintained and her career in the American film industry (rather than Hollywood at this stage) in the 1990s. As Paul McDonald (2009) observes, a taste for imported films (especially European films often associated with art) acts as a non-economic means to distinguish social status, when the growing middle class has increasingly led to a blurred socio-economic hierarchy in a post-World War II environment (p. 355). As a way of differentiation, the consumption of art films reflects an audience’s high-brow and intellectual taste, as these films often contain linguistic otherness, artistic innovation, and narrative ambiguity (McDonald, 2009, p. 355). From this perspective, Gong’s star image was embraced by a niche, upscale audience, rather than the general mass in the US. As such, she essentially established what can be termed ‘niche stardom’ (Negra, 2005, p. 81). In her analysis of ‘Queen of the Indies’ Parker Posey, Diane Negra (2005) elucidated the niche stardom she established from the American independent cinema and the ambiguity of her star power beyond this realm. That is, while Posey was undeniably a well-known star figure within American independent cinema, her niche stardom did not always lead to mainstream, commercial recognition. Similarly, Gong’s niche star status built from art
films within film festival circuit did not facilitate a career into the mainstream Hollywood in the 1990s. Rather, it introduced her to the American independent sector, where she starred in *Chinese Box* (1997), an indie film (I will explore this term in next section in detail) made by American Chinese director Wayne Wang.

As Negra rightly argues, the crossover success into the mainstream, big-budget productions hinges upon ‘the star characteristics and cultural conditions’ (2005, p. 82). In Posey’s case, the star image she curated in the American independent cinema became a restricting factor, as the elements of a satire of famous and subversive femininity in her image did not align comfortably with the promoted female image and conservative family values in mainstream Hollywood (Negra, 2005, pp. 82-84). Chris Holmlund (2002), through comparing the star images and career trajectories of three Latin actresses Lupe Ontiveros, Rosie Perez, and Jennifer Lopez, concludes that despite their similar ethnic background, only the good-looking, light-skinned Lopez whose body (specifically, her posterior) was capitalised on for heterosexual appeal succeeded in moving to the mainstream (pp. 117-119, 121). In a similar vein, Gong’s career in the 1990s was also indicative of being confined by the star image she established in the Chinese art films. These films by and large constructed an image of Gong as a Chinese woman under oppression, simmering with national allegory that was difficult to cross over to mainstream Hollywood. Gong repeatedly played young Chinese women in adverse situations (e.g. being cast into arranged marriage, forced into concubinage, or brought as the wife of an old man) who fought fiercely against their fate, yet ultimately ended up dying or in madness. Her image was intrinsically associated with the representation of a ‘China’ that suffers while harbouring hopes of rejuvenation, as many scholars commented (see Cui, 2003; Berry and Farquhar, 2006; Larson, 2017). The strong connection to ‘China’ in her image adds difficulty to cross over to mainstream Hollywood, while simultaneously being embraced as a symbolic figure by a more literate, oppositional audience that the independent cinema audience is widely positioned to be.
From the perspective of transnationalism, Gong being neglected by Hollywood in the 1990s can also be understood through considering the Sino-Hollywood dynamics during that time. For a profit-driven industry such as Hollywood, the employment of transnational stars necessarily factors in their economic appeal in domestic and global markets. While the international markets have become increasingly important for Hollywood since 1994\(^\text{13}\), the mainland Chinese film market had not fully manifested its box office potential yet (I use ‘not fully’ rather than ‘not’ because the huge success of *Titanic* [1997] in China suggests the potential of the Chinese market). The mainland Chinese market has been open to Hollywood only in 1994, with a limited quota of 10 films on a revenue-sharing basis per year in the 1990s (Zhu, 2022, p. 134). Additionally, the star culture in China was still at a nascent stage in the 1990s. During this time, the issue of access to the Chinese market was the primary concern for Hollywood, rather than the investment in transnational Chinese stars as a way of penetrating the market. From this perspective, it is not surprising that Gong was not employed by the mainstream Hollywood in the 1990s.

Gong’s transnational path through Cannes, Venice and Berlin film festivals indicates the power of film festivals in fostering the transnational stardom and career of Chinese female stars. Her path is also informative of how the Chinese film industry contributed to the transnational exposure and career of its own stars, when its development (since the Reform era) was not yet in full swing in the 1990s. This approach of using art films to promote Chinese female stars on the international stage poses a stark contrast to its industrial practices in the 2010s, which will be reflected in Jing’s particular transnational journey in the subsequent chapters.

While Gong’s niche stardom did not attract Hollywood’s attention in the 1990s, she eventually entered mainstream Hollywood in the mid-2000s, participating in big budget films such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) and *Miami Vice* (2006). Her role as a

\(^{13}\) In 1994, the international box office revenues of Hollywood films for the first time outperformed the box office takings in its domestic market (Balio, 2013, p. 9).
Japanese geisha in *Memoirs* to a large degree resembled her previous onscreen image – a woman who draws power from, and fights against, a system of oppression, but her crossover success – from niche to mainstream and from China to Hollywood – should not be merely read as her adapting to the cultural conditions, as Holmlund’s (2002) example of Lopez illustrated. Rather, Gong’s crossover was occurred within broader industrial conditions, where a) the line between the independent cinema and the mainstream became increasingly blurred within the American film industry (Tzioumakis, 2013; Schatz, 2017), and b) the Sino-Hollywood relationship started to change, considering the box office potential of the Chinese market became more evident, and the development of the Chinese film industry gained momentum. It is primarily the first industrial condition that enabled Zhang Ziyi, who I will now turn to, to break into mainstream Hollywood and become a transnational star in the early 2000s. It is the two industrial realities combined that pushed forward the transnational career of Zhang and Gong in Hollywood in the mid-2000s, with Zhang’s career being particularly emblematic of the changing Sino-Hollywood dynamics in this decade.

### 3.2 The 2000s: Zhang Ziyi, indiewood, and mainstream Hollywood

Zhang Ziyi shared a similar transnational path as Gong in the beginning of her career, but she soon veered off that course. She debuted in Zhang Yimou’s *The Road Home* (1999), playing the female lead Zhaodi. The film received a Golden Bear nomination and won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2000, which endowed Zhang Ziyi with transnational visibility in the film festival circuit. Departing from Gong’s close association with film festivals, Zhang starred in Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), a what can be considered ‘indiewood’ film coproduced by the US, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It was a critical and commercial hit that propelled Zhang to unprecedented transnational exposure. Apart from the film’s success, her

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14 The film won several awards and nominations, including the most noted award, Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards. It garnered 214 million dollars box office globally against a production cost of 17 million dollars.
performance won several awards and nominations in national (Hong Kong and Taiwan) and international (the UK and North America) contexts. Through *Crouching Tiger*, Zhang soon established transnational stardom in Hollywood. Subsequently, she participated in commercial Hollywood productions such as *Rush Hour 2* (2001) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). Clearly, *Crouching Tiger* played a vital role in contributing to Zhang’s breakthrough into the mainstream Hollywood. To fully understand how she quickly moved from film festival circuit to Hollywood and how she gained mainstream Hollywood stardom from a ‘non-mainstream’ Hollywood film, it is crucial to unpack the concept and industry of indiewood, as well as the indiewood nature of *Crouching Tiger*.

Indiewood is a portmanteau merging the meaning of indie (independent) and Hollywood. In general terms, indiewood refers to ‘an area in which Hollywood and the independent sector merge or overlap’ (King, 2009, p. 1). As such, it is a cinema marked by ‘a blend comprised of features associated with dominant, mainstream convention and markers of “distinction” designed to appeal to more particular, niche-audience constituencies’ (King, 2009, p. 2). Indiewood suggests a certain kind of industrial practice and aesthetics, but also a particular stage as American independent cinema evolves over time. In his attempt to define and distinguish the term independent, indie and indiewood, Yannis Tzioumakis (2013) made clear that these terms chart the three chronological phases that inform and shape the contemporary landscape of American independent cinema (p. 30). Particularly, the indiewood stage is of most relevance and importance in understanding Zhang’s crossover success through *Crouching Tiger* in 2000.

To grasp the features of indiewood, a background of the development from indie to

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15 Zhang Ziyi's performance in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has won her the award of Most Promising Actress at Chicago Film Critics Association Awards (the US), Best Supporting Actress at Toronto Film Critics Association Awards in 2000, as well as the nomination of Best Supporting Actress at the 54th British Academy Film Awards (the UK), Best Actress at the 20th Hong Kong Film Awards, (Hong Kong), Best Leading Actress at the 37th Golden Horse Awards (Taiwan), to list a few. A full list of awards and nominations can be found at Zhang Ziyi's Wikipedia page.
indiewood is needed. Characterised by structural changes, both the indie and indiewood phases demonstrated an increasing participation of Hollywood in independent film production and distribution. As Tzioumakis (2013) notes, the indie years (circa. 1989-1995) saw, among other things, a deeper involvement of the Hollywood majors in niche production and distribution sectors (e.g. acquisition of independent film companies, financing films at development level, and establishing specialty divisions) (pp. 33-36). The indiewood years (beginning from roughly 1996 onwards) witnessed a further enhanced, integral involvement of Hollywood majors than the previous stage, including utilising Hollywoodised filmmaking, distribution and marketing methods (e.g. more accessible narrative, big budget, star cast, global distribution network) (pp. 36-38). This increased involvement of Hollywood studios in especially the late 1990s shaped the idea of indiewood at filmic and cinematic levels. For the purpose of my discussion of Crouching Tiger and Zhang’s stardom here, two aspects are significant to note. First, leaning more to the commercial Hollywood, indiewood films possess stronger potential to cross over to the mainstream (Tzioumakis, 2012, p. 11). Second, indie(wood) creates a zone for stars to commute between niche and mainstream (see Baron and Tzioumakis, 2020, pp. 189-206). On the one hand, Hollywood stars are used in indiewood films as a way of marketing, bringing indiewood films more visibility to a mainstream audience. In return, Hollywood stars breathe oxygen from indiewood (through playing demanding roles) into their own stardom. On the other hand, niche stars and actors working in independent sector gain increased exposure in the mainstream cinema and market, following the growing commercial imperative in indiewood films. In some way, indiewood serves as a space of overlap, where stars from niche and mainstream background converge and expand their career.

Crouching Tiger is such a film that reflects the industrial conditions of indiewood and the mainstreaming of Zhang’s stardom in Hollywood. The film had a budget of 17 million dollars, which was a large amount for an indie/independent production at the time. Hollywood major Sony Pictures’ main subsidiary Columbia Pictures and specialty
film division Sony Pictures Classics (SPC) were involved in the film’s production and SPC in its distribution in the US.\textsuperscript{16} In a strict sense, Crouching Tiger cannot be considered an indiewood film created entirely within the American film industry, since it was a transnational coproduction. Yet it cannot be seen as a foreign language import either, given SPC’s direct financial involvement (see Schatz, 2017, p. 275). The difficulty in identifying the extent to which this film aligns with the idea of ‘indiewood’, then, poses a challenge in understanding Zhang’s career movement and transnational stardom attained through this film. Therefore, I use the term ‘indiewood’ in a broad sense here to highlight the involvement of the Hollywood majors and their specialty film divisions in production at a time when they recognised that there was a market for foreign language imports and sought to engage in their (co)production. SPC was one of the two most powerful players (the other being Miramax, acquired by Disney in 1993) in the 1990s, with a track record of success in distributing and marketing foreign-language films (McDonald, 2009). As Paul McDonald (2009) remarked, SPC and Miramax dominated the niche market of foreign-language films in the US and defined popularity within this terrain (pp. 372-373). Then, Crouching Tiger’s strong tie with SPC suggests that it was backed by its financing, domestic and global distribution network, and marketing expertise. Additionally, the film brought in Chow Yun-fat and Michelle Yeoh, two transnational stars with established fame in Hollywood as the male and female lead to draw in more audiences. Finally, the film was promoted and released in a way that maximised the potential for becoming a commercial hit. These strategies including premiering at the Cannes Film Festival, packaging foreignness in its trailer, platform releasing to accumulate critical acclaim, and pursuing the Oscars (see a comparable case of Miramax’s distribution and marketing for Life is Beautiful [1997] in McDonald [2009]). Therefore, it was less a surprise that the film eventually became both a critical success and a box office hit.

\textsuperscript{16} The film was co-produced by seven companies, including three American companies: Sony Pictures Classics, Columbia Pictures, and independent company Good Machine, as well as four Chinese companies from Hong Kong (Edko), Taiwan (Zoom Hunt), and China (China Film Co-Production Corp., and Asian Union Film & Entertainment).
The indiewood nature of *Crouching Tiger* was the cornerstone of Zhang’s transnational stardom in Hollywood, as the film’s crossover success simultaneously propelled her to a mainstream audience. Despite the fact that it was a supporting role, her performances won critical acclaim which added cultural and economic value to her stardom. Apart from this, she was arguably introduced as a star in the film. She was given substantial attention in terms of screen time, performative space, and narrative significance comparable to Chow and Yeoh. Noticeably, she was introduced by her name, in addition to her character’s name, in the trailer, making up one of the three names that appeared in the voice over, as it narrates ‘Sony Pictures Classics proudly presents Chow Yun-fat, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi...’ (IMDb, 2024). As such, there is little doubt that the indiewood film *Crouching Tiger* introduced her to the mainstream, paving the way for her transnational career in Hollywood.

Despite the fact that Zhang’s crossover success in the early 2000s was attributed significantly to a changed industrial landscape in the American independent sector in the late 1990s, the film festival – as an alternative distribution network and home for independent cinemas – acted as a vital platform and a jumping-off point for her transnational career. Therefore, it was her Berlin presence in 1999 and Sony Pictures’ specialty film division SPC that collectively enabled her to take this indiewood path. Compared to Gong’s path which was centrally defined by art cinema and film festivals and its distance from mainstream Hollywood, Zhang’s path suggests an evolving industrial condition in American independent sector marked by Hollywood’s encroachment of that terrain. Given that the indiewood phase in American independent cinema widens the route from niche to mainstream for actors/stars, Gong’s crossover to mainstream Hollywood in the mid-2000s is not unexpected. *Memoirs* serves as a prime example of not just Hollywood’s investment of Zhang (by casting her as the lead), but also Hollywood’s recognition and exploitation of Gong’s niche fame within the independent sector (by casting her in a supporting role). Their characters in the film, despite being Japanese, remained aligned with their established star persona.
The Hollywood career of Gong and Zhang in the 2000s signalled the changing Sino-Hollywood relationship during this time. Following China’s accession to World Trade Organisation in 2001, the import quota was raised from 10 to 20 films per year (Brzeski, 2017). Albeit still limited, the doubled quota has made the issue of access less pressing. More importantly, with China’s opening itself to the world on a more integral level, Hollywood was enabled to trial other ways to penetrate the market such as investing in the Chinese exhibition industry, establishing divisions in China and (co)producing Chinese-language films (Herring, 2021, pp. 92-95). Clearly, at this stage, Hollywood realised the box office potential of the Chinese market and started to adopt various strategies to tap into it. Simultaneously, the Chinese star culture in the early to mid-2000s was gradually taking shape. Alongside with Gong and Zhang’s national stardom attained from recognitions at film festivals, Hollywood and/or Chinese blockbusters (I will fully explore the Chinese blockbuster in Chapter 4), successful domestic films and television dramas have led the rise and celebrity of some home-grown stars such as Fan Bingbing, Li Bingbing, Zhao Wei, and Zhou Xun in the early 2000s. The formation of Chinese star culture made stardom a feasible strategy to penetrate the Chinese market. Then, Hollywood’s use of Gong and Zhang, apart from their appeal to its domestic market, also held potential to appeal to the Chinese market. Therefore, Gong and Zhang’s films like Memoirs and Miami Vice could be viewed as early attempts to gauge how the market responded to star power.\(^{17}\) In this way, Hollywood’s investment in Gong and Zhang, especially in Zhang in Memoirs, was also driven by an interest in the Chinese film market. It is the combined forces – from within and outside – that defined Gong and Zhang’s Hollywood career in the 2000s.

In addition to this, Zhang’s Hollywood career was also benefitted from the development of the Chinese film industry in the 2000s. The fact that Zhang assumed the lead role in Memoirs in 2005, following a four-year gap since her supporting role

\(^{17}\) It is worth noting that China banned Memoirs of a Geisha (2005) for its potential to raise Sino-Japanese tensions with Chinese actresses playing Japanese geishas (Coonan, 2006).
in *Rush Hour 2* in 2001, cannot solely be attributed to her star status attained through *Crouching Tiger* and the growing Chinese market. In the early 2000s, the popularity of Chinese blockbusters *Hero* (2002), in which she played a supporting role, and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), in which she played the female lead, in the US contributed significantly to maintaining her stardom between 2001 and 2004. Compared to the niche, arthouse productions that propelled Gong to transnational stardom in the 1990s, the Chinese blockbusters with star cast, big budget, and commercial viability that maintained Zhang’s stardom certainly represents a shift of strategy regarding pushing Chinese female stars on the international stage. This approach moves away from its practices in the 1990s and begins to show affinity with the way the Chinese film industry would propel Jing to transnational stardom – through an active participation in the production of mainstream Hollywood blockbusters – in the 2010s.

Amidst these Sino-Hollywood encounters in the 2000s that shaped the contour of Zhang’s transnational career, a noteworthy feature was the increasing importance of the Chinese market. Against the backdrop of the overall increasing international box office takings of Hollywood films, the Asia Pacific markets showed a steady growth (MPAA, 2008; 2011). In 2010, when the box office revenues of the Asia Pacific region accounted for 41 percent of the international box office, the Chinese market contributed to more than forty percent of the total takings occurred within this region (MPAA, 2011). Following the substantial increase of box office revenues in China in the 2010s, the importance of the Chinese market for Hollywood would only continue to grow. This market condition would change the Sino-Hollywood dynamic on a more profound level and impact how Hollywood used Chinese (female) stars in the 2010s. Accordingly, the transnational paths that led to Gong and Zhang’s crossover success in the 1990s and 2000s would continue to morph in the new era, which I will now turn to.
3.3 The 2010s: Chinese female stars, the Chinese market, and Hollywood blockbusters

In the 1990s and 2000s, only a handful of Chinese female stars appeared in Hollywood films. However, the 2010s saw a surge of Chinese female stars – Fan Bingbing, Li Bingbing, Liu Yifei, Yang Ying, Yu Nan, Zhang Jingchu, Zhou Xun, and Jing Tian, to name a few – appearing in Hollywood films, particularly in blockbusters of action, adventure, and fantasy genres. At first glance, their presence in mainstream, globally distributed Hollywood films seems to be in parallel with Zhang’s later career after *Crouching Tiger* in the sense that they appear in mainstream, commercial Hollywood productions. Yet, their connection to films with the blockbuster label indicates that this is a different transnational path (viability aside), as blockbusters point to a particular mode of production different from Zhang’s Hollywood films in the 2000s.

To better understand and analyse this path taken by many Chinese female stars, a background of blockbusters is necessary. Although the term blockbuster is open to various interpretations, its industrial characteristics are often distinct and specific. Blockbusters are commonly articulated through the language of superlatives (Stringer, 2003, p. 4). As Julian Stringer (2003) notes, the blockbuster conveys a sense of ‘excess’: ‘a going beyond of what had been the size norms of accepted or established practice; the adding on of something special; the presence of an extra dimension of some kind or other’ (p. 5). This sense of excess is achieved through a comparison with the industrial norms of commercial productions. Identified by Thomas Schatz (2003) as ‘high-cost, high-tech, and high-stakes’ (p. 16), blockbuster productions necessitate big (and increasingly leaning toward mega) budget to cover especially the production costs of star employment and advanced film technologies (special effect) and the marketing costs of massive promotional campaigns, which makes them even riskier ventures than conventional commercial productions. Entering the new millennium, blockbuster productions have gradually relied on franchises and tentpoles, as they are
most profitable, easier to sell to international markets, and with capacity to breed ancillary markets (Balio, 2013). The Chinese female stars in the 2010s were found mainly participating in this type of productions, such as *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (2015), *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016), and *Kong: Skull Island* (2018). Notably, among these blockbusters in which they appeared, many of them pertain to franchise instalments. Franchising, as Derek Johnson (2013) notes, ‘explains the multiplied replication of culture from intellectual property resources...[and implies] a new way of thinking about networks of collaborative content production constituted across multiple industrial sites’ (p. 6). *Iron Man* and *X-Men* (from Marvel Comics/ Marvel Cinematic Universe), *Transformers* (from Hasbro), *Mission: Impossible* (from the franchise driven by Tom Cruise), and *Kong* (from the King Kong franchise/ MonsterVerse) are blockbusters adapted from established IPs across various media products. As such, Chinese stars’ presence in Hollywood blockbusters (and particularly franchise blockbusters) suggests a path divergent from Zhang’s association with commercial productions in the 2000s.

Given the massive costs of producing blockbusters, achieving success at box office in domestic and more importantly international markets becomes critical. Ushering into the 2010s, the box office of Asia Pacific region kept a steady and significant increase over the ten years, rising from 8.5 billion to 17.8 billion dollars, gradually taking up a higher percentage (from 40.4 to 57.8 percent) of the total international box office (see Table 3.2). The box office of the Chinese market has made significant impact to this growth. It retained a fast and overall steady growth from 2.0 billion in 2011 to 9.3 billion dollars in 2019, with only a slight downturn in 2016.\(^\text{18}\) Additionally, China surpassed Japan to have become the biggest international market in 2012 and maintained the top grossing market till 2019 (see Table 3.3). This growth was accompanied by an incrementally widening gap between China and the second largest

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\(^{18}\) See Teo (2019, p. 324) for causes of its sustained growth and temporary decline.
market, from a 300 million dollars in 2012 to an astounding 6.9 billion dollars in 2019. Moreover, compared to the box office in the North America market, there was only a 2 billion dollars’ gap for China to close in on it (11.4 billion dollars) (see Table 3.2). Naturally, as blockbusters are expensive, Hollywood would want them to make profit from the most lucrative international market – the Chinese market. As a result, Chinese stars, as a form of cultural and economic asset, would be used in a way that aligns with this market condition, where a consideration of the Chinese market takes precedence over the rest of the international markets, yet not to an extent that would threaten its own domestic market.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>International box office markets (US dollars billions)</th>
<th>The US/Canada box office (US dollars billions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International (total)</td>
<td>Asia Pacific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>23.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Global box office markets between 2010 and 2019
(Source: Motion Picture Association of America/Motion Picture Association)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country and its respective box office (US dollars billions)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>China</td>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3 Top three international box office markets between 2011 and 2019
(Source: Motion Picture Association of America/Motion Picture Association)

The lucrative Chinese market certainly elucidates the presence of numerous Chinese female stars in Hollywood blockbusters in this decade. With China’s further lift of the import quota from 20 to 34 per year in 2012 (Brzeski, 2017), Hollywood adopted diversified strategies to speak to the Chinese market. Of these measures, particularly relevant to the employment of Chinese stars was the purposeful integration of Chinese elements, such as Chinese characters and cultural themes, and casting Chinese and Hong Kong stars in Hollywood films (see Su, 2016, p. 63). Thus, the presence of numerous Chinese female stars in Hollywood blockbusters in the 2010s was, to a large extent, owing to the booming Chinese market.

At first glance, it appears that this would be a new transnational path for Chinese female stars to embark on a career in Hollywood. However, I argue that it is a non-viable path, as the roles given to these female stars were often minor and perfunctory (except for, for example, Jing Tian’s roles in The Great Wall and Pacific Rim: Uprising), accounting for less than ten fragmented minutes of the film’s running time. In an extreme case, Fan Bingbing’s role in Iron Man 3 was exclusively featured in the post-credit scene in the version tailored for the Chinese market, making her absent from the viewing experience of international and American audiences. Evidently, Hollywood actively drew their star power and/or centralised ‘their presence in a Hollywood blockbuster’ as a marketing strategy to attract Chinese fans and/or interested audiences into cinemas. Additionally, the roles they play were often professional women such as scientists, doctors, pilots, and executives, moving away from the notorious (mis)representation of Chinese women under the rubric of orientalism in Hollywood history. Seemingly progressive, these roles did not result from changes in Hollywood’s institutionalised cinematic racial order, but rather aligned with the preferences of the Chinese government, in the hope of increasing the likelihood of passing censorship. More importantly, there is little room for their character arc to
develop or sufficient performative space for these female stars, let alone aligning these characters with or integrating them into their existing persona. Essentially, these roles were designed to appeal to the Chinese audience and the Chinese government (I will explore this strategy, its efficacy in the Chinese market, and its impact on their stardom in depth through Jing’s role in Kong: Skull Island in Chapter 5).

This strategic employment of Chinese female stars in Hollywood blockbusters calls into question of how a presence as such would lead to transnational stardom in Hollywood, when their bodies, performances and characters were tailored to take effect on the Chinese market alone. In this way, Hollywood simply exploited their stardom in China, rather than investing in them. This apparent lack of investment – or more precisely a lack of interest to invest – in these stars is the fundamental reason why this is an unviable path. In contrast, Gong and Zhang’s Hollywood career involved Hollywood’s investment, especially considering their roles in Memoirs of a Geisha, where their established star image was incorporated into their characters (albeit problematically), performative space was given, and they were introduced as stars in the marketing of the film in the US market and beyond. In other words, Hollywood intended to sustain their appeal to domestic and international audiences.

It is within this industrial and market reality that Jing’s particular transnational journey is situated. Of course, compared with her contemporaries, Jing stood out as a rather unique and complex figure in the 2010s, for she did not just play a dispensable role in Hollywood blockbuster Kong: Skull Island, but also assumed a leading and a supporting role with narrative significance in two blockbusters The Great Wall and Pacific Rim: Uprising respectively. Her roles appeared to break the rule of Hollywood’s exploitation of female stars in the 2010s. However, these three blockbusters were (co)produced by Legendary, a subsidiary of the Chinese conglomerate Wanda Group since 2016. The ownership of Legendary recalibrated Jing’s positionality in Hollywood and impacted how she was used, and as such she was situated between the two industries, rather than in either industry. With the Chinese film industry directly involving in the
production of Hollywood blockbusters, Jing’s transnational path was different from her contemporaries. Additionally, the fact that she appeared in two franchise instalments – *Kong: Skull Island* and *Pacific Rim: Uprising* – suggests that she was also positioned in a cinematic environment where franchises could create complexities for her to achieve transnational stardom. While franchise films and blockbusters share similarities in terms of ‘scale’ within the contemporary Hollywood context, franchise films operate under a different industrial logic which centralises elements such as an IP, and therefore the idea of stardom could sit uneasily within this type of production. As Tara Lomax (2021) argues, while ‘stardom and franchising are two effective industrial systems with comparative marketing objectives’, they serve as ‘different modes of production [and therefore] do not always easily coalesce’ (p. 188). Given this, Jing’s presence in these two franchise instalments could potentially be impacted by the industrial nature of this type of franchise blockbuster productions. Finally, different from Zhang’s presence in Chinese blockbusters, this represents another shift of strategy regarding pushing Chinese female stars on the international stage.

However, like her contemporaries, she did not attain transnational stardom in Hollywood, despite having been backed by the Chinese film industry. As her contemporaries were exploited by Hollywood for the Chinese market, it raises questions regarding the extent to which Jing’s roles were arranged for the Chinese market, how much the involvement of the Chinese film industry really affected the Sino-Hollywood dynamics in their collaboration, and finally whether Hollywood demonstrated (an interest in) investment in making her a transnational star. These questions constitute the central concern of my analysis of Jing’s transnational journey in this thesis. From her failure, I would argue that while the specific ways Hollywood used Jing was different from her contemporaries, she was also caught up and confined by the broad industrial and market conditions that shaped the path her contemporaries have taken. Then, despite the complexity in Jing’s transnational journey, if Hollywood was only interested in the Chinese market rather than the star, her failure in attaining transnational stardom was not unexpected.
Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the transnational paths Chinese female stars have taken to Hollywood since the 1990s and mapped out the way in which the industrial conditions shaped these paths. By reviewing the (un)viable paths the Chinese female stars have taken, this chapter provided the much-needed industrial contexts for understanding Jing’s failure in the 2010s. Notably, the identification of Hollywood’s investment, or lack thereof, in the Chinese female stars, including Jing, in the 2010s is the central issue emerged from Hollywood’s concessional moves towards the Chinese market, which will be scrutinised in Chapter 5. On China’s side, from Gong and Zhang’s career movement from China to Hollywood, there is a discernible shift of approaches from art films to Chinese blockbusters that the Chinese film industry has taken to push Chinese female stars on the international stage since the 1990s. In the next chapter, I will explore how Huallywood – a transnational Chinese cinema emerging from the development of the Chinese film industry – is employed as an approach to propel Jing onto the international stage.
Chapter 4 Caught between production and reception:

Branding Jing Tian with transnational appeal

Introduction

During her Huallywood years (2011-2014), Jing Tian’s presence in four Huallywood films – *The Warring States* (2011), *Special ID* (2013), *Police Story 2013* (2013), and *The Man from Macau* (2014) – was most appealing in filmic and cinematic terms. First, she established and maintained a screen persona of a capable, feisty, and rebellious young woman in physical and/or emotional terms. Second, she was billed as ‘the female lead’ in these films and worked with well-known national and/or transnational stars such as Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Liu Ye, Sun Honglei and Donnie Yen. Third, these films were distributed internationally, amongst which *The Warring States* and *Special ID* secured a theatrical release in the US. However, she failed to attain popular acclaim in both the Chinese and the US market through these films. Furthermore, in a Chinese context, the poor reception of *The Warring States* both at the box office (11.8 million against a budget of 24 million dollars [Box Office Mojo, 2024a]) and among Chinese audiences (3.9 out of 10 on Douban [Douban, 2024a]) established her national notoriety in 2011. The construction of a well-managed persona (with the industrial effort to ‘make her a star’) and the failure of achieving popular acclaim in the Chinese public form an interesting contradiction between the production and reception of stardom in China. Given that these films defined Jing’s persona and public reception at this stage, her supposed ‘failure’ (as determined through the negative reception of her fame in the Chinese public) presents an illuminating case for unravelling the industrial structure and the workings of Huallywood cinema and how it serves as a (contestable) site for making national or transnational stars.

Rather than ascribing Jing’s failure solely to her own lack (of star quality, or acting skill), this chapter concentrates on how her roles and/or positionalities in these Huallywood
films shed light on her failure in attaining popular acclaim in the US market and the Chinese public. It examines the way in which the industrial structure and production modes of Huallywood dictate the construction of Jing’s characters in filmic terms and the positionalities of Jing as a star in cinematic terms. First, I look at the visual and narrative construction of her two characters in *The Warring States* and *Special ID* respectively (as these two films secured a theatrical release in the US), uncovering the industrial logic beneath the production of these characters (their cultural meanings and targeted audiences and markets). While doing so, I also attend to how such an industrial agenda defines Jing’s persona. Second, I look at the ways in which these films position Jing as a star during the processes of production, distribution, and marketing. I pay particular attention to the arrangement that pairs her with established stars in these films and her positionalities in promoting these films in the Chinese market and the US market. While doing so, I contextualise these practices within the industrial structure and production modes and norms of Huallywood, unearthing how her failure was attributed to these (problematic) practices. To uncover the reason why she attained national notoriety in China, this chapter also examines how her presence in these four Huallywood films was received by the Chinese public. I look at how the domestic media, including entertainment news and tabloid journalism, as well as the Chinese audiences (user reviews and comments on Douban), responded to her presence in these four films, so as to demystify how her presence in Huallywood may be perceived as problematic by them. This chapter, in the main, will argue that it is the (mis)placement of Jing in Huallywood cinema that results in her failure in attaining popular acclaim in the US market and the Chinese public.

### 4.1 Huallywood: A particular transnational cinema in the Chinese film industry

Given this chapter’s focus on investigating Huallywood cinema as a site for producing (trans)national stars, it is necessary to explore Huallywood as a term and a particular
cinema in the Chinese film industry before embarking on the analysis of Jing. First and foremost, China’s embrace of neoliberalism in the Reform era serves as the crucial background for understanding the development of the Chinese film industry and that of Huuallywood. As David Harvey notes, neoliberalism is ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (2005, p. 2). It generally pursues a pro-market dogma which requires only the minimal, necessary intervention of the state to ensure the proper functioning of markets (Harvey, 2005, pp. 2-3). The employment of neoliberalism is contextually specific. In China, while the economic reform is officially under the name of ‘socialist market economy’ (see Cui, 2012), Harvey sees neoliberal ideologies being embedded in the nation’s economic system and characterises the reform as ‘neoliberalism with “Chinese characters”’, addressing it as ‘a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 120). It is against this political economic background that Huuallywood cinema is brought into being and defined (and it is also against this background that Jing’s positionality in Huallywood cinema is viewed and understood by the Chinese public, which I will explore in Section 4.4).

Huallywood is a portmanteau of the Chinese word ‘hua’ (meaning ‘Chinese’) and Hollywood. Conceptually, Huallywood can be understood as a particular kind of transnational Chinese cinema(s) with reference to Hollywood, with both ‘hua-’ and ‘-lywood’ serving as the transnational elements of the term. Firstly, ‘hua’ suggests ‘a semantic matrix of Chineseness’ that transcends the idea of the national to encompass the cinemas of mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diasporic Chinese communities (Fu, Indelicato and Qiu, 2016, p. 56). Secondly, ‘-lywood’ suggests an acknowledgement of Chinese cinema’s interactions with Western cinematic traditions, primarily with that of Hollywood (Fu, Indelicato and Qiu, 2016, p. 58). The term is useful to ‘account for the place of transnational Chinese cinemas in relation to
Hollywood and to regional filmmaking’ (Khoo, 2019, p. 172). At the conceptual level, the term does not centralise mainland China as the key facilitator of a Huallywood cinema. Yet, it is worth noting that the coinage of the term in academia was in response to two concomitant industrially based phenomena – China’s ascendance ‘to become the world’s second largest film market’ and the nation’s rising status as a ‘global film producer by means of trans-border coproductions with South Korea, Japan, and the USA’ and so forth (Fleming and Indelicato, 2019, p. 141). As Olivia Khoo (2019) notes, the concept of Huallywood suggests ‘a unique positioning through which to intervene in debates about transnational Chinese cinemas, the China-Hollywood binary, and in relation to a new Asia Pacific regionalism’ (p. 171). Following the rapid development of the Chinese film industry and the increasing significance of the Chinese market, the discursive terrain of Huallywood has been increasingly dominated by mainland China. In light of this, this thesis employs the term Huallywood to denote a particular transnational Chinese cinema in reference to Hollywood emerging from the development of the Chinese film industry in the Reform Era.19

While there exist no codified conventions that define a Huallywood film, characteristics that involve ‘the appropriation and internalization of Hollywood aesthetics, industry standards and business models’ (Berry, 2013, p. 173) can be identified to be constitutive of Huallywood.20 In this sense, the idea of a Huallywood cinema can be argued to have taken shape in its early forms in the early 2000s, reflected through the production of China’s blockbusters. Since Hollywood films (re)entered the Chinese market in 1994, they tended to have massive appeal to the Chinese audience: Hollywood films reaped 60 percent of the total box office revenue

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19 Chinawood is another term that bears similarities to Huallywood (see Davis, 2010). However, I opt to use Huallywood due to its explicit transnationalism associated with ‘hua’.

20 It is worth noting that Michael Berry (2013) uses ‘Hollywoodization of Chinese cinema’ and ‘Chinese cinema with Hollywood characteristics’ to frame the Chinese film industry’s industrial practices which draw inspiration from Hollywood. The term, as Berry notes, implies ‘not a fundamental copying or colonization of the Hollywood industry but a more subtle appropriation of key aspects of the Hollywood models while leaving space for a more subversive and critical reading’ (2013, p. 173). The idea and practices employed by the Chinese film industry resonated with Huallywood’s reference to Hollywood as ‘not only rival or imitator but an important interlocutor’ (Khoo, 2019, p. 172), albeit without sharing the exact name.
in 1994 and increased to 70 to 80 percent in 1995 (Zhu, 2003, p. 86). As a vigilant response to the onslaught of Hollywood films over box office revenues in the national market, the Chinese film industry produced some of its own blockbusters (see Berry, 2003, p. 218; Berry, 2013, p. 175). The blockbusters produced during this time such as *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) started to display characteristics that speak to the production model of Hollywood blockbusters, including large production budgets, visual spectacle, employment of pan-Chinese stars and international crews (Berry, 2013, pp. 174-175). *Hero* is a frequently mentioned blockbuster that embodies these transnational characteristics (Stringer and Yu, 2007). Furthermore, the film’s commercial success in the US market suggested the transnational appeal of (this particular type of) Chinese cinema.

These blockbusters can be viewed as the predecessors and in nature one strand of Huallywood cinema, characterised by their transnational characteristics in production and transnational appeal in the international (East Asian and potentially Western) markets. In the mid-2000s, the Chinese film industry continued to produce blockbusters that incorporated *wuxia* (e.g. sword-fighting) and the spectacularising of the ancient China which appealed to international markets, such as *The Promise* (2005), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), and *The Banquet* (2006). Following China’s economic rise on the international stage, blockbusters in Huallywood cinema have gradually emerged as a prominent expression of the nation’s embrace of competitive transnationalism. Aspiring to become a global film producer, the Chinese film industry not only produced films with transnational characteristics but also fostered trans-border collaborations (while ensuring that those film projects serve its objectives of demonstrating China’s soft power). Blockbusters such as *Red Cliff* (2008; 2009), *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (2011), *The Grandmaster* (2013), and *The Crossing* (2014; 2015) were mobilised and (co)produced by China, involving large budgets, pan-Chinese/Asian star casts, international production crews, as well as transnational circulation. Generally, this strand in Huallywood tends to be outward-looking, devised not just to compete for audiences in the national market, but also to attract
international audiences, stimulate cultural export and demonstrate China’s soft power.

On the other hand, another strand of Huallywood cinema, while also marked by its transnational characteristics and blockbuster propensity in production, tends to be inward-looking, leaning more towards a domestic audience, as the national film market continued to expand in the mid-2000s and 2010s (see Keane, 2006, pp. 849-851; Khoo, 2019, pp. 172-173). To produce films as primarily commodities (for a Chinese market), Huallywood’s reference to Hollywood then is ‘not only to the industry but also to an aesthetic model for commercial mainstream entertainment filmmaking, a series of production, promotion, and distribution models, the rise of a Hollywood-style star culture, and so forth’ (Berry, 2013, p. 173). This strand is characterised by its approach of learning from Hollywood in relation to the way in which it makes, distributes, and promotes films to maximise profit. As such, it is highly entertainment-oriented and profit-driven, prioritising the lucrative domestic market (and then the international markets). Defined by their commercial nature, these Huallywood films employ popular genres (e.g. action, comedy, and fantasy), star-led franchises, adapt marketable IPs, and secure releases during festive seasons (e.g. Christmas and the Lunar New Year) to boost viewership and box office performance. *Detective Dee* series (2010; 2013; 2018), *Ip Man* series (2008; 2010; 2015; 2019), *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010), *Painted Skin* (2008; 2012), *The Monkey King* (2014; 2016) are some examples of this strand of Huallywood.

Surely, these two strands of Huallywood films are not mutually exclusive, especially in terms of their excessive commercial nature and the increasingly frequent blending of inward- and outward-looking perspectives as the industry develops over time. Both strands collectively highlight China’s capacity of mobilising transnational cinematic sources to bear the name of a global film producer. The four films Jing participated in represent typical examples in the landscape of Huallywood cinema: *The Warring States* is an epic blockbuster with an outward-looking perspective, potentially appealing to audiences in East Asian and Western markets; *Special ID* and *Police Story 2013* embody
both inward- and outward-looking perspectives, drawing on not only the popularity of established stars Donnie Yen and Jackie Chan associated with the action genre in a national market but also their transnational stardom and the niche appeal of Hong Kong action in a Western market; and *The Man from Macau* is a star-led New Year Celebration film that targets primarily a national audience. Jing’s presence in these four films makes her a valuable case to investigate the particular onscreen persona she constructed within Huallywood cinema, and how an association with Huallywood impacts Jing’s branding, public image and career trajectories, and ultimately how such image constructions within this cinema shed light on her failure in achieving popular acclaim in the Chinese public and the US market.

4.2 A variation of Mulan: The warrior woman in *The Warring States*

*The Warring States* is a blockbuster characterised by its transnational production and circulation. The film was produced by the Chinese company Beijing Starlit Film and TV Culture Co. Ltd. (Starlit), with a budget of 150 million RMB (approximately 24.4 million dollars) (NetEase Entertainment, 2011). The leading roles, except for Jing Tian, were established stars with transnational celebrity status from pan-Asian areas, including Sun Honglei (mainland China), Francis Ng (Hong Kong), Kim Hee Seon (South Korea), and Kiichi Nakai (Japan). Apart from the leading roles, the supporting roles also consisted of established mainland stars and celebrities (e.g. Huang Haibing, Guo Degang, Jiang Wu, Xu Jiao). The star-studded cast indicates the film’s ambition to capitalise on their star power in attracting national and international audiences. In terms of the production crew, apart from the domestic production team, the film employed Japanese instrumental group S.E.N.S for musical scores and South Korean cinematographer Kim Kyung Koo in charge of the cinematography; both were critically acclaimed in their field. Finally, the film managed to secure a theatrical release over 30 cities in the US through China Lion Film Distribution, in addition to a last-minute confirmation of a synchronised release date – 12 April 2011 – in both the Chinese and
the US market (Chen, 2011). In terms of the scale of investment, cast, production team, and distribution, *The Warring States* employed the transnational production model in Hollywood cinema.

The film took on a decidedly outward-looking perspective, reflected in its genre, theme, and specific choice of subject and events. First, the genre and theme intended to resonate with those Chinese blockbusters that gained significant visibility in the West in the early to mid-2000s. These Chinese blockbusters, including *Hero*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, and *The Banquet*, featured historical eras in ancient China and themes in relation to court and rivalry, with blockbuster aesthetics. In *The Warring States*’ American trailer, it was advertised as ‘an epic ancient war blockbuster’ (China Lion, YouTube, 5 April 2011). This concise description of the film distinctly indicated various shared elements with those Chinese blockbuster predecessors that achieved success in breaking into the Western market. In particular, the Warring States period (which also served as the film’s title) in Chinese history was a tumultuous period in which seven States engaged with wars vying for supremacy. It was not only a period that evokes creative imagination in its own right, but also the same period where *Hero* was situated (*The Warring States* was set in the mid-Warring States period, and *Hero* in the late Warring States period). To some extent, the film tried to align itself with *Hero* to preemptively capture the interest of Western audience towards a story set in the same historical era, considering *Hero*’s critical and commercial success in the US.

Second, the specific choice of subject and events was intended to enhance the film’s appeal in the West. Adapted from the historical records of the legendary military strategist Sun Bin (played by Sun Honglei), the film consisted of a series of stories based on the rivalry between Sun Bin and Pang Juan (Francis Ng), two disciples of the military strategist guru Guigu Zi. Sun Bin was the author of *Sun Tzu the Art of War* (‘Sun Zi Bingfa’ or ‘Sun Bin Bingfa’), the world’s first book of military strategies that has been translated and disseminated to the West since the late 18th century. It was purported that he wrote the book after being persecuted by Pang Juan, who mutilated him by
gouging out his kneecaps. The translated copies of Sun’s book gained popularity in the Western book market around the time when *The Warring States* was in production (see Han, 2012). According to the film’s associated executive producer Zong Shan, ‘given the popularity of *Sun Tzu the Art of War* in the US, its American distributor only selected *The Warring States* for a theatrical release, which boosts our confidence in the box performance of the film in the US market’ (quoted in Sina Entertainment, 2011). As such, just like *Hero*’s adaptation of Jing Ke’s assassination of the King of Qin served to maximise its international appeal (Wang and Rawnsley, 2010, pp. 94-95), *The Warring States* adapted Sun Bin and the related events in the hope of attracting Western audiences. Additionally, Zong remarked that being the first Chinese blockbuster that secured a synchronised theatrical release in the US is a reflection of China’s increased soft power (quoted in Sina Entertainment, 2011). As a blockbuster film filled with elements of transnational appeal and proactively pursuing a release in the US market, *The Warring States* evidently adopts an outward-looking perspective, aiming to gain visibility in the West.

The purposeful transnationalism in both form and content of *The Warring States* ensures that Jing’s role as the leading female character must also be conceived to align with its transnational aspirations. In other words, her character needs to be relatable and attractive to a Western audience. Consequently, Jing’s onscreen persona is imbued with transnational appeal. In the film, she plays Tian Xi, a fictional female character whom Sun has a romantic entanglement with. Tian is the sole daughter of the General Tian Ji of Qi State, and simultaneously she is a warrior woman who commands Qi’s army on the battlefield. In what follows, I will demonstrate how Jing’s character is constructed in a particular way to speak to the popular imagination of Chinese woman in the West. Mainly, I will argue that in visual and narrative terms, her character amalgamates two interrelated constructions – Mulan and the wuxia warrior woman – that are familiar and possess mainstream or niche appeal to a Western audience. First, I will argue that her character partly draws inspiration from Mulan, the Chinese female hero that holds mainstream popularity following the commercial and critical success
of Disney’s animated film *Mulan* (1998). Second, I will argue that it also in part resonates with the *wuxia* warrior woman in the Chinese(-themed) blockbusters that achieved commercial and critical success in the Western market during the early and mid-2000s.

The narrative representation of Tian Xi bears certain resemblance to Mulan, the Chinese female hero that gained substantial visibility in the American popular culture due to the commercial and critical success of Disney’s animated film *Mulan* in 1998 (Yin, 2014, p. 286). As the only daughter in the family, Mulan disguises herself as a man to assume her aged father’s place in the army to counter the invasion of the Huns. While Tian Xi’s noble lineage contrasts with Mulan’s modest family background, she is similarly the sole daughter of the (visually) aged General Tian Ji, and she also leads Qi’s army on the battlefield against the Wei State. In terms of the narrative, Tian Xi’s societal roles are portrayed as comparable to a man. Apart from her role as the commander of Qi at the frontline, she also participates in state affairs in court along with male ministers and runs diplomatic missions to other States on behalf of Qi. Additionally, her father compares her to a son, remarking that ‘the daughter of my Tian family is as capable as a son’ (*‘wo Tianjia yang nü ru yang er’*). Her father’s praise suggests Tian’s competence in court and on the battlefield, two arenas that are typically associated with men in ancient China. In this sense, Jing’s character is constructed as a warrior woman who assumes societal roles reserved for men. It strikes a chord with Mulan’s situation, where she lives by the standard of men and is judged by the standard applied to men while serving in the army.

Unlike Mulan, however, Tian’s female identity has been known to the public throughout the film. The undisguised female identity in the narrative is an important marker that connects Tian with the *wuxia* warrior woman, the other reference this character draws inspiration from. In her analysis of the representation of the warrior women in *Hero*, Louise Edwards noted that both Flying Snow and Moon do not disguise themselves as men to achieve their military achievement, marking a
departure from the traditions of warrior women who ‘often require cross-dressing to occur before their remarkable deeds can be performed’ (2010, p. 69). This new representation of Chinese warrior woman gained popularity in the Western market, following the critical and commercial success of the indiewood film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and was further reinforced through *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. In a similar vein, Tian’s undisguised female identity embodies this new model of warrior woman. In the beginning of the film where Tian leads Qi’s army into battle, while the bulky armour unmistakably conceals her femininity, her loose hair without the *guan* (‘cap’, *guan* in its own right is an important marker of the male identity in ancient China) betrays her female gender (see Figure 4.1). The first time when Sun Bin sees her in this costume, he also comments, ‘the general [who defeated the army of Wei] is a woman’, which further underscores the recognisability of her female gender.

![Figure 4.1 Tian Xi (Jing Tian) clad in armour in *The Warring States*](Source: the photo gallery of *The Warring States* on Douban [Douban, 2024a])

Furthermore, unlike Mulan who cross-dresses as a man to conceal her female identity beneath the soldier’s uniform, Tian’s female identity is more ostensible in visual terms. While she dresses in men’s clothing (with the *guan* functioning as an important marker of the male identity) in a considerable amount of screen time, these costumes are not
particularly associated with masculinity to a general Western audience in visual terms (see Figure 4.2, where Tian is seated in the middle, dressed in a white costume). Instead, these costumes tend to display *wen* masculinity. As Kam Louie and Louise Edwards (1994) note, Chinese masculinity can be understood through a *wen-wu* dyad. *Wen* refers to those ‘genteel, refined qualities that [are] associated with the literary and artistic pursuits of classical scholars’ (p. 141), whereas *wu* to those with ‘physical strength and military prowess’ (p. 142). In traditional Chinese culture, scholars and officials associated with *wen* masculinity tend to display androgynous features that adhere to the Confucian ideology (Geng, 2004, p. 45). Hence, the sartorial code does not align her appearance with masculine attributes. In addition to this, with Jing’s feminine facial and physical traits, the costume tends to highlight a feminine appearance of Tian.

Figure 4.2 Tian Xi (Jing Tian) dressing in men’s clothing (in the middle) in *The Warring States*

In addition to this, Tian exhibits dauntless and feisty characteristics that defy gender expectations for a high-born lady, accompanied by behaviours that align more with traditional masculinity. For example, she displays valour on the battlefield, wielding her sword and rallying her army with a commanding roar of ‘charge!’ as she leads them.
into battle. She also demonstrates violent behaviours, evidenced by the scenes in which she kills enemies ruthlessly on the battlefield and tortures the captive from Wei State for information. Apart from being ruthless to her enemies, she also displays vengeful behaviours by taking physically aggressive actions to punish those who cross her. For instance, when she learns that it is Sun Bin who aided Wei soldiers in attacking her army, she batters him with punches and kicks before presenting him to the King of Qi. On another occasion, when Sun tricks her, she subjects him to a barrage of strikes from a stick. These characteristics and mannerisms bear resemblance to the warrior woman who challenges traditional gender expectations and norms. It is exemplified particularly by Zhang Ziyi’s characters in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers* in which she portrays rebellious, transgressive femininity (see Wu and Chan, 2007; Kourelou, 2010).

As Jing’s character merges elements of Mulan and those of the *wuxia* warrior woman, she necessarily inherits and embodies female power and agency shared by these two representations. As the commander of Qi’s army, she is presented as capable of leading, strategising, fighting, and killing. She is portrayed as intelligent; several moments in the narrative underscore her smartness, including her strategies to capture Sun Bin to secure his service for the Qi State and to rescue Sun Bin after he suffers mutilation. Even during a scene where she dances with Pang Fei, she gathers intelligence from her, all the while seemingly entertaining Pang Juan. These characteristics align well with the discourse of empowered woman which gained increasingly prominence in American popular culture in the 1990s (see Harris, 2004). In summation, the design of this character intends to capitalise on the familiarity and relatability of these two representations among Western audiences so as to make a successful venture into in the US market. By constructing Jing’s character in this particular way, her star persona is similarly imbued with transnational appeal, particularly catering to the Western market.

However, *The Warring States* did not establish Jing Tian’s star status in the US, despite
the character’s potentially strong appeal to the Western audience. It is crucial to acknowledge that the filmic apparatus and story positioned her as a star. First, the cinematography paid particular attention to her, with various close-up, over-the-shoulder, medium and full shots centralising her face and body. The way in which Jing was framed – the close-ups and dedicated individual shots that evoke intimate identification – provided the necessary conditions for developing stardom (see McDonald, 2000, pp. 27-29). It also featured her body movement, with several sequences highlighting her kicking, punching, and sword fighting, which contributed to the spectacularising of her identity as a warrior woman. In these moments, the cinematography would capture the audience’s undivided attention on Jing as they watched the film. Second, the story revolves around Sun Bin, but Jing’s character Tian Xi is inextricably connected to him, which ensured the overall narrative significance of her. For instance, Sun’s attachment (being a hanger-on [‘menke’]) to the Tian family stems from his affection for her. Following Sun’s mutilation, she puts several plans into action to rescue him. The way in which Jing’s character was arranged in the narrative confirmed her central position in the film. In these two aspects, it is evident that Jing was given a significant role that serves to establish stardom at the filmic level.

As such, I would argue that her failure in attaining stardom in the US market lies more in other aspects in the production, marketing, and distribution process. First, given that the film primarily capitalises on the popularity of Sun Bin and his book *Sun Tzu the Art of War* in the US, audiences’ expectations are drawn to focus more on Sun, rather than Jing’s character Tian. American critics highlighted the characterisation of Sun Bin (and the performance of Sun Honglei) and/or the complicated relationship between Sun Bin and Pang Juan, whereas Tian was mainly mentioned as Sun’s romantic interest (see Abele, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Hale, 2011; Simon, 2011). In the reviews that discussed Sun and Tian’s romantic relationship in more detail, two critics characterised the romance as ‘unlikely’ (Anderson, 2011; Hale, 2011). From the American crucial reception, Sun remains the central focus of the film, while the romantic relationship between him and Tian is viewed as somewhat problematic. It suggests that Jing’s
character (and her relation to Sun) was not a key attraction of the film, nor was she organically integrated into the film’s narrative.

Second, the film generally did not gain critical acclaim in the US, which consequently did not contribute to Jing’s exposure and publicity. It was rated 40 percent fresh based on the reviews from 5 critics and 46 percent fresh by approximately 100 audiences on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes, 2024a), suggesting that the film was not received well from either group (the sheer number of reviewers also suggests its lack of mainstream attention, which I will return to later). While the film advertised to be ‘an epic ancient blockbuster’, Brent Simon (2011) commented that it failed to convincingly explore the competing political motivations between the States and lacked the intensity and excitement needed to make it a compelling action film. Also, another critic indicated its lack of effort to accommodate non-Chinese audiences with its compressed, chaotic narrative (Hale, 2011). In addition, this was further exacerbated by the language barrier where ‘English subtitles whiz[ed] by awfully quick’ (Abele, 2011). Apart from Jing’s character not being positioned as central focus, it is often challenging to make a star from a critically failed film.

Third, its American promotional trailer fails to contribute to the marketing of the film, which also results in the failure of making Jing a star. The drawbacks of the trailer are apparent by a comparison with the promotional strategies practised by those successful foreign-language films in the US market, which was discussed in Chapter 3, where I drew on McDonald (2009). One important aspect is packaging foreignness in the film’s trailer (McDonald, 2009, pp. 365-366). For *The Warring States*, while its trailer limited the foreignness by only featuring two short Chinese lines ‘Sun Bin’ and ‘It’s only a legend!’; it did not include English voice over to help American audience to gain a brief overview of the film. As such, American audiences received limited information about the film, apart from the caption ‘an epic ancient war blockbuster’. Furthermore, it provided no information of the stars involved in the film. For the American audience it would be challenging to identify the stars without prior
knowledge about Asian stardom. As such, the trailer did not effectively contribute to introducing, differentiating, or promoting Jing (or any star) as a star within the film.

In addition to the missteps in the film’s production and marketing, Jing’s failure also extends to the film’s distribution in the US, a factor that connects more to the wider industrial and market conditions. First, the imbalanced power dynamics between China and Hollywood creates hindrance in the distribution of Chinese films in the US market. Given Hollywood’s hegemony in its domestic market, foreign-language imports often operate within the independent sector and are often considered to have niche appeal rather than mainstream appeal by default. For Chinese films hoping to penetrate the American market, this is, and has been, a structural disadvantage that cannot be easily overcome. Regarding The Warring States, while the film secured a theatrical release in the US, it remained a small-scale release that was only available in selected ‘major metropolitan markets’ (Simon, 2011). Second, under this broad market condition, China Lion remained a relatively small distributor in the independent sector at the time. As I have mentioned in Chapter 3, at the time of the film’s release, major producers and distributors such as Miramax and Sony Pictures Classics (SPC) had an increasingly significant impact on determining the popularity of foreign-language imports within the American independent sector (McDonald, 2009, pp. 372-373). For instance, the two successful Chinese(-themed) blockbusters in the early 2000s entered the mainstream American market through collaboration with SPC, as seen in the case of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (see Chapter 3), or through Miramax and the endorsement from established American directors such as Quentin Tarantino, as seen with Hero (see Wang, 2009). In contrast, China Lion, the American distributor of The Warring States, remained a smaller, less competitive player in the industry at the time, lacking experience to promote the film (as evidenced by the promotional trailer of The Warring States). As such, the industrial and market conditions inhibited Jing from gaining mainstream attention in the US. In summation, Jing’s failure in establishing stardom in the US market can be attributed to the inherent problems in the film’s production and marketing, as well as the structural challenges
imposed by the industrial and market environment in the US.

Jing did not achieve popular acclaim in the domestic market through *The Warring States* either. The film failed at the box office (it garnered 11.8 million against a budget of 24 million dollars [Box Office Mojo, 2024a]) and among Chinese audiences (it received 3.9 out of 10 on Douban [Douban, 2024a]). As I stated earlier, in general terms the failure of a film often presents challenges in establishing stardom. *The Warring States* attempted to align with the Western market’s interest in the period dramas set in ancient China yet ignored the shifting trends in the Chinese film market. As A. T. McKenna and Kiki Tianqi Yu observed, China’s cinematic approach to history witnessed a strategic shift in emphasis ‘from wuxia spectaculars to traumatic narrative’, following the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, in response to political and ideological pressures (2016, p. 22). *Wuxia*-related blockbusters like *Hero* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* drew public criticism for perpetuating self-orientalism and lacking depth in meaning (McKenna and Yu, 2016, p. 22). In the meantime, *wuxia*-related blockbusters also faced market saturation and audience fatigue during this time, as these films often featured ‘overlapping subject matter, repetitive story lines, and recurring themes and characters, all of which indicate a lack of artistic imagination and creativity’ (Su, 2016, p. 158). Additionally, coinciding with the market saturation was the diversification of blockbuster types in the Chinese market after 2007 (Chen, 2022). Clearly, as a blockbuster period drama released in 2011, *The Warring States* failed to capture the shifting trend in the Chinese film market in the late 2000s. Thus, the film’s outward-looking perspective and disregard for the changing dynamics of the domestic film market can be a crucial reason that hinders Jing from establishing stardom and attaining popular acclaim in a Chinese context.

It is worth noting that while the film’s outward-looking perspective resulted in Jing’s character being constructed to appeal to a Western audience, the representation of warrior woman is not without an audience in the domestic market. The warrior woman has been well documented in Chinese literature and history for over 15
centuries and has remained indelibly resilient trope in Chinese cinema (Edwards, 2010, p. 65). While one might argue that Jing’s failure in the domestic market could be attributed to her warrior woman bearing no resemblance to the ‘authentic’ warrior woman in China, I want to take Jing’s failure beyond the textual level, contextualising her positionality as the female lead in this big-budget, star-studded blockbuster within the production models in Huallywood cinema.

As introduced in Section 4.1, to enhance publicity and attract audiences beyond national borders, a common industrial practice for Huallywood films with an outward-looking perspective is to cast stars from Pan-Asian regions. As a typical outward-looking Huallywood film, The Warring States cast Sun, Ng, Kim and Nakai, each star was exploited for their (trans)national appeal in mainland China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and other international markets where their stardom could take effect in generating publicity and/or draw in audiences. By comparison, Jing was in an awkward position as she contributed very limitedly to the film’s marketing and publicity in the mainland market and beyond. While from the production side the industry clearly can promote Jing as a star in a Huallywood film, it remains an unconventional casting choice vis-à-vis the industrial structure of Huallywood. Consequently, this decision would face scrutiny from the reception side. In The Warring States’ launching press conference, entertainment journalists were taken aback by the casting of a newcomer, Jing Tian, for the female lead role, questioning whether the young actress could carry a film with an investment exceeding 100 million RMB (Zeng, 2010). Clearly, Jing’s central position in The Warring States engendered more question than certainty regarding the film’s box office performance in the domestic media. Following the film’s failure, she gained national notoriety in the Chinese public (the factors contributing to her national notoriety will be explored in Section 4.4 after my analysis of Jing in Special ID). Therefore, while the film’s failure may bear some responsibility for inhibiting Jing from achieving popular acclaim in the Chinese market, her failure also stems from being misplaced as the female lead in a Huallywood film.


4.3 A police officer in martial arts: The action woman in *Special ID*

*Special ID* is a Huallywood film marked by Hong Kong ‘elements’ in its production and transnational circulation. The film was produced by Starlit in association with China Film Group Corporation. It assembled a cast primarily composed of stars and actors from Hong Kong cinema. It featured the transnational martial arts star Donnie Yen in the male lead role, alongside American Taiwanese actor Andy On (who debuted and developed a career in the Hong Kong film industry), award-winning actors like Roland Cheng, Collin Chou, and Nina Paw in supporting roles. In the main cast, only Jing Tian and the male star Zhang Hanyu were the mainland Chinese actors. Similarly, the production team was mainly composed of Hong Kong talent. It employed Clarence Fok, who was noted for his cult work *Naked Killer* (1992), as the director, Peter Pau, who was recognised for his camera work for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, to undertake cinematography, and Bruce Law, to coordinate the car stunt. The film had a transnational theatrical release in mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand on 17 and 18 October 2013, as well as in the US, following a 5-month gap (7 March 2014). Unlike the transnational production model adopted by *The Warring States*, where the creative talents were from pan-Asian regions, the actors and production team of *Special ID* were mainly from Hong Kong cinema. As such, it is a different transnational production model from the blockbuster type such as *The Warring States*.

This production model was fostered, at a structural level, following the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in June 2003. While collaboration between the two regions in filmmaking has occurred since the reopening of the Chinese market in the 1980s and 1990s, the CEPA, which grants Hong Kong preferential treatment and access to the mainland film market, represented a significant milestone in the comprehensive collaboration between the two film industries. In the CEPA era, the Hong Kong film industry has been increasingly caught in a process of mainlandisation (Szeto and Chen, 2011; 2015), or sinicisation (Chung and Yi, 2016),
where the mainland’s money, market, politics, and ideology play a profound role in reshaping the landscape of Hong Kong cinema. As such, the co-productions between the Hong Kong film industry and that of mainland in the CEPA era is increasingly characterised by a ‘China-centric regionalism in the Asian filmmaking business’ (Chung and Yi, 2016, p. 208). In this sense, the mainland-Hong Kong collaboration aligns with the notion and industrial conditions of Huallywood. As can be seen in Special ID, it represents a transnational production model that is backed by Chinese financing (Starlit) and comprised of Hong Kong’s production talents.

Unlike the outward-looking emphasis in The Warring States, Special ID stands in the intersected space that combines the outward- and inward-looking perspectives in Huallywood cinema. In other words, the film responds to both the growing Chinese film market, as well as East Asian and Western markets. First, it is a commercial production that blends martial arts, stardom, gangster/crime, and espionage elements, appealing to a wide audience and carrying box office potential in the Chinese market. The film tells a story about a Hong Kong police officer Chen Zilong (played by Donnie Yen) who dedicates years to undercover work, gathering evidence against the gang leaders to dismantle the entire underworld organisation. This characterisation reflects a popular and recurring theme in Hong Kong action films, wherein the protagonist assumes the role of a police officer who confronts crime to uphold justice and order. The representation of police officer can be portrayed in their authentic identity (as a police officer), who utilises their martial arts to combat crime and injustice, as exemplified in many of Jackie Chan’s films (e.g. Police Story [1985], Rumble in the Bronx [1995], Rush Hour [1998]). Alternatively, they can take on roles of undercover agents navigating the grey area between law enforcement and criminal activity, who suffers from psychological and moral struggles, as depicted in films like Infernal Affairs (2002).

In Special ID, Yen’s role embodies the characteristics of two types of police officers: those adept at employing martial arts physically and those who grapple with psychological challenges. The film incorporates stars, martial arts, and themes related to the Hong Kong police force and gangsters that hold widespread appeal among
Chinese audiences. In addition to its inward-looking perspective, *Special ID* also conveys an outward-looking perspective. As Sabrina Yu argued, Hong Kong action tends to be ‘the only Chinese film form that has successfully crossed national and cultural boundaries and become truly transnational, whether it be kung fu films popularised by Bruce Lee in the 1970s, John Woo’s gangster films, which have gained cult status in the West, [or] Jackie Chan’s globally successful action comedies [...]’ (2012b, p. 11). In this sense, *Special ID* also holds transnational appeal for the Western market, owing to the niche market for Hong Kong action films, as well as Yen’s transnational martial arts stardom.

The transnational appeal of *Special ID* as a Hong Kong action film suggests that Jing’s role as the female lead (and simultaneously a supporting, rather than co-leading, character) must align with its generic conventions of themes and characterisations. In the film, Jing plays a mainland police officer, Fang Jing, who assists Yen’s character in cracking down the underworld organisation, as he embarks on a mission in a mainland city, Nanhai. In what follows, I will illustrate how her role as a female police officer is centrally framed as an action woman in visual and narrative terms. I will argue that by highlighting her physical competence in fighting and killing in filmic and cinematic terms, Jing is mainly promoted as an action star. Subsequently, I will argue that by promoting her in this way, Jing’s persona shares parallels with the action woman in Hollywood cinema. In addition to this, I will also suggest that her persona in *Special ID* reinforces the construct seen in *The Warring States*, which further reflects a branding strategy that aims at establishing her as a transnational star.

In the film, Jing’s character Fang Jing is generally constructed as a strong character who is physically capable of fighting and killing. Several dedicated scenes highlight her adeptness in hand-to-hand combat, showcasing her ability to strategically use her body to fight and (often) clinch a victory. For instance, in her first fighting scene, she engages in one-on-one combat with two hooligans respectively. As she runs towards a crowd of hooligans, one of them sneers and questions her identity with contempt.
Without a word, she swiftly delivers a dropkick, sending him tumbling to the ground. At this point, another hooligan steps forward and attempts to choke her, Fang counters deftly, gripping his hands and slamming him down on the ground, followed by a barrage of punches. When he tries to fight back by lifting her up, she seizes the opportunity, leveraging his shoulders to regain control and target his neck, successfully knocking him on the ground for the second time. She ensnares an arm around his neck, subjecting him to a chokehold. As he is nearly out of breath, another hooligan steps forward. Sensing another threat, Fang swiftly draws her gun, aiming it at the approaching hooligan’s lower body, effectively halting his advance. She then fires a shot in the air, commanding the crowd to kneel, which effectively asserts her authority and controls the situation. This one-minute combat scene portrays Fang as a skilled, agile, and resourceful policewoman who effectively uses her martial arts to subdue an opponent.

Her physical competence is also evinced by other narrative arrangements and visual representations of her fighting body. For example, in a scene set on the roof terrace, she corrects Chen’s gun-holding position and shares the techniques for aiming and shooting precisely. While doing so, she reveals that she used to be a shooting champion, and recounts how she narrowly missed joining the national shooting by a single grade. As Chen challenges her to take the air rifle from his hands, Fang swiftly engages him in a struggle and gets the rifle with ease. Her shooting skill is also proved invaluable in a critical moment where she precisely takes down a man to rescue Chen. As the film approaches its climax, she engages in an adrenaline-fuelled fight that lasts for 6 minutes with the villain Sunny, who will later confront Chen. In these scenes, she performs a series of demanding physical tasks, including chasing his car, leaping from the roof of a bus to another vehicle, and engaging in combat with him inside the moving car. Her derring-do repeatedly conforms her as a physically strong woman who challenges male’s strength and power.

Apart from depicting her fighting body, Jing’s costuming also contributes to the
framing of her character as an action woman. Throughout the film, she sports a short, black-haired bob. This hair style, albeit still appearing feminine, stands in contrast with the long hair that is traditionally associated with femininity. Her short hair not only emanates an aura of grittiness and coolness, but also serves a pragmatic purpose during combat, as it does not impede her movements or present a potential weakness (as long hair might) for her opponents. Complementing her hairstyle, she often wears a black tank top, a black leather jacket, tight black jeans, and black boots. This outfit is well-suited for combat: the tank top and tight jeans are formfitting, enabling flexibility and freedom of movement, while the leather jacket provides protection against injuries. Additionally, the overall black colour scheme adds a sense of intimidation and stealth, which also contributes to an advantage in combat. At times, she wears a police uniform that highlights her identity as a police officer. Overall, the costumes she wears are predominantly gender-neutral, and more importantly functional, suited for performing high kicks, punches, leaps and jumps, rollovers, splits, and other physically demanding action stunts. They reflect the film’s attempt to construct a clean, neat, and ready-to-fight female character.

The film’s marketing also focused on promoting Jing as an action woman. First, the aforementioned costuming – the bob haircut and the overall black outfit – appeared on the film’s promotional posters for the mainland Chinese market and that of the US. On both versions, she was also depicted wearing a trench coat and holding a gun (see Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4). As I illustrated above, the sartorial code contributed to a preferred reading of Jing’s character as an action woman in the film. Second, Jing’s stunt work received a good deal of attention in the film’s press promotions. The emphasis was on the extent of her involvement in performing stunts and the quality of her execution. Reportedly, she performed all those physically demanding and visually spectacular martial arts movements without relying on a stunt double (Sina Entertainment, 2013). In the film’s premiere interview in Xi’an, Donnie Yen praised Jing’s stunt work, commenting that ‘she has the potential to become the next Michelle Yeoh’ (quoted in Pan, 2013). In line with posters, the film’s press promotions tended
to highlight Jing’s capacity as an action star.

As I have made clear, in filmic and cinematic terms, Jing was centrally framed as an action woman in *Special ID*. Apart from its alignment with Hong Kong action cinema, the action woman has also been a recurring representation in Hollywood cinema since the late 1970s, evolving from muscular female heroes in the 1980s to 1990s that
challenged binary conceptions of gendered identity to the postfeminist girl heroes in the late 1990s and beyond that responded to the rising of postfeminist popular culture in American society (see Tasker, 1993; Stasia, 2007). As Yvonne Tasker (1998) observes, ‘in developing roles for women as fighters, action and crime movies have made use of stereotypes and images including the “butch” type, the tomboy and the “feisty heroine” [...]’. Although in different ways, both the tomboy and the feisty heroine offer an articulation of gender and sexuality that foregrounds a combination of conventionally masculine and feminine elements’ (p. 68). Apart from her physical competence and appearance, the personality of Jing’s character also speaks to the aggressive, feisty heroine Tasker (1998, p. 68) described here. In the film, she often displays a short temper, preferring physical confrontation. For example, in her first fighting scene, she is in fact instructed to wait in the car, yet she impulsively enters the hooligan crowd and engages in a fight. She often disagrees with Chen and tends to gesture with her fingers, pointing at others while speaking. On the other hand, she exhibits feminine elements, including having a pink hello kitty badge holder and the feminine selfies in her tablet. She also assumes the role of Chen’s romantic interest, conforming to the framework of ‘the male/female buddy pair, [...] foregrounding romantic and sexual possibilities’ (Tasker, 1998, p. 75). On these fronts, Jing’s character clearly shows affinity with Hollywood’s feisty heroine. It is worth noting that the feisty heroine type mirrors the personality of her character Tian Xi in The Warring States (see my earlier discussion), suggesting an intention to reinforce Jing’s onscreen persona as a feisty action/warrior woman. In summation, Jing’s role in Special ID, like that of The Warring States, is imbued with transnational appeal, indicative of a branding strategy that aims at establishing her as a transnational star.

However, Jing’s role in Special ID failed to establish her stardom in the US market. Her failure to a great extent mirrors the circumstances observed in The Warring States. First, the film’s sole promotional focus in the US market is Donnie Yen. The American trailer (Well Go USA, YouTube, 29 January 2014) begins with a sequence of title cards, heralding Donnie Yen as ‘a true martial artist’ by The Hollywood Reporter, ‘the leading
man happens to be an action star’ by *The New York Times*, followed by Donnie Yen’s name, and ‘the biggest action star in Asia’ by *Huffington Post*, interwoven with clips showcasing his martial arts in the film. In the character introduction sequence, Yen’s role serves as the central focus that ties the key themes together: ‘true colors’, ‘the mission’, ‘the brotherhood’, ‘the respect’, and ‘the betrayal’. Successive visuals of Jing, On, Cheng, and Chou’s roles appear in between, without any disclosure of these actors’ names. Finally, the trailer culminates in text overlays that reaffirm Yen’s significance; ‘Donnie Yen is Special ID’. The film’s American poster (see Figure 4.4) also highlights Yen’s unparalleled importance, featuring his figure nearly double the size of On and Jing’s. His name is the only one billed above the film title, echoing his filmic persona. Therefore, Jing is sidelined as a supporting role without her name being featured in the film’s marketing in the US, as the primary focus is on Yen.

Second, the film generally did not gain popular or critical acclaim in the US, which consequently limited Jing’s exposure and publicity. It was rated 56 percent fresh based on 9 critics and 26 percent by about 500 audiences on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes, 2024b). The film’s action was generally recognised among the critics, but its narrative had inherent problems and was criticised as ‘inconsistent, clichéd, and unengaging’ (Tallerico, 2014), generating ‘little ‘suspense’ (Tsai, 2014), ‘undercover tension or plot reversals expected of the subject matter’ (Elley, 2014). English subtitles resurfaced as a problem, as they ran too rapidly for Western audiences to keep up (Catsoulis, 2014). However, it is important to note that Jing’s stunt work was generally recognised by the critics, despite not taking lead billing. Her presence was considered ‘mak[ing] the most memorable impact, bringing the [film] a much-needed energy whenever she’s on-screen’ (Tallerico, 2014). Her fighting sequences were mentioned alongside those of Yen and On as the most impressive, breath-taking part of the film (Tsai, 2014). Her performances, both in terms of action and acting, were deemed to surpass expectations, especially in comparison to the male cast; as one critic wrote, ‘Jing more than holds her own on both levels amid the male cast’ (Elley, 2014). However, like what occurs to *The Warring States*, the structural disadvantage of
Chinese films in the US market presents a major hurdle that impedes her from mainstream visibility. While the film secured releases on streaming platform (iTunes) and in movie theatres, it only garnered limited attention from viewership, as evidenced by the sheer number of critical and audience reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, as well as a meagre box office revenue of 12,666 dollars in the US market (Box Office Mojo, 2024b). The film's box office performance and viewership suggest that despite Jing’s commendable performance, she remained a marginalised figure and was unable to establish transnational stardom due to the market conditions in the US.

Additionally, there is another structural disadvantage regarding gender that inhibits Jing from establishing action stardom in Hollywood. In a general sense, the genre’s traditional association with men places women in an uneasy position within the action cinema. As Mark Gallagher (2006) notes, ‘the action film has historically been a “male” genre, dealing with stories of male heroism, produced by male filmmakers for principally male audiences’ (p. 45). It has been characterised by depicting ‘male conflict’ and ‘identity formation’ since the early 1980s, following ‘the codification of the action genre’s dominant narrative conflicts and conventions of visual style’ (Gallagher, 2006, p. 45). Specifically, when it comes to Chinese action stardom in Hollywood, women suffer significantly more from gaining visibility. As Rikke Schubart observed, while Hong Kong cinema had historically created a pyramid of action men and women, few have succeeded in achieving stardom in the West (2007, p. 123). Moreover, the likelihood of Chinese women establishing action stardom in the West was even lower (Schubart, 2007, p. 123). It suggests that Chinese women face greater challenges to establish themselves as action stars in the US market.

From this perspective, Jing was not only limited by the market condition (as a Chinese action star) but also industrial constraints (as a Chinese female action star). Because of the cinematic bias (that this is a ‘male genre’), Chinese male stars are able to assume the sole leading role and develop their individuality (which is vital for stardom) from the type (i.e. the action man). Beyond the display of martial arts, Bruce Lee developed
Jeet Kune Do that was associated with the remasculinisation of Chinese body (see Tasker, 1997, p. 322); Jackie Chan merged martial arts with comic effects and self-endangerment (Hunt, 2011, p. 141); Jet Li incorporated Chinese wushu cultural heritage and developed a persona of kung fu master (Hunt, 2011, p. 141); and Donnie Yen reprised Wing Chun martial arts and closely tied himself to Ip Man (Funnell, 2013, pp. 126-127). In contrast, Chinese female stars encounter more obstacles in developing individuality associated with martial arts. For instance, Zhang Ziyi’s transnational stardom was centrally framed as a martial arts woman, yet she faced limitations in leveraging this image. As evidenced in her geisha role in Memoirs of a Geisha (2005), Zhang’s persona was reshaped to align more closely with traditional femininity. In a similar vein, given the structural disadvantage of woman in action cinema, by taking a supporting role in Special ID, Jing was unable to convert the type (i.e. the action woman) into her own individuality (i.e. Jing as a branded action woman).

Jing did not attain popular acclaim in China either. Similar to The Warring States, the poor reception of Special ID among Chinese audience (4.5 out of 10 on Douban [Douban, 2024b]) may partially account for her failure. Additionally, it could be attributed to the disconnection between the ideal femininity preferred by Chinese (male) audiences and the filmic representation of action woman. Based on an Internet survey of national femininity conducted by Women of China, Wang et al. (2016) observed that the normative femininity remains rooted in feminine qualities, and women who embody traits associated with elegance and cultural refinement are most widely accepted and admired. On the contrary, masculine femininities such as ‘woman’ (nü hanzi), characterised by a tough, feisty demeanour, are not perceived as the ideal femininities people expect from women (Wang et al., 2016). In some way, Jing’s onscreen persona as a feisty action/warrior woman established through The Warring States and Special ID is disconnected from Chinese audiences. Beyond the textual level, Jing’s positionality as the female lead in Special ID (despite playing a supporting character) presents a jarring element against the film’s commercial aspiration to appeal to a wide audience for profit maximisation. Her leading presence in the film
could not serve as a draw for a national audience, as she was not considered a star in the Chinese public. Like her presence in *The Warring States*, she contributed very limitedly to adding to the commercial value of the film in the domestic market. To make her a star in Huallywood runs counter to the industrial logic of this cinema. In other words, she is (mis)placed in a business model that demands her to ‘give’ (i.e. to leverage one’s stardom for the film), rather than to ‘take’ (i.e. to achieve stardom through the film). Therefore, Jing’s positionality in *Special ID* further illustrates that Huallywood tends to be a contestable site for star-making.

**4.4 Unpacking the narrative of ‘failure’: Neoliberal individualism and gender**

Jing’s roles in her subsequent Huallywood films further reinforced her onscreen persona as a feisty, rebellious, and intelligent young woman. In *Police Story 2013* (2013), she plays the rebellious daughter of Jackie Chan. In *The Man from Macau* (2014), she reprises the policewoman role. Like the first two films, she was also billed as the female lead and collaborated with (trans)national stars Jackie Chan, Liu Ye, Chow Yun-fat and Nicholas Tse. Similarly, her presence in these two films failed to lead her to transnational stardom in the US, or popular acclaim in the Chinese public. It is worth noting that Jing’s presence in Huallywood led her to a Hollywood International Award, an acknowledgement of her contribution to the box office success of *Special ID*, *Police Story 2013*, and *The Man from Macau* in the Chinese market, from the 18th Hollywood Film Awards (Sina Entertainment, 2014a). However, while the award granted her certain visibility in the US, its emphasis on her achievement in the Chinese market negatively demonstrated the limited visibility of Huallywood films in the US.

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21 The factors contributing to her failure in attaining stardom in the US market through *Police Story 2013* were largely comparable to my analyses of *The Warring States* and *Special ID*. Moreover, *Police Story 2013* was distributed in the US market after a roughly 18-month gap via Well Go USA, which was a rather long delay (it was released on 24 December 2013 in China and 5 June 2015 in the US) (Rotten Tomatoes, 2024c). *The Man from Macau* was a Huallywood film (a New Year Celebration film) with an inward-looking perspective, therefore it did not purposefully aim at entering the US market.
market. Instead, she established national notoriety following the release of *The Warring States* in 2011, where she was rumoured to have a wealthy businessman supporting her acting career (Jin, 2011a; Jin, 2011b; Ruan, 2011; Zhang, 2011; Zhao, 2011). In 2014, she was also awarded the most disappointing actress for her performance in *Special ID* and *Police Story 2013* at the Golden Broom (a Chinese equivalent of the Golden Raspberry Awards of the US) (Ma, 2014). It appears that her association with these Huallywood films has largely contributed to the negative reception of her fame in China, which solidified her public image as a failed star.

Clearly, Jing was famous in China, yet in an infamous way. To some extent, her fame in the Chinese public was somewhat anticipated. Due to the large scale of publicity of these films and Jing’s billing as the ‘female lead’, it was improbable that she would remain obscure to the Chinese public. What is interesting is the ways her fame was negatively received/interpreted by the Chinese public. First, the rumours that established her national notoriety convey a sense of ‘unworthiness’; that is, in the eyes of the Chinese public, she was not ‘worthy’ to be in Huallywood productions, as her participation was ‘facilitated by financial means’ (setting aside the gendered connotation in it for now). Second, her performances were not considered categorically bad, particularly when considering the disparity between Western critics’ praise of her performance in *Special ID* and the criticism it received from the Golden Broom. Hence, in this section, I will explore the factors that result in the poor reception of her presence in Huallywood in China. First, I will examine the promotional strategies that billed her as the female lead with other established stars in these four films. Then, I will look at the ways in which the Chinese public responded to these promotional strategies and more broadly her presence in Huallywood. In doing so, I will further consolidate my argument regarding how Huallywood serves as a contestable site for making a (female) star.

In the marketing of the four films, there is an attempt to align Jing’s name and significance with the established stars featured in each production. She is often
introduced as the female lead in the promotional posters, trailers, and domestic media coverage surrounding these films, although she often assumes supporting roles within the diegesis (except for *The Warring States*, in which she takes the female lead). As film posters provide direct visual cues to suggest actors’ roles and significance, I employ them as the primary illustrative evidence here. On the film poster of *The Warring States* (see Figure 4.5), Jing occupies a similar space to the other three stars (Sun Honglei, Francis Ng, and Kim Hee Seon) and she is positioned parallel to Sun, the protagonist, which underscores her female lead role opposite him. Despite being a supporting role in *Police Story 2013*, she shares equal prominence with Jackie Chan and Liu Ye on the film poster designed for the Chinese market (see Figure 4.6), positioned strategically to emphasise her significance alongside the two established (trans)national stars while also attracting viewers’ attention to her character. Similar strategies are also applied to the other two films: on the film poster of *Special ID* (see Figure 4.3 in previous section) and *The Man from Macau* (see Figure 4.7), Jing is positioned behind Donnie Yen and Chow Yun-fat, yet her figure on both posters shares a comparable size to theirs, highlighting her prominence. Given that stardom constitutes a vital part in the promotion of these films, by doing this Jing’s image and name are aligned with these established stars. As Jing is often positioned on a par with, and occasionally secondary to, the top-billed star(s), it seems to be a promotional strategy that seeks to leverage the status of those established stars, drawing a parallel with her to elevate her status to theirs.
Figure 4.5 *The Warring States* poster for the Chinese market

Figure 4.6 *Police Story 2013* poster for the Chinese market
However, the alignment of stardom did not equalise their star status but rather led Jing to national notoriety. To understand the failure of this marketing approach, it is necessary to consider the cultural and ideological context within which the Chinese stars are situated. As I mentioned at the beginning of Section 4.1, neoliberalism with ‘Chinese characteristics’ (see Harvey, 2005, p. 120) has largely shaped the political economy of China and brought about the commercialisation of the Chinese film industry. In addition to this, the reform based on neoliberalism with ‘Chinese characteristics’ brought about the phenomenon of stardom. Even within the confines of strict state supervision, the market economy invariably invites global capitalism in China, introducing the neoliberal ideologies of individualism and consumerism. As Paul McDonald notes, the star system associates closely with consumerist ideas of wealth, freedom, and individualism, and stardom has promoted these values through individual stars since its emergence (2000, p. 32). Given China’s employment of neoliberalism, it is not surprising that in the Reform era, the discourse of stars – a symbol of individualism and consumerism – has returned to the Chinese public, along with the emergence of home-grown Chinese stars.  

22 As a capitalist product, stars were officially ‘banned’ in socialist era, during which the Chinese Communist Party deemed the connotations of capitalist ideologies associated with stars detrimental to the socialist cause. Instead,
As neoliberalism foregrounds the principles of a ‘free market’, Chinese stars, as a type of worker, are situated within this market condition. As the centralised control of the state dismantles in the Reform era, actors are liberated from salaried employment within a neoliberal context and encouraged to engage in market competition as individuals. As the market is perceived as ‘free’ and competitive in a neoliberal context, personal success (e.g. the achievement of stardom) is often framed with the rhetoric of meritocracy. As noted by Jo Littler, meritocracy embodies the idea that regardless of one’s social position at birth, society should provide sufficient opportunity and mobility ‘for “talent” to combine with “effort” in order to “rise to the top”’ (2018, p. 1). In a neoliberal framework, then, individuals are ‘encouraged to believe that if we try hard enough we can make it [...]. To release our inner talent, we need to work hard and market ourselves in the right way to achieve success’ (Littler, 2018, p. 2, my emphasis). Against the neoliberal backdrop in the Reform era, I would suggest that the emphasis of individualism as well as the discourses of merit and effort emerge as influential mechanisms that shape the public’s perception of Chinese stars as a type of worker. In light of this, the promotional strategy that seeks to align Jing’s status with that of the established stars in these films is unlikely to succeed, as it contradicts the idea of neoliberal individualism in Reform China. In this marketing approach, Jing was not perceived as an individual and agentic actor who strives to achieve stardom independently, but rather as relying on the status of established stars in these films to elevate hers.

More importantly, as meritocracy values the narratives of talent and hard work, Jing’s positionality in Huallywood cinema and her collaboration with these established stars present a challenge to this principle. Talent refers to professional excellence; for actors it is assessed by whether they possess (good) acting skills. Hard work refers to the often consistent and diligent effort to achieving a goal; for actors it is assessed by

Chinese stars survived in the form of film workers, whose power was harnessed by the nation to propagate national ethos and ideologies (see Hang, 2010; Zhang, 2010b; Yu, 2012a).
whether they (are perceived to) invest sufficient effort in honing their craft. As a form of performing art, acting tends to resist an objective evaluation. Similarly, as mediated figures, stars’ presentation of hard work often poses challenges to authenticity. Nevertheless, in a neoliberal framework, talent and hard work speak through the rhetoric of upward mobility, rearticulated as (the visibility of) the process of working one’s way up, which aligns with the meritocratic concept of success (i.e. ‘rising to the top’). In Jing’s case, her presence in Huallywood clearly does not contribute to her narrative of upward mobility, as Huallywood is a structure that mobilises the often top-tier, transnational cinematic resources. In other words, unlike the established stars who possess (trans)national renown among Chinese audiences, she had not accumulated enough public recognition before being cast as the female lead in these Huallywood films. Therefore, in the eyes of the Chinese public, Jing was a lesser-known starlet (if not a newcomer in the Chinese industry at all), who is ‘unworthy’ of accessing Huallywood cinema. At the same time, she simultaneously became an incompatible element within a cast composed of (trans)national stars who are considered ‘worthy’ in these four Huallywood films.

As a result, it comes as no surprise that since the failure of The Warring States, rumours have circulated in the Chinese public about Jing receiving support for her acting career (from a wealthy businessman). In her examination of the reception of celebrity tabloid, Sofia Johansson highlighted how celebrity-bashing stories can unveil the way in which ordinary readers navigate social power structures (2006, p. 356). She emphasised how readers’ interpretations of such stories contribute to deconstructing social tensions surrounding issues of class and identity (Johansson, 2006, p. 356). In a neoliberal China where meritocracy holds significant value, the rumour then reflects a knee-jerk reaction from the Chinese public, driven by their discontent and resistance against individuals like her who are perceived to have unjustly exploited their connection to attain success through shortcuts. In this sense, Jing’s continued participation in these Huallywood productions has only perpetuated her perceived ‘unworthiness’ in the Chinese public. Within this cultural and ideological environment, Huallywood – a
The rhetoric of meritocracy certainly accounts for the emergence of rumours as a negative response to Jing’s supposedly exploitation of her connections to secure roles in Huallywood films. However, this framework exhibits limitations in illustrating why these rumours connect Jing’s presence in Huallywood to the support from a businessman. It suggests that further explorations are necessitated regarding the factors that led to Jing’s failure in attaining popular acclaim in the Chinese public. To gain a thorough understanding of this, I will now examine the popular discourses in response to Jing’s presence in Huallywood in the Chinese public. Mainly, there are two main discourses emerging from the reception, which I refer to as the ‘canary’ and the ‘queen of films that suck’. In what follows, I will unpack these two perceptions that reject her presence in Huallywood and explore how the gendered structure of power in a neoliberal context serves as the bedrock of their emergence, dissemination, and widespread impact, as well as how it inhibits Jing from attaining popular acclaim in China. I will argue that her poor reception in China is also attributed to her gender as a female star participating in Huallywood productions.

The discourse of the canary stemmed directly from the rumours mentioned above and later grew into an influential discourse in the Chinese public that rejected Jing’s presence in Huallywood. It initially appeared in a blind gossip story from Sohu Entertainment in 2011 when The Warring States was released (Jin, 2011a). The word canary (‘jinsique’) is employed to depict a woman in Chinese society who is economically reliant on a man and typically leads a materially privileged life, akin to a caged domestic bird with a beautiful appearance. In this article, the author described Jing’s ‘encounter with the man who supported her career’ as follows: ‘Like

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23 It is worth noting that the word canary holds culturally different connotations. In a Western context, it refers to the ‘canary in a coal mine’ phenomenon, where the bird serves as an early warning system for potential crises in its environment.
all the girls in pursuit of a career in acting, J [sic], the female lead in the recently released epic blockbuster, came to Beijing to develop her acting career. During her time at Beijing Dance Academy [sic]24, she met L [sic], a rich Shanxi mining tycoon and a shareholder of a well-known corporation. The beauty and the rich quickly fell in love [...]’ (Jin, 2011a). Then, the narrative proceeded to depict how this businessman L invested in several films to make her a star and how, when these endeavours fell short, the public derided her as ‘a super canary’ (‘yizhi chaoji jinsique’) (Jin, 2011a). Following the poor performance of The Warring States at both the box office and in audience reception, the discourse of canary spread and continued to be cited in entertainment news (e.g. Jin, 2011b; Ruan, 2011; Zhang, 2011; Zhao, 2011). Questions in relation to her mysterious wealthy boyfriend also surfaced in her early interviews (e.g. Li, 2011; Liu, 2013; Ren, 2011; Sun, 2012; Wang, 2011; Zhang, Y., 2014). The myth even attracted the attention of transnational media in the ensuing years, as her career expanded into Hollywood (see Landreth, 2017a; Liu, 2017). As Paul McDonald notes, rumours cannot be easily dismissed as falsity, for when the same information is repeatedly circulated and becomes known by a sufficient number of people, rumours can shape the perception of a star’s image and come to represent some aspect of the truth (2000, p. 7). Despite lacking any substantiated evidence, the discourse of canary gained increasing momentum with each appearance Jing made in a Hollywood production.

As evidenced by the reviews and comments of these four films on Douban, the Chinese audiences expressed significant animosity toward Jing’s billing and employment in these Hollywood productions, with a myriad of comments referring to the discourse of canary in explicit, sarcastic, or allusive ways. In the review and comment section of The Warring States, Special ID and Police Story 2013 in particular, this perception dominated the front row on the first page, drawing an abundance of ‘helpful’ clicks from Douban users:

24 Before her time at Beijing Film Academy, Jing studied at the Affiliated Secondary School of Beijing Dance Academy, rather than Beijing Dance Academy.
[The Warring States] ‘Jing Tian’s sugar daddy must really love her! If not for love, he couldn’t have squandered so much money on such a rubbish film’ (Muyayou, Douban, 12 April 2011) garnered 617 helpful clicks (Douban, 2023a); [Special ID] ‘After knowing the purpose of this film was to make Jing Tian a star, [I] immediately lost hope of it. Anyone who knows about The Warring States knows what I mean’ (Dachengtian, Douban, 18 October 2013) attracted 1,083 helpful clicks; and [Police Story 2013] ‘Once upon a time the tuhao (rich rednecks) liked to use money to make the female star their own chick; yet it hasn’t been for a few years, they now fancy making their own chick a star. [...] If 150 million yuan couldn’t make his chick famous, there is a line-up including Donnie Yen, Jackie Chan, Liu Ye, Chow Yun-fat, and Nicholas Tse ready to take on this mission. Jing Tian! Just marry him!’ (mrhao, Douban, 25 December 2013) drew 1,290 helpful clicks (Douban, 2023b).

The selective examples presented here exude a strong sense of certainty that Jing’s presence in Hollywood is not based on meritocracy. This certainty is then conveniently connected to and rationalised through the discourse of canary. Furthermore, Jing’s perceived dependence on this male figure is depicted and vilified as a relationship that is illegitimate (a trade between money/power and sexuality) and somewhat morally and sexually perverted (‘sugar daddy’, an asymmetrical relationship between her as a young actress and an older, financially affluent businessman). From the use of pejorative and vulgar expressions such as canary and sugar daddy, these statements are charged with an undisguised misogynistic sentiment. In the discourse of canary, Jing’s body and sexuality are objectified, stigmatised, and commodified in exchange for her career development, by dint of an assumed male figure.

The discourse of canary is a creation rooted in a patriarchal social structure and refashioned in a neoliberal context. Given the different ways ‘patriarchy’ is understood and employed (see Walby, 1989), it is necessary to account for my adoption here. By ‘patriarchy’, I refer to a social system within which men are positioned in the dominant
position and women in the subordinate position. It is a social structure which ‘promotes male privilege by being *male dominated, male identified, and male centered*’ (Johnson, 2014, p. 5, emphasis in original). In a patriarchal society, men dominate and control, and therefore see themselves as subjects; the social life is also structured to identify with men, by taking men’s standards to represent human experience; and the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do (Johnson, 2014, pp. 6, 7, 10).

By contrast, women become the subordinated/controlled (the objectified), othered, and marginalised, and therefore defined by their relationship (usefulness) to men. In this gendered structure of power, women are positioned at a disadvantage in comparison to men. In a neoliberal context that encourages free competition, a patriarchal structure renders men privileged, granting them more social and economic resources to achieving success than women, whereas women are positioned as subordinate, who (are forced to) commodify their femininity as a form of capital and power to obtain the resources men have (see Dai, quoted in Wu, 2021). The discourse of canary is informed by the subordinate status of women within the patriarchal structure and simultaneously breathes oxygen from the neoliberal ideologies. When suggesting the commodification of her body and sexuality to obtain the cinematic resources from an assumed male figure, it overlooks that ‘the act of trading the female body and sexuality’ is predicted on the male-dominated nature of the industry, where men control the production of film projects from financing, directing, to casting decisions. Due to the unequal distribution of power and resources, female stars are positioned at a disadvantage in this industrial structure and forced to exploit ‘their body and sexuality’ as a form of capital. From this perspective, Jing’s gender as a female star is clearly at play (and works against her favour) in the way the Chinese public responded to her presence in Huallywood.

The discourse of canary can be considered a gendered response that denies Jing’s capacity and career success in participating in Huallywood productions as a woman. It rejects her achievements in professional arena as a female star and directs the attention to her private life. First, given the subordinate status of women within the
patriarchal structure, the identification of women’s success becomes more challenging. As Virginia Wright Wexman observes, narratives of success for male stars often highlight their training in educational institutions or through apprenticeship situations, whereas stories of success for female stars often emphasise the discovery of their photos or their involvement in the ‘casting couch’ method, where their sexuality is traded for roles (1993, p. 134). In a similar vein, Jing’s career success in participating in Huallywood productions was framed by the Chinese public as trading her sexuality for roles, rather than recognition of her capacity in the professional sphere. Second, in this gendered structure of power, men and women are positioned in an active-passive, public-private dichotomy. As female stars, it is more challenging for them to attain cultural legitimacy as workers (Holmes and Negra, 2011, p. 13). In that the focus on female stars is more associated with the private sphere, Jing encountered greater difficulty in dispelling rumours surrounding her personal life and establishing herself primarily as an actor. Within this gendered dynamic, it comes as no surprise that when Jing attempted to redirect the public attention to her status as an actor, emphasising that she secured these roles through her hard work and dedication (e.g. Wang, 2011; Sun, 2012; Chen, 2013; Liu, 2013; Shang, L’officiel, June 2013; Sun, Vogue, July 2013; Xu and Wang, In Style, September 2013; Sina Entertainment, 2014b), the hardworking persona failed to compete with the prevalent circulation of the discourse that depicted her as a canary. Therefore, her failure to achieve popular acclaim is impeded by her gender as a female star, where the Chinese public placed sterner judgements on her participation in Huallywood productions and more emphasis on her private life, which perpetuated the negative impact of the discourse of canary on her public image.

Another popular discourse in response to her presence in these Huallywood films is the derogatory label ‘queen of films that suck’ (‘lanpian nüwang’) or alternatively ‘Jing Tian’s productions are destined to disappoint’ (‘Jing Tian chupin, bishu lanpian’) (Limaofirm, 2017), which is also attributed to her failure to attain popular acclaim in the Chinese public. It emerged from audience reception on Douban, attributing the poor box office performance and/or audience ratings of these Huallywood films to
her.25 Audiences’ discontent with the quality of these films was more evident in the poorly rated *The Warring States* and *Special ID*, where evaluative terms such as ‘a rubbish film’, ‘not worth watching’ and ‘poor quality’ recurred frequently. Whereas the other two films with mediocre rating tended to receive mixed reviews. While commenting on these films, audiences established a connection between her presence and the perceived quality of the films as subpar. The discourse encompasses two interrelated narratives. First, her mere presence suggests a low-quality film. Second, low-quality films are greenlit by dint of her being cast in them.

Both narratives direct their disappointment and indignation at these films toward Jing. In relation to the first narrative, a notable example was the top film review of *Special ID* that earned 1,121 helpful clicks, in which the user wrote, ‘For any rational audience, once he/she sees that Jing Tian’s name is top billed in a film, he/she should immediately realise that this is an international [sic] certificate of a film that is not worth watching […’ (Mamaye, Douban, 18 October 2013). The second narrative viewed her as the black sheep who disrupted the functioning of the film industry, while this sentiment often overlapped with the discourse of canary. While similar ideas and perceptions can be found in reviews of the four films to varying degrees, this sentiment was most prevalent in relation to the lowest-rated film *The Warring States*: ‘apart from money, a good film needs talent and true love for the film rather than the actress’ (Zhangxiaobei, Douban, 13 April 2011), ‘when 150 million yuan is squandered on one film to make this face of a maid [sic] famous, how many prospective Ning Hao [talented directors] will not have rice [money] to cook [make films]?’ (mioakiyama, Douban, 18 April 2011), and ‘this rubbish film that cost 200 million yuan [sic] and featured four megastars turned out to be some mysterious rich man’s scheme to make Jing Tian famous’ (Zhanyuezhishang, Douban, 5 October 2013).

25 Apart from *The Warring States*, *Special ID*, *Police Story 2013*, *The Man from Macau* were box office hits, garnering 29.1 million, 94.2 million, and 93.8 million dollars respectively (Box Office Mojo, 2024b; 2024c; 2024d). All four films received either poor or mediocre ratings on Douban. As mentioned in earlier sections, *The Warring States* was rated 3.9 out of 10, *Special ID* 4.5 out of 10, *Police Story 2013* 5.9 out of 10 (Douban, 2024c) and *The Man from Macau* 5.8 out of 10 (Douban, 2024d).
At first glance, this discourse seeks to attribute the failure of a film, a collective art form, to Jing, an individual star who accounts for one part of it. While these reviews acknowledged the shortcomings of the films on various fronts, they ultimately reverted to this discourse which attributes Jing as the primary reason for their failure. Interestingly, Jing became the star who was considered responsible for the failure of the entire film, rather than the male stars in these films, despite the fact they were in fact more prominent, in both filmic and cinematic terms, than her. Furthermore, audiences’ reviews and comments suggested a tendency to position them as ‘victims’ and lent sympathy for these male stars,

[The Warring States] ‘I offer my condolence to the actors and international cast who were invited [to make Jing a star]. I hope that all of you get paid enough to mend your trauma [caused by starring in this film]’ (Masheng, Douban, 14 April 2011);

[Special ID] ‘Once again, Jing Tian ruined another big-budget Chinese blockbuster with her zombie-like performance. This time, the kung fu king Donnie Yen is dragged in to play with [sic] Ms Jing’ (Mamaye, Douban, 18 October 2013);

[Police Story Lockdown] ‘Tiantian [Jing] could bring down the box office revenues of Long ge’s [Jackie Chan] film by at least 300 million [yuan]. Who else has this kind of power in Chinese cinema?’ (Hengyurenwoxing, Douban, 24 December 2013) (Douban, 2023b);

[The Man from Macau] ‘Feeling sorry for Fa ge [Chow Yun-Fat] – Don’t work with her [Jing] next time. It will damage your reputation and integrity’ (Fengyanyingyu, Douban, 1 March 2014) (Douban, 2023c).

These reviews and comments positioned the leading male stars such as Donnie Yen, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yun-fat in a vulnerable status. By siding with the male stars, this perception overlooks the fact that as well-established stars, they held more discursive power to leverage their star status to select desired characters or film projects within
the Chinese film industry. While Jing was centralised, criticised and/or ridiculed as deserving vitriols for ‘what she has done’, the male stars were not identified as equally responsible for her film’s unsatisfactory ratings.\textsuperscript{26} Surely, in their roles as actors, their screen performance constitutes a crucial aspect of a film’s quality. Yet in this discourse, the performances of male stars were neither addressed as good, nor perceived to be encumbered by the performances of Jing. In other words, the framing of these male stars as victims stemmed not from their status as actors, but their gender as male stars. As such, the discourses that target Jing are not only individualised, but also gendered.

As Johnson cautions, ‘the significance of what happens to people differs profoundly from one gender to the other’ (2014, p. 158). The audiences’ double standard against Jing mirrors a misogynistic psychology of ‘himpathy’ (Manne, 2018, p. 197) which exonerates men from their misdeeds. The male stars can avail themselves of the structural advantage to alleviate, or even get rid of, the negative impacts from the failure of films. For example, in a press conference for his new work in 2013, Sun Honglei, the male lead in *The Warring States*, recollected being ‘raped [sic] by bad films’ (Li, 2013). He further asserted that ‘some unscrupulous investors make films just to get actresses and launder money, and their conduct has tarnished the film industry’ (Li, 2013). In addition, the news title worked in his favour – ‘Sun Honglei blasts bad investors: they make films only to pick up actresses’ (Li, 2013). As a male star, he was enabled to salvage his public image by portraying himself as a professional with artistic integrity, who exposes the institutional dark side of the Chinese film industry. Furthermore, he was able to take advantage of his gender and further scapegoat Jing. On the other hand, Jing had to contend with the discourse of canary in the following years. In this gendered structure of power, Jing as a female clearly bore a greater burden from the failure of these Huallywood films compared to male stars, which further exacerbated her struggle to attain popular acclaim in a domestic context.

\textsuperscript{26} I do not mean that male stars were supposed to shoulder the blame either. Instead, as a collective art form, the failures of a film can be multifaceted.
Through a textual analysis of the public discourses in response to Jing’s presence in these four Huallywood films, I have argued that Chinese audiences and the entertainment media tend to scrutinise her presence in these productions through a gendered lens, wherein female stars are culturally and industrially devalued. As a female star, her perceived incompatibility with Huallywood cinema based on the meritocratic rules is further fuelled by a misogynistic trope which impedes her from obtaining public recognition. Furthermore, in this gendered structure that identifies with men, she is in a more vulnerable status when these films have poor box office performances or public receptions. As such, if Huallywood cinema does not serve as a site for making a star, it is an even more problematic site for making a female star.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored Jing’s career in Huallywood years (2011-2014) and framed her situation as being caught between production and reception. I have examined the construction of her persona in Huallywood cinema, as well as her failure in achieving popular acclaim through this cinema in both the US market and the Chinese public. The first predicament she was caught in occurs between Huallywood (as the producer) and Hollywood (as the receiver). I have identified that Jing’s onscreen persona as a feisty action/warrior woman is characterised by its transnational appeal to a Western market, and that this persona mirrors the transnational stardom Zhang Ziyi has established in Hollywood in the 2000s through indiewood (see Chapter 3). However, the imbalanced transnational dynamics between China and Hollywood, where China was at a disadvantage, have created structural hurdles for the visibility of Chinese films in the US. As such, Huallywood tends to be a contestable site for promoting Jing as a transnational star to the US market. To establish Jing as a transnational star in the US, an alternative approach was needed. As will be discussed in the next chapter, with the financing from the Chinese film industry, Jing was enabled to directly venture into mainstream Hollywood.
The second predicament she was caught in occurs between Huallywood (as the producer) and the Chinese public (as the receiver). I have identified that the branding strategies that constructed her as an action/warrior woman which appeals to the West may estrange her from a domestic audience. In addition, the branding strategies that positioned her as the female lead and sought to align her with established stars in Huallywood cinema pose a challenge for Jing to attain popular acclaim within a neoliberal culture, where the rhetoric of meritocracy and a gendered structure of power have profoundly shaped the public’s perception of her presence in Huallywood cinema. On both fronts, Huallywood appears to be a contestable site for making a national star, and particularly a female star. Given that Jing’s transnational construct – in filmic and cinematic terms – failed to appeal to a Chinese audience, one might question how, as her career stretched to mainstream Hollywood in the subsequent years, her roles were received by the Chinese audience. Picking up this line of enquiry, the next chapter will explore how her career in Hollywood, which is a larger, more transnational venue than Huallywood, impacted on her reception in China.
Chapter 5 Caught between China and Hollywood: Jing Tian in the vortex of gender, race, and (trans)nationalism

Introduction

As was explored in Chapter 3, the industrial and market conditions play significant roles in facilitating the transnational paths for Chinese female stars to cross over to Hollywood at a given time. In the 2010s, the prosperous Chinese market attracted increased interest of a profit-driven industry such as Hollywood. As a strategy of engaging with the Chinese market, there was a notable increase in the presence of Chinese female stars in mainstream Hollywood blockbusters. Jing Tian was one of the female stars who appeared in three Legendary blockbusters – The Great Wall (2016), Kong: Skull Island (2017) and Pacific Rim: Uprising (2018). Different from her contemporaries, Jing did not just assume insignificant or perfunctory roles (Kong: Skull Island) that call into question their feasibility of establishing transnational stardom. She also assumed a leading role in The Great Wall, as well as a meaningful supporting role in Pacific Rim: Uprising. However, neither of these roles established Jing’s star status in Hollywood, nor did they valorise her stardom in China. Furthermore, following the Chinese public’s negative response to her career in Hollywood (the narratives of ‘failure’ discussed in Chapter 4), she was further labelled as ‘the star who cannot be made famous’ (peng bu hong) for her perceived failure to attain popular acclaim in China.

The discourse of peng bu hong, in a way, serves as a shorthand for her failed attempt to achieve national and transnational stardom in the Chinese and Hollywood contexts between 2011 and 2016. On one level, it is a discourse that emerged from the Chinese public who rejected the various industrial attempts to ‘make her a star’. In this sense, this discourse can be interpreted through the contrasting ways of how fame is positively or negatively received and judged in reception. In the contemporary context,
both popularity and notoriety can be understood as ‘media-driven renown’ (Cashmore, 2006, p. 7), where fame is associated with visibility in mass media, rather than achievement, in which merit and talent are extolled (Schmid, 2006, p. 298). Popularity emphasises a status of being celebrated and embraced by the audience, whereas notoriety emphasises a status of being widely known yet disliked by the audience. In Jing’s case, the discourse of peng bu hong that centred around her failure pointed to the kind of fame defined by notoriety, where she was widely known in reception due to her highly publicised presence in Hollywood and Hollywood yet simultaneously failed to be liked by the Chinese audience because of such presence. On another level, the widespread dissemination of the discourse of peng bu hong surrounding her fame and career reflects a perspective that highlights consumption (see Thomas, 2012, p. 10), where audiences’ perception of her status – that is, her status of ‘being not popular’ in the Chinese public – determined her public image. In this perception, the role played by the industry – that is, her status of ‘being promoted/treated as a star’ in the industry – was sidelined and negated. In any case, just as the negative reception of her Hollywood career, the narrative of peng bu hong remains an individualistic perspective that seeks to blame her for not establishing (trans)national stardom.

In this chapter, I challenge this individualistic framing and examine her status as a transnational worker within the context of Hollywood. I concentrate on how her characters and industrial positionalities in these Legendary blockbusters inform her failure in establishing stardom in Hollywood and the ongoing antagonism towards her fame among Chinese audiences. First, I examine the narrative and visual constructions of her characters and how they have been (re)shaped by the politics of gender and race in Hollywood as well as the considerations of the Chinese film industry and market. Second, I examine how these films position Jing as a transnational worker in the processes of production and promotion. Third, I look at how Jing’s roles were received in the US by focusing on critical reviews (I have decided not to look at audience reception, as there is limited audience engagement with her as a star in the US). I also look at how Jing’s Hollywood roles were received by Chinese audiences, primarily
drawing on the user reviews and comments on Douban. In the main, this chapter will argue that her ‘failure’ in Hollywood, as defined through her lack of visibility in the mainstream American reception and the narrative of *peng bu hong* in the Chinese public, is attributed to a series of systemic problems in relation to gender, race and (trans)nationalism inherent in the processes of production and promotion in Hollywood and its negotiations with the Chinese film industry, which are beyond Jing’s control as an individual star and a transnational worker.

To examine the systemic issues, it is important to acknowledge Jing’s identities as a woman, a racial minority (Chinese), and a Chinese national (i.e. a transnational worker from the Chinese film industry) within the context of Hollywood. Given her ternary identities, it is useful to employ the concept of intersectionality to unpack the specific conditions she encounters in Hollywood. Coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her article ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’ (1989), intersectionality emerged as a ‘heuristic term’ to address ‘the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics’ (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013, p. 787). Intersectionality raises questions about the limitations of viewing inequality in a given society through a single axis of social division, as this approach may fail to fully articulate the discriminations experienced by social groups with overlapping identities (Crenshaw, 2016). It understands that social inequality is conditioned by ‘many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. [...] [B]e it race or gender or class, [it is] shaped by many axes that work together and influence each other’ (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 2). For example, as Crenshaw observes, black women are discriminated from the workforce as ‘women who are Black and as Blacks who are women’ (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013, p. 790). A black female, in this sense, possesses intersectional identities as a black and a woman. Her specific situation determines that a single-axed division would not work, for she suffers ‘unique and distinct kinds of burdens’ that come with her dual identities (Crenshaw, 2016). Intersectionality recognises the complexity of social identities and therefore serves as a valuable analytical tool to examine the ways in
which the structured intersectional discriminations are operated on those social groups with overlapping identities (Crenshaw, 2016). While intersectionality stems from a sociological background, its framework is useful in examining Jing’s specific conditions and experiences within Hollywood.

The acknowledgement of the complexity of social identities suggests that the examination of intersectional situations should always be contextually based (Crenshaw, 2016). As such, the examination of Jing’s specific situation necessitates considerations of her gender, race, and her Chinese national background and how these factors collectively shape her filmic persona and employment conditions in Hollywood. On the one hand, as a woman and a racial minority, she will encounter institutionalised oppressions in the structure of Hollywood. The politics of race and gender in contemporary Hollywood will play a role in shaping her onscreen representations and the narrative significance of her characters in the film. On the other hand, her identity as a Chinese national will complicate the industrial constraints faced by minorities in Hollywood, following the rising discursive power of the Chinese film industry and the commercial appeal of the Chinese market. Specifically, Jing’s Hollywood career was closely tied to Legendary, an American studio acquired by the Chinese conglomerate Wanda in 2016 (see Frater, 2016). The ownership of Legendary complicates Jing’s roles and positionality in Hollywood, as she can be viewed as situated between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood, rather than solely constrained by the structure of Hollywood. Consequently, the negotiating power facilitated by the financial investment of the Chinese film industry and/or the Chinese market can contribute to reshaping her roles which to an extent liberates her from the conventional institutional structures of Hollywood, yet simultaneously such intervention may also impose new restraints on her character.

In the three Legendary blockbusters, Jing played a Chinese warrior woman in ancient China in The Great Wall, a ‘Chinese’ biologist in Kong: Skull Island, and a Chinese career woman in Pacific Rim: Uprising. I will explore how Jing’s intersectional identities are
reflected through her roles and her employment conditions within the context of Hollywood. As introduced in the beginning of this chapter, her roles hold varying levels of narrative significance in these films. For analytical purposes, my examination of Jing’s roles will not be organised chronologically by the release dates of these films, but rather based on their narrative significance in descending order. This approach allows me to organise the changing strategies Hollywood has adopted in its engagement with the Chinese film market, the domestic market, and the international markets in a more effective way.

5.1 Sinicising girl power? The postfeminist warrior woman in The Great Wall

The Great Wall was coproduced by Legendary, Universal, Le Vision and China Film Group Corporation, with China and the US respectively accounting for 50 percent of the investment (McClintock and Galloway, 2017). As a coproduction, the film involved a large scale of collaboration and negotiation between the two film industries. The coproduction nature determines the complexity in Jing’s role as a Chinese warrior woman, as it needs to align with the interests of Hollywood and China, while also speaking to a global audience (given the global mainstream distribution of the film). In this film, Jing assumes the female lead character Commander Lin Mae, who leads an all-women division within an army, but also engages in battles to combat alien monsters. In what follows, I will demonstrate how the character Lin is constructed in a complicated and incoherent way in the process of negotiations between the two film industries. Mainly, I will argue that Lin embodies the postfeminist girl hero at her core that conforms to a Western framework of construction, yet she is simultaneously coated with a particular set of Chinese ideologies that run counter to it.

To examine the way in which Lin is depicted as a postfeminist girl hero, it is necessary to look at the rhetoric of postfeminism and how it is articulated through cinematic
means. Postfeminism emerged in the 1980s after the second wave feminist movements. Depending on the ways in which scholars interpreted the prefix ‘post’, postfeminism has been endowed with different meanings (Genz and Brabon, 2009, pp. 3-4). As Gill and Scharff (2011) usefully summarised, postfeminism has been used broadly in four ways. First, as a theoretical orientation it suggests an ‘epistemological break within feminism’, which signals the transformation and change within feminism that challenges dominant Anglo-American feminism; second, a ‘historical shift’ that marks an end of a particular moment in feminist histories, which is the second wave in this sense; third, a ‘backlash against feminism’; and fourth, a ‘sensibility’ that characterises large parts of contemporary culture (Gill and Scharff, 2011, pp. 3-4). In all four approaches, it is by seeing postfeminism as a sensibility that the term can be seen as an ‘object of critical analysis’ and thus ‘can be used analytically’ to examine an emerging and popularising social and cultural landscape, particularly in relation to media’s representation of women, femininity, and feminism that is postfeminist (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 4).

Postfeminism as a sensibility (Gill, 2007) draws strength from Angela McRobbie’s influential essay which describes postfeminism as ‘a double entanglement’ (2004, p. 255). The entanglement is characterised by the coexistence of two sets of paradoxical phenomena: a) the advocacy of traditional values (for example, family and marriage) and the celebration of neoliberalist discourses (for example, freedom of choice), and b) the existence of feminism as a common sense and the objection and hostility towards it (McRobbie, 2004, pp. 255-256). In terms of postfeminism’s relationship to feminism, this entanglement functions in an ‘acknowledgment/repudiation dynamic that simultaneously includes and excludes, accepts and refutes feminism’ (Genz, 2006, p. 335). Also, given the inclusion of feminist elements in the postfeminist discourse, it cannot be sufficiently construed as a pure ‘backlash’ against feminism (Gill and Scharff, 2011, pp. 3-4). Yet, although feminist ideas are included, McRobbie argues that it remains, by its nature, an anti-feminist sentiment which would lead to the ‘undoing of feminism’ (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255; McRobbie, 2009, p. 1). As she further explains,
‘postfeminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force’ (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255).

Rosalind Gill’s (2007) elaborations of a postfeminist sensibility reflect such an entanglement. In her essay ‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ (2007), Gill identified an array of interrelated themes in popular culture that can help to navigate a postfeminist text. These themes include

- the notion that femininity is a bodily property;
- the shift from objectification to subjectification;
- an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline;
- a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment;
- the dominance of a makeover paradigm;
- and a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference;
- a marked sexualization of culture;
- and an emphasis upon consumerism and commodification of difference (p. 149).

In these themes feminist ideas such as ‘choice’ and ‘subjectification’, which encourage women to take control of their own body, are (mis)used in juxtaposition with and to support anti-feminist notions like the sexualisation of the female body and naturalisation of sexual difference. In this way, the direct objectification and sexualisation of women in the past now shifts to women’s own ‘choice’ to objectify and sexualise their bodies (Gill, 2007, p. 151). With the sexist core remaining unchanged, postfeminism repackages the exploitation of women’s body and sexuality in a self-policing way and in the name of feminism (Gill, 2007, p. 152).

Noticeably, the postfeminist emphases upon subject and individualism (an ideology that sees selfhood with active agency), as well as consumerism (an economic imperative associated with the market economy) resonate closely with neoliberal underpinnings. As introduced in Chapter 4, as neoliberalism highlights individual
agency, it overlooks the structural oppressions to social groups like women, people of working-class, people of colour, people of diverse sexualities, and groups with intersectional identities. This erasure of structure has reduced the women in postfeminist discourse to those with ‘dominant-group privilege’ (Anderson, 2014, p. 4). Therefore, a postfeminist female subject tends to be – socially privileged and culturally favoured – white, middle- or upper-class, and heterosexual, as well as young, beautiful, and fit (or slim), a figure who does not necessarily suffer from explicit discrimination and who can afford the luxury of making choices. The established resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism, as Gill has found, indicates that postfeminism is not merely a response to feminism, but also a sensibility growing out of neoliberalist ideas (2007, p. 164). In other words, a postfeminist sensibility emerges at the intersection of neoliberalism and patriarchy, rather than simply being a post-feminist syndrome. Thus, postfeminism may be best understood as ‘a distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism’ (Gill, 2017, p. 611).

The representation of girl heroes in Hollywood cinema has been informed by the rhetoric of postfeminism since the end of the 1990s. It originates from in the strong and active female characters that Hollywood has presented since the late 1970s. Diverging from the stereotypical representations of women in the 1950s and earlier, these action women on screen actively respond to the second wave feminist movement (Inness, 2004, pp. 5-6). From Ripley in Alien (1979) and Sarah Connor in Terminator (1984), Lara Croft in Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001), to the female superheroes in films such as Wonder Woman (2017) and Captain Marvel (2019), these active women embody strength and power that disassociates from passive femininity. However, there was a perceived change of representation at the turn of the century, where the action female heroes in the 1980s who possessed an androgynous, mascularised body were eclipsed by an ‘explicitly glamorous, sexualised [girl] version’ (Tasker, 2015, p. 68). This shift of representation coincided with the advent of a postfeminist culture (Stasia, 2007, p. 237). As Sherrie A. Inness argues, the new representation of girl heroes, as progressive and liberating as it may first appear, often
bears conservative norms over gender, race, class, and sexuality, hovering within a narrow milieu of prescribed social boundaries (2004, p. 8). At the visual level, they embody the conventional standards of physical beauty and alluring sexuality associated with traditional femininities, and therefore they are beautiful, young, slim, shapely, and often-but-not-exclusively white and heterosexual (O’Day, 2004, pp. 205-206). When they perform tasks, their appearance often takes precedence over their actions. They often maintain pristine facial features and impervious bodily conditions, executing their actions in a graceful and balletic manner that align with normative femininity (Purse, 2011a; 2011b). These girl heroes absorb the male-identified standard, where their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19) is prioritised. As Cristina Lucia Stasia pertinently remarks, these girl heroes are ‘sexualised object before subject’ (2007, p. 243). At the narrative level, these girl heroes are often portrayed as powerful figures who survive and triumph in great style, yet they frequently fall short of challenging the patriarchal social order or expressing their indignation, resistance, and retaliation against (white) male oppression (O’Day, 2004, p. 216). Instead, by commodifying female ‘empowerment’, these girl heroes contribute to ‘rearticulating dominant patriarchal and capitalist values, while not substantially disrupting power relations’ (Riordan, 2001, p. 282). As a result, the representation of postfeminist girl heroes substitutes a collective feminist politics with an individualist discourse of female ‘empowerment’, which rarely includes critiques of patriarchy.

Jing’s character Lin Mae in The Great Wall seamlessly mirrors the visual and narrative construction of the postfeminist girl hero. Specifically, the role was primarily connected to the rhetoric of girl power and gender equality in the marketing campaigns in the US (McMillan, 2016). In one of her interviews at the New York Comic Convention in 2016, Jing introduced her character as follows,

‘[…] She’s a general in this army which is called The Nameless Order, and she’s [sic] such a strong, brave, determined. One of the things that I love the most about the story [sic] is the equality between men and women in leadership roles. I think that
respect [sic] that all of these warriors have for one another regardless of gender is something that I wish we could see more in film and in real life for that matter, so audiences will see [that] this character brings a lot of girl power to the movie (quoted in JoBlo Movie Trailers, YouTube, 9 October 2016, my emphasis).

The idea of girl power grew out of the ‘pro-girl’ rhetoric in the 1990s which was in conjunction with the third wave feminism, and it was popularised through one of the feminist movements, Riot Grrrl, which celebrates young women’s agency and empowerment and encourages them to be powerful (Riordan, 2001, pp. 279-280). While the notion of girl power inspired by Riot Grrrl originally contains a feminist agenda, the process of commodification in media and popular culture has made it a rhetoric of feminist identity, rather than a feminist politics (Riordan, 2001, p. 292; Hains, 2009, p. 90). As Ellen Riordan remarks, the commodified girl empowerment dilutes the political essence in Riot Grrrl so as to appeal to the widest audience and potentially command the most profit (2001, p. 290). Consequently, ‘the radical message [in Riot Grrrl] about structural change is lost’ (Riordan, 2001, p. 294). Also, this idea is built upon a premise that the gains made by past generations of feminist movements have thoroughly permeated across all strata of social lives (Siegel, 1997, cited in Stasia, 2007, p. 240). Then, ‘it is just a matter of exercising one’s girl power’, given that gender equality has been achieved (Stasia, 2007, p. 240). Consequently, the rhetoric of girl power champions ‘female empowerment’, extolling female achievements in the patriarchal society without questioning the system that produces male privilege and women’s oppression (see Johnson, 2014, p. 107). In this sense, the rhetoric of girl power in media and popular culture can be understood as speaking to a postfeminist cultural landscape.

Narratively, Lin is depicted as a warrior woman who possesses both physical strength and intellectual prowess. She is situated within a patriarchal society during the Song Dynasty, under the reign of Emperor Renzong. The kingdom is guarded by the Nameless Order, an army stationed along the Great Wall to defend against the Tao Tei,
a kind of voracious monsters in Chinese mythology that emerge every 60 years to attack. The Nameless Order, led by male General Shao, is predominantly male-dominated, with men comprising four-fifths of its forces. The Crane Corps, the one division left, is comprised entirely of women, led by Lin as their commander. Amidst four male commanders and under the leadership of a male general, Lin stands out as the sole female commander tasked with responsibilities identical to those of men – defending the Great Wall and safeguarding the patriarchal kingdom from the threat posed by the alien monsters. As the story progresses, she is appointed as the General of the Nameless Order to lead not only female soldiers but also male soldiers, following the death of the General Shao. She rises to a leadership role within a male-dominated environment and even surpasses male commanders to lead a group of men. The transition of leadership occurs naturally, with no resistance from her male counterparts. In addition to this, Lin’s authority remains unchallenged within the army. In her capacity as a warrior woman, Lin displays her physical strength by eliminating the queen monster (with the assistance from Garin, the male protagonist in the film), ultimately securing the victory of humanity. Her power is not only demonstrated through physical capacity but also her intelligence. She is adept at communicating and translating English, a skill that sets her apart from other commanders and soldiers. In this story world, with her leadership abilities, physical strength, and intellect, Lin symbolises the rhetoric of girl power, as defined through her ‘ambition, success, and power’ (Harris, 2004, p. 17).

In the meantime, despite her achievements, as a woman who occupies a position traditionally reserved for men in a patriarchal society, her power is carefully reined in to prevent it from challenging or threatening the authority of men. In the narrative, it is achieved through the reinstatement of her subordinate position and the display of her femininity. First, while she is not discriminated or oppressed in the army, she has a male figure who guides, protects, and/or rewards her. In the first half of the film, General Shao is presented as a quasi-father figure to her. Lin is taught by him, reflected in Shao’s line ‘You grew up in the Nameless Order. I’ve taught you many things, and
you have been learning [...]’. She is protected by him; Shao dies when protecting her from the ambush of a Tao Tei. Her general post is given by him on his deathbed. In the latter half of the film, this role is transferred to the emperor who promotes her as the General of Northwest Territory for defending the kingdom. Throughout the narrative, Lin wields power, but not to a degree that threatens the existing social structure. In addition to this, her power is ultimately employed to safeguard the patriarchal kingdom and uphold the emperor’s reign. Second, despite being powerful, she is not presented killing a monster *independently* without the protection, or aid from the male characters such as Shao and Garin. Whilst there are scenes indicating that she kills monsters (i.e. she jumps off the Wall with spears and comes back alive in the first battle), when it comes to confronting real monsters, she is either in collaboration with Shao or Garin, or otherwise ensnared by a group of monsters and in need of rescue. Clearly, her power is weakened, especially in contrast to that of men. However, it is worth noting that her collaboration with others is uncommon for typical girl hero protagonists in Hollywood films. This narrative arrangement is influenced by China’s consideration of the avoidance of presenting individual heroism, and it is also linked to the dynamics of transnational star power between Damon and Jing, which I will return to later in this section. Third, she also displays vulnerability, a trait conventionally associated with femininity in a patriarchal culture. She is the only one who cries emotionally when Shao dies, with tears streaming down her cheeks, while other male commanders merely appear sorrowful. These narrative arrangements are in line with a postfeminist construction of Hollywood’s action heroines – that ‘she is softened, not hardened, [where her power is] within the parameters allowed by patriarchal discourse’ (Stasia, 2007, p. 238) – which many feminist critics have taken issue with (e.g. Brown, 2004; O’Day, 2004; Coulthard, 2007; Stasia, 2007; Purse, 2011a; White, 2011; Kent, 2021).

Apart from the narrative, the visual representation of Lin is postfeminist through the way her body is objectified and sexualised to cater to the visual pleasure of male audiences. This is evident in the sartorial emphasis of her fit, feminine and sexualised
Though she appears in two sets of costume, I will concentrate on the blue combat suit which symbolises her division, as it is the one that she wears throughout the battles against Tao Tei monsters. This combat suit (see Figure 5.1, where she stands on the right, centrally framed) is designed by Mexican designer Mayes C. Rubeo. According to Rubeo, this design takes into account two primary factors – its utility as an airborne combat suit and its aesthetics as a military uniform (quoted in Haas, 2017). For the former, because these female warriors are required to jump off the Wall, it cannot be stiff or bulky (Rubeo, quoted in Haas, 2017). Given that mobility is the central concern in the air, both the armour and chainmail adhere to this code; the armour is form-fitting like a diving suit with no excess parts that would cause hindrance when flying down; the chainmail is scaly shaped, fitting snugly to the body and pliable enough to ensure agility. For the latter, the dominant hue is a colour of blue which resembles the sky, a military strategy which provides camouflage for female soldiers (Rubeo, quoted in Haas, 2017). The blue armour, instead of covering her entire body, only enfolds her shoulders, breasts, waist, and part of her arms and legs. Also, whilst the armour and the underlying chainmail envelops the female body, the chainmail’s cobalt blue forms a degradable contrast with the vibrant, shimmering blue armour. The reflective blue highlights her breasts, waist, and legs. Although the body is fully concealed under the chainmail, the armour in some way ‘undresses’ her through accentuating her feminine body curve with the brassiere, crooked belt, mini-skirt-like shield and patched armour on her thighs and legs, as well as exposing the rest of her ‘flesh’, notably her midriff and groin. It is a tight-fitting, in some way revealing costume that features a fit, sexualised female body.
As a postfeminist girl hero, Lin’s female body is spectacularised and/or sexualised for the visual pleasure of male audiences, especially when it is in motion. First, her face has been well preserved throughout the film to maintain her to-be-looked-at-ness. It remains by and large pristine and (deliberately) kept away from scarring. It is most evident when compared to the male characters. For instance, after the initial battle against the Tao Tei monsters, Garin and Tovar’s faces are heavily splattered with the monsters’ green blood, their own red blood, and black artillery ashes. Similarly, the Chinese commanders and General also have their faces smudged by artillery dust and green blood. Despite the variations in shade and intensity, the blood and dirt obscure their entire faces, giving them a grimy appearance. Lin’s face, on the other hand, remains mostly pristine, marred only by a small smudge of green blood near her jaw. It suggests that Lin is primarily framed by the way she looks, rather than the way she fights. Second, when Lin engages in action, her movements are graceful and balletic, adhering to traditional gendered expectations where women abstain from any ‘unladylike’ acts (Purse, 2011a, p. 82). When she leaps from the Crane rig and executes multiple somersaults before returning to the springboard, her movements are elegant, agile, and pleasing to look at. Despite the physical exertion required for these gravity-defying moves, she maintains composure, as evidenced in her serene expressions and
steady breaths. As noted by Stasia, while the 1980s’ female heroes present a functional body, the body of postfeminist girl heroes is mainly spectacle (2007, p. 243). Furthermore, Lin’s moving body is also sexualised. For example, in the sequence where she skydives down the Wall to confront the monster, the cinematography sexualises her moving body (see Figure 5.2). It is a sequence featured in both the second trailer and the film. From this angle, her breasts and outstretched arms dominate half of the frame, drawing the primary attention of spectators away from the blurry swarm of monsters and artillery fire. Instead of visualising the danger of her act, the positioning of the camera encourages the (male) audience to seek visual pleasure from her moving, protruding breasts. In this sense, she becomes a ‘sexualised object before subject’ (Stasia, 2007, p. 243).

Figure 5.2 The point of view from Lin in the first battle in The Great Wall

As I have demonstrated above, the construction of Jing’s role as Lin Mae conforms to the postfeminist girl hero within a Western framework. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, while The Great Wall is a coproduction, the story was developed by a group of white male screenwriters in Hollywood, including Max Brooks, Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, who oversaw the story, along with Carlo Bernard, Doug Miro and Tony Gilroy, who penned the script (IMDb, 2023). In other words, Lin is a character
constructed within the structure of Hollywood, with minimal involvement from China. As such, her Chinese face, ‘Chinese’ costuming, her warrior woman identity that draws from Chinese cultural legacies (while also speaking to the popular imagination of Chinese women in the West), and her use of Chinese language in the film only suggest a superficial representation of ‘China’. Although one might argue that her ‘Chinese’ ethnicity, rather than being white, challenges the default whiteness often associated with postfeminist girl heroes, it is important to consider how this inclusion works. As Sarah Banet-Weiser alerts us, different logics and processes run behind a politics of visibility and an economy of visibility, in which visibility is ‘a means to an end’ for the former, yet visibility is ‘the end’ for the latter (2018, p. 23). Therefore, the key point is not so much about visibility itself, but ‘how visibility is managed and controlled’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 24, emphasis in original). Thus, the incorporation of race and ethnicity suggests not necessarily the change at a structural level or the challenge against the existing structure. Just as the idea of feminism and the feminist identity are included in postfeminism, the idea of race and the racial identity can also be included and commodified in a postfeminist discourse, serving as the justification of a racial politics as something of the past (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 205; Butler, 2013, p. 50). The creation of Lin is such a case of the economisation of visibility. Similar to her white postfeminist counterpart that Hollywood has churned out since the late 1990s, she is essentially a formulaic product promoted under the banner of girl power. As Jing’s role embodies the notion of girl power, her Chinese specificity is erased (as much as it is ‘presented’). In this representation, Hollywood seeks to infuse a Chinese woman’s body with Western popular cultural elements that may potentially resonate with an American audience, reimagining Chinese femininity within a postfeminist frame. The incorporation of Jing’s Chinese identity on screen was not so much an investment in her, but rather an exploitation of her Chinese identity.

On the other hand, the collaborative nature of the film as a coproduction suggests that it must also respond to the interests of the Chinese film industry. As Chris Homewood (2021) notes, while Hollywood studios sought to engage more with the lucrative
Chinese market, China, in turn, capitalised on the global influence of Hollywood to ‘communicate a favourable [national] image to foreign publics and, in so doing, build soft power, especially in the West’ (p. 97). Given the collaborative nature of *The Great Wall*, the imperative of disseminating a positive image became more evident. The ideological undertone was reflected in the narrative through the staunch belief of Chinese soldiers in patriotism, altruism, and collectivism; and in action it was manifested in their bravery in fighting flesh-eating monsters, making sacrifices for the greater good, and defending the kingdom. The need to address Chinese values implies that as the most highlighted Chinese character in the film, Lin is also expected to convey something Chinese that is discursively meaningful to audiences beyond just her Chinese face, body, and Mandarin language. In a cross-cultural context, her words and actions serve as more effective means than her bodily traits in the meaning-making process of incorporating Chinese values. The film responded to the ‘seriousness’ of the Chinese blockbusters by including a dedicated scene where Lin lectures Garin, the self-interested, greedy mercenary who fights for money rather than honour, about the concept of ‘trust’ (*xinren*) on the Wall. The scene served to propagate Chinese ethos and ideologies centred on nationalism, collectivism, patriotism, and altruism. Lin says, ‘in this army, we fight for more than food or money. We give our lives to something more. *Xinren* is our flag. Trust in each other, in all ways, at all times.’ This line not only educates Garin but also communicates to the audiences in the movie theatre that Chinese soldiers, and by extension China, fight for the good of others, honour, and the country. It emphasises the importance of collective interests and cooperation. In this sense, Lin embodies the ethos and values China holds and transmits a positive image of China as a nation to a *global* audience via the powerful distribution pipelines of Hollywood.

However, this need of sinicising the girl to bear collective features runs counter to the individualistic core of postfeminist girl power in this character. It creates a split in the character and further impinges on the way she behaves in the narrative. As I have demonstrated earlier, she is never presented killing monsters on her own. Instead, she
is presented in collaboration with General Shao, her fellow soldiers, or Garin while doing so. Even in scenes where she appears alone when jumping off the Wall, the presence of loops and straps on her always reminds us of collaboration, as another fellow soldier is there to pull her up. This incoherence is particularly visible in the scene where she kills the queen monster, which is the climax of the film. Despite her assertion that ‘I’ve trained for this my whole life’, she does not act alone. Instead, she collaborates with Garin, who throws a magnet to immobilise the monsters surrounding the queen. It allows her to take a clear shot at the queen monster. While it is Lin who delivers the final blow and secures victory of humanity, it is not solely her individual triumph as a girl hero. Such arrangement diverges from the typical Hollywood postfeminist girl hero protagonist – she would commonly tackle such challenges by herself, because that is her moment. It also results in confusion and debates regarding whether it should be Garin or Lin to do this, based on the hints in the plot. By presenting this moment in a Chinese way, the heroic moment that typically glorifies individual heroism is downplayed, blurring the ownership of this moment between Garin and Lin. Consequently, Lin, as postfeminist girl hero in a Western framework, emerges as an incongruent character that does not fully adhere to an individualistic rhetoric. Her character reflects the ongoing negotiations between the two film industries, which struggle to achieve a balance. While playing this character, Jing’s body and performance are drawn into and constrained by the broader industrial negotiations between the two. In this light, her failure to attain transnational stardom through this complicated character should not be thought of as an individual failure, but rather a structural one that associates with failed negotiations between the two industries.

Furthermore, another key feature that differentiates Lin from traditional postfeminist girl heroes in Hollywood cinema is her secondary position to the male protagonist Garin (played by Hollywood star Matt Damon). Lin’s secondary position (and by extension Jing’s) is reflected in the narrative in two major ways. Firstly, the storyline primarily revolves around Garin, rather than Lin. It unfolds from the perspective of
Garin, a European mercenary in search of a deadly weapon (gunpowder) who travels to ancient China. While he familiarises himself with China’s cultures and values, Lin serves as his translator, moral guide, and his potential romantic interest. In this process, she mainly functions to facilitate his character arc. Garin’s primary narrative significance was also confirmed by the film’s producer Peter Loehr, who commented that ‘he drives the plot’ (quoted in Qin, A., 2016). Secondly, the display of competence (action stunt) is skewed to put more emphasis on Garin, rather than her. The film allots four dedicated scenes (the first battle, the display at the dining hall, the second battle, and the third/final battle), three of which involve major fights with monsters (except for the dining hall scene), for Garin to showcase his excellent archery skill. Whereas for Lin, this depiction of her competence as a female soldier is significantly shorter, with a total action exhibition limited to merely two to three minutes. In addition to this, her action is presented with less violence. Clearly, the film does not allocate enough attention and narrative space for Lin to fully display and exercise her girl power. Disparate from the stories of her postfeminist girl heroes which conventionally centre on the girls’ growing and maturing, Lin (the Chinese star/transnational actor Jing) is eclipsed by the male protagonist Garin (the Hollywood/transnational star Damon) in The Great Wall. Jing/Lin’s particular situation – as a postfeminist girl hero at the secondary position, is illuminating in terms of how Hollywood’s postfeminist gender and racial politics is also put in dialogue with the industry’s considerations over the idea of transnational stardom.

Apart from the filmic arrangements I have demonstrated above, Jing was not promoted as a star by the industry. Browsing through the American mainstream trade press such as Variety and The Hollywood Reporter, it is not difficult to find that the headlines in relation to The Great Wall have been commonly associated with Matt Damon, and occasionally Zhang Yimou, whose auteur status may be familiar to some American audiences: ‘[...] Matt Damon Epic “The Great Wall”’ (Brzeski, 2016a), ‘Matt Damon’s “The Great Wall” [...]’ (McNary, 2016; Faughnder and Meyers, 2016; McClintock and Galloway, 2017), ‘Damon [...] on The Great Wall’ (Sims, 2016), and
‘Zhang Yimou [...] with The Great Wall’ (Wong, 2016), to list but a few. In contrast, Jing (as well as other Chinese stars in the cast) is often sidelined in these articles, despite her female lead role in the film. To foreground Damon, for the director Zhang Yimou, is a marketing strategy ‘to pander to viewers outside China’, based on ‘the way the market is right now’ (quoted in Qin, 2017). The hierarchical order can also be revealed in The Great Wall’s poster in the US market (see Figure 5.3), on which Damon is emphasised in three ways: a) his name is the only one billed at the top; b) his figure occupies the largest proportion in the composition; and c) his character’s talent for archery is prominently highlighted. In comparison, Jing’s figure is half the size of that of Damon, sharing the same space as the other three supporting cast. Apart from her blue armour, she receives much less attention as the ‘female lead’. The two official trailers in the US market also downplay her importance. In the first trailer (Legendary, 2016a), the emphasis is put on the Great Wall (by presenting title cards), the mythological monster (presenting a fleeting silhouette, a green claw, and a roar) and Garin (who narrates the story in the first person), whereas Jing’s name appears in the end, together with other cast members. In the second trailer (Legendary, 2016b), while scenes featuring Jing are included, Damon’s scenes predominate. In both trailers only Damon’s and Zhang’s names appear in captions between the scenes, whereas Jing’s name appears at the end. Apparently, it is mutually ‘beneficial’ for both Hollywood and the Chinese film industry to highlight Damon (and to a lesser extent Zhang Yimou) in marketing this film in the US. Through this arrangement, it is evident that the film primarily relies on Damon’s star power for ticket sales in the US market.
While the commercial success of the film is a major concern for Hollywood, the industry did not demonstrate interest in promoting her as a star. In not featuring the female lead alongside Damon in the marketing process in the US, this strategy positions Jing as inconsequential. For Jing, while playing the female lead opposite Damon in a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster could lead to transnational stardom, the real situation is that Hollywood spares very little effort in introducing her as an individual star, or even as a co-star, to the American public. Hollywood employs a readily available postfeminist girl hero template on a Chinese warrior woman and perfunctorily overlays it with Chinese ethos and values, making Jing’s role a sinicised postfeminist girl hero that is inherently problematic and lacking coherence at its core. In both filmic and cinematic terms, Hollywood demonstrates little interest in investing in her and promoting her as a potential star. Therefore, it was the failed negotiations between the two film industries and Hollywood’s disinterest in developing a transnational star that inhibited her attainment of transnational stardom. These forces emerged on a structural level and therefore were beyond her own control as an individual. Ironically, while her character is ‘empowered’ in *The Great Wall*, Jing is disempowered by the negotiations between China and Hollywood.
Jing did not attain popular acclaim through this role in the Chinese public. The film was received poorly on Douban, with 4.9 out of 10 audience rating (Douban, 2023d). As I have discussed in Chapter 4, Jing’s Hollywood career had already affected Jing’s public image in China due to the gendered response to the perceived incompatibility between her star status and the scale of Hollywood cinema. In comparison, Hollywood represents an even larger and globally visible platform. Her participation in a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster and her role opposite Hollywood star Matt Damon potentially amplified Chinese audiences’ perception of her ‘unworthiness’, making it more challenging for her to attain popular acclaim in the domestic environment through this role. However, as I have examined earlier, the character is inherently problematic and incoherent. In what follows, I will look at how Chinese audiences responded to this character she plays (rather than the ongoing gendered reception of her as a star) and explore the extent to which this sinicised postfeminist girl hero is disconnected from a Chinese audience. In doing so, I will suggest that this role to a degree estranged her from a home audience, and therefore it hindered her ability to attain popular acclaim, or recuperate her fame from the narrative of peng bu hong surrounding her.

Despite expressing their opinions in various ways, Douban users seem to generally concur on the film’s lack of investment in Lin’s character and her narrative function. First, she is presented without a character arc. As one review on the front page wrote, ‘the characterisation of the two foreign characters is more comprehensive, [whereas] the heroine’s characterisation is kind of adequate… [it’s] just a flat character… [she is] not particularly annoying, but not particularly memorable either… she is just a general’ (Esia, Douban, 18 December 2016). The flatness of her character (and the rest of the Chinese cast) was reflected in numerous comments and reviews. Audiences’ perception of the flatness of her role, to some degree, echoes with my own analysis of the filmic arrangements that relegate Lin to a secondary position. In addition to this, from the lukewarm response here, it appears that the representation of a Chinese girl hero that celebrates ‘female empowerment’ does not strike a chord with some
audiences. Second, the progression of Lin’s promotion to the General post lacks coherence, and the tactics employed by her division in attacking monsters lacks rationality. One popular review addressed both issues and wrote,

nobody knows why General Zhang Hanyu [sic] passes his post down to Lin on his deathbed. After all, there isn’t really much foreshadowing for this development, nor is it apparent that this girl’s organisational skill and fighting ability are better than others [sic]. There’s one possibility left – she is the bastard [sic] of Shao. The way the Crane Corps attacks by jumping off the Wall is almost just for visual spectacle; its practicality in battlefield is...[sic] (WR-TARA-934, Douban, 16 December 2016, with 1,717 helpful clicks).

A good deal of comments, often accompanied with hundreds of helpful clicks, expressed their discontent regarding Li’s assumption of the general post, rather than other (male) commanders. It needs to be acknowledged that the film handles the transfer of the general post in a rushed manner; General Shao simply appoints her to be his successor without providing any clear statement. However, the way audiences responded to a female warrior taking a leadership role was misogynistic. Despite the inherent issue in the narrative here, the female warrior as a leader fails to identify with many audiences. Rather than accepting the narrative arrangement of female empowerment, audiences further questioned her leadership in a gendered way. In addition, the film’s sexualisation of Lin’s female body and the rhetoric of female empowerment were observed (but not criticised) by some audiences. For example, Lin’s leadership was interpreted by one reviewer: ‘[since] no evidence suggests she’s the best fighter, [...] it must be that she has the biggest boobs [sic]’ (Muwei’er, Douban, 21 December 2016). Here, the sexualisation of Lin’s body in the film emerges as a gendered objection of her leadership role. In another review, one wrote, ‘shouldn’t one of those male commanders have objected when [General Shao] appoints a woman to lead? Can I understand this as the director’s [sic] expression of the rise of feminism?’ (Dingjiayu, Douban, 16 December 2016). Hinting that it is a post reserved for men, it
rejects the idea of her leadership.

However, while one can argue that the film did not spend much effort on depicting her capacity as a qualified leader, which consequently drew audiences’ criticism towards her leadership, the film spent far less effort on the other four male commanders who were the candidates for this general post. The absence of depiction of male commanders’ capacity is reflected in the general lack of characterisation of these male characters, a point that many audiences expressed disappointment about. One comment that draws 4,407 helpful clicks wrote, ‘[...] what a waste of this star-studded Chinese cast. I can’t remember any of them’ (Youxindarao, Douban, 15 December 2016) (Douban, 2023e). Another wrote, ‘[...] it is a pity that there wasn’t enough time to depict the other three [sic] commanders’ (Ebimotousi, Douban, 17 December 2016, with 537 helpful clicks) (Douban, 2023e). They suggested the fleeting appearance of these Chinese male stars and the cursorily presented male commanders in the film. In comparison, Lin remains the only character with deliciated attention to showcase her skills and intelligence. From this perspective, Lin is the comparatively more capable candidate to assume the general post. However, Chinese audiences seemed to ‘naturally’ question a woman’s capacity to take on the leadership role, despite the fact that the capacity of the other four Chinese commanders is not clearly presented as superior to hers. These comments reflect not only their discontent with the film’s narrative weakness but also their gendered perspective towards women in leadership roles. As such, the element of female empowerment in this character tends to be an unrelatable representation to many Chinese audiences.

The negative reception regarding the strategy employed by the Crane Corps division in attacking monsters reflects more on the perceived flaws in the approach itself, rather than commenting on Lin and female soldiers’ physical strength. As reflected in WR-TARA-934’s comment, it was designed primarily for visual spectacle, rather than its practicality on the battlefield. This sentiment resonated with many audiences. The top review with 9,786 helpful clicks wrote, ‘the most absurd thing is that the blue-
armoured female soldiers are required to bungee jump off the Wall like those acrobats in the Olympic opening ceremony, sacrificing themselves to alien monsters’ (Xuruocheng, Douban, 15 December 2016). One less popular but noteworthy comment expressed disappointment in the task being assigned to women, writing that ‘[…] the elderly, children and women should be protected […] The screenwriters must hate women so much that they let them die in this excruciating way’ (Changchengbudao-tianburong, Douban, 16 December 2016, with 187 helpful clicks) (Douban, 2023e). These comments mirror my analysis in relation to the spectacularising of (Lin’s) female body, where she is seen as a (sexualised) object before a subject. Clearly, this attacking strategy seeks to prioritise women as spectacle to an extent that it sacrifices coherence and logic, resulting in audiences’ negative reception.

From the audience reception on Douban, the representation of this postfeminist girl hero that celebrates ‘female empowerment’ – a warrior woman who assumes the social status of a male and displays strength – failed to resonate with a national audience. However, I do not intend to suggest that Hollywood’s postfeminist girl heroes do not have a market in China. Rather, I want to highlight the problematic approach Hollywood adopted in inscribing postfeminist femininity onto a Chinese warrior woman, with limited effort invested in developing her character through the script and modifying postfeminist traits to cohere with her Chinese identity. In some way, while the negative reception from the Chinese audience demonstrates Hollywood’s lack of investment of the role, it is simultaneously suggestive of Hollywood’s lack of investment in Jing. As such, it comes as no surprise that Jing’s role in this film did not contribute to establishing her as a star in the Chinese market.
5.2 Dragon lady in disguise? The career-obsessed woman in *Pacific Rim: Uprising*

While it is a globally distributed Hollywood blockbuster, *Pacific Rim: Uprising* demonstrates a clear intention to appeal specifically to the Chinese film market. It is a sequel to Guillermo del Toro’s 2013 *Pacific Rim*. The original film was considered an example of industrial ‘anomaly’ (Mendelson, 2013). Despite its underperformance in the American domestic market (with a total gross of 101 million in the US market against a production cost of 190 million dollars), *Pacific Rim* attained box office success in the international markets (a total gross of 309 million dollars in the international markets), rendering it a profitable feature nonetheless (Mendelson, 2013; Box Office Mojo, 2023a). Ying Zhu (2022, p. 239) attributed this industrial anomaly to the increasing importance of international markets. As she observed, the significance of international markets for Hollywood has led to a trend where films popular in the US market may not necessarily warrant sequels, whereas certain domestic ‘flops’, buoyed by their success in commanding the box office overseas, continue to spawn subsequent instalments (Zhu, 2022, p. 239). *Pacific Rim: Uprising* is a case in point. The original film garnered 111 million dollars box office revenues in the Chinese market alone, contributing one fourth of its global takings (Box Office Mojo, 2023a). Considering the film’s popularity in China, the prospect of a sequel was broached following Wanda’s acquisition of Legendary, with a primary focus on the Chinese market, rather than the US market (Wojnar, 2018). The production background of this film is important to consider, as it conditions the representation of Jing’s role. In the following analysis, I will illustrate how the construction of the character Shao is primarily shaped by the gender and racial politics inherent in the structure of Hollywood, but also modified in order to engage with the Chinese market.

In this film, Jing assumes a supporting role, Shao Liwen, a Chinese entrepreneurial woman who takes charge of the technology conglomerate Shao Industries. Also, she is
a technologist with ambitions to deploy her remote-piloted drone programme on a global scale. At first glance, the identity of a career woman strikes a chord with the postfeminist girl hero in *The Great Wall*, as both roles embrace the rhetoric of female empowerment. Characterised by independence, financial autonomy, and a successful career (Gorton, 2007, p. 212), the identity of career woman actively evokes the gains of the second wave feminist movement. However, the career woman Shao represents in this film, I will argue, does not align with the ideal postfeminist subject commonly depicted in Hollywood chick flicks, i.e. a woman who is visually hyperfeminine and narratively non-confrontational and unthreatening (Glitre, 2011, p. 24). Rather, she is constructed as the opposite of the postfeminist career woman – a career-obsessed, neurotic, unflattering woman that mirrors the stereotypical representation of feminists in modern times.

In the narrative, Shao is mainly portrayed as socially inept, characterised by her condescending mannerisms towards other characters, particularly her employee Newton Geiszler. In her first scene when she arrived at the base of the Pan Pacific Defense Corps (PPDC), Shao’s interaction with PPDC’s Marshal Quan, who comes to welcome her, is marked by her conspicuous absence of engagement. She refrains from initiating conversation or responding verbally to his greeting. Noticeably, she rejects his handshake. Sensing the tension, Geiszler intervenes and tries to explain and ease the situation (‘Sorry, she doesn’t do the whole hand shaking thing.’). Throughout the encounter, she does not even smile. Here, the narrative presents her as overly discourteous toward a first-time acquaintance. Shao also demonstrates domineering and controlling demeanour towards Geiszler, speaking to him in a commanding, disrespectful way that causes him great distress. She uses Mandarin, her native language, to interrogate Geiszler about the encounter with Hermann Gottlieb, his former scientist partner, and prohibits him from future contact with Gottlieb. Moreover, she reprimanded Geiszler’s Mandarin in a sharp, acerbic way when he struggles to express himself (‘Speak English. Your Mandarin makes you sound like an idiot.’ in Mandarin), and she further demands him to improve his Mandarin for
effective communication (‘Work on your Mandarin. I don’t like to repeat myself. In any language.’ in Mandarin). Shao’s bossy mannerisms are also reflected through Geiszler’s complaint behind her back (‘[…] that one is all over me. I mean, I can’t get a break from her.’). Interestingly, in both scenes, she is being disrespectful to two male characters. It is suggestive of her asserting authority that undermines conventional gender norms of male dominance, but in an emasculating manner.

Apart from her apparent lack of social skills, Shao is depicted as a selfish, autocratic, and coldblooded businesswoman. This characterisation is narratively demonstrated through her demanding work ethics, her lack of empathy towards others, and her vindictive reaction when faced with betrayal. First, despite the seemingly impossible task of deploying her remote-piloted drone programme within 48 hours, Shao remains determined and insists that Geiszler ensures its completion at all costs (‘I’ve worked my whole life for this [in Mandarin]. Get it done [in English].’). Second, she displays no compassion for the lives lost in the robot attack in Sydney. Rather, she is elated by how this tragic event furthers her business ambitions, as it directly facilitates the approval for her drone robot deployment. Third, when finding out that Geiszler sabotages her drone programme, she fires several shots at him (although missing) and orders security to shoot him in the head if necessary. Through these narrative arrangements, Shao is centrally depicted as a woman who, despite her success in areas (finance and technology) traditionally dominated by men, is dreadful in her social life. As such, the feminism she embodies is portrayed through a postfeminist lens, where her feminist qualities are acknowledged only to be repudiated (see McRobbie, 2004).

The characterisation of Shao draws on a stereotype of feminists – the selfish feminist – which emerges from the backlash against radical feminism and the second wave feminist movement more broadly. Radical feminism shines a spotlight on the systemic structures that generate male privilege and perpetuate women’s oppression, thereby challenging the patriarchal status quo that governs our social fabric (Johnson, 2014, p. 111). In her essay ‘The Selfish Feminist’, Imogen Tyler (2007) explores how the
philosophy of political narcissism within radical feminism in the 1970s evokes this selfish image and consequently how this image serves to undermine feminism through distancing the subsequent generations from self-identifying as feminists. Political narcissism underscores the significance of women’s self-esteem, self-love, and solidarity among women as a means to resist gender inequality rooted in traditional patriarchal family structures, where selfless femininity is upheld as ideal (Tyler, 2007, pp.175-176). In a context where the patriarchal family model dominated in the 1970s, the only perceived alternative for radical feminists was the absence of a family altogether (Johnson, 2014, p. 97). However, this perspective often portrays radical feminists as anti-family, despite the fact that their stance is fundamentally against patriarchy and highlights concerns regarding the impact of patriarchal structures on marriage, motherhood, and the patriarchal family model (Johnson, 2014, p. 97). Consequently, radical feminism’s exploration of the link between women’s exclusion from the public sphere and their subordinate status in familial and sexual relationships, along with their critique of traditional selfless femininities, is often misconstrued as self-centred and anti-family (Tyler, 2007, pp. 178-181). This misinterpretation arises not only from anti-feminist critics but also from certain pro-family feminist advocates (Tyler, 2007, p. 181). As an abject figure, the selfish feminist assumes a set of ‘imaginary physical and psychological connotations’, with which she is defined as ‘selfish, cold, frigid, irrationally angry, confused, and perhaps more than anything [...] singular, lonely and unhappy’ (Tyler, 2007, p. 185). It is perpetuated through a range of media forms, including films, and emerges as a stereotype of feminist. From the narrative arrangements of Shao, it is evident that her personality and behaviours tally with this stereotyped image of the feminist.

In Hollywood chick flicks, the selfish feminist is often reincarnated as the career-obsessed woman, who, as the antithesis of the postfeminist protagonist, has to relearn how to be a ‘woman’ from the postfeminist subject. As Shelley Cobb (2011) identifies, this is often achieved by casting an ageing female star, whose age serves as a symbol of an ‘outdated’ mode of feminism ‘that is inconsistent with, or inappropriate to, the
preoccupations and concerns of contemporary Western women’ (p. 32). In this stereotyped characterisation, the ‘old’ career woman neither belongs to the patriarchal family unit, nor can she maintain ‘normal’ or functional relationships (Cobb, 2011, p. 32). Of course, *Pacific Rim: Uprising* is not a chick flick film and therefore does not conform to the chick flick narrative. There is no postfeminist protagonist for Shao to learn from. Moreover, Shao is not visually old. In this light, the characterisation of Shao simply appropriates the stereotype of selfish feminist in American popular culture, labelling it as a ‘strong’ female figure, and imposes it on a Chinese body. Since the role diverges from the narrative conventions of the chick flick genre, it merits a closer examination regarding the meaning of this standalone selfish feminist figure with a Chinese female identity in the film, especially the way it is also connected to and shaped by the racialised politics in Hollywood cinema.

Historically, Hollywood has established and perpetuated a cinematic racial order that privileges whiteness in visual, narrative, and institutional terms (Negra, 2001; Denzin, 2002; Bernardi, 2008; Dyer, 2017). In this structure, Asian actors have been subject to onscreen racial stereotyping and industrial oppressions relating to role segregation, stratification, and delimitation (Xing, 2009). In Hollywood’s discriminatory practices, the roles available for Asian actors are limited and the characters lack complexity (Xing, 2009, pp. 133-138). Also, Asian actors are restricted from playing the roles for white actors (yet white actors can take Asian roles through ‘yellowfacing’) and the leading roles (Xing, 2009, pp. 133-138). As a result, the characters for Asian actors are confined to a series of generic stereotypes predicated on an overarching discourse of ‘yellow peril’. According to Gina Marchetti (1993), the discourse of yellow peril draws upon ‘medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe’ and encapsulates ‘racist terror of alien cultures, sexual desires, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East’ (p. 2). The yellow peril, as she contends, ‘rests on a fantasy that projects Euroamerican [sic]

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27 In addition to the visual representation, Jing was at the age of 28 when she shot the film. Comparing to the stars who were cast in this type of stereotypical role associated with 1970s feminism, she was not old either.
desires and dreads onto the alien other’ (Marchetti, 1993, p. 2).

The desire for and dread of the Asian female other has been notoriously coded in cultural representations such as the China Doll, the Madame Butterfly, the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady. In the representations of China Doll, Madame Butterfly and Lotus Blossom, Chinese women are constructed as servile, submissive, and dainty sex objects (Espiritu, 2012, p. 4). On the other hand, in the representation of Dragon Lady, Chinese women are constructed as desirable, deceitful, and dangerous, who ‘could poison a man as easily as she could seduce him’ (Espiritu, 2012, p. 10). These two contrasting representations are dominant and enduring types that have informed the Chinese female in Hollywood cinema for decades (Mullings, 1994, pp. 279-280). In both stereotypes, the sexuality of Chinese female is exploited. The docile China Doll is given identities such as the prostitute to fulfil white males’ desire, whereas the castrating Dragon Lady makes use of her seductive sexuality for her evil scheme. These two one-dimensional caricatures of Asian women perpetuate the representation of ‘sensuous, promiscuous, [and] untrustworthy’ Asian women in Hollywood cinema (Espiritu, 2012, p. 10).

Despite this, these representations are not static, but permanently subject to change and evolution. As Denzin (2002) rightly points out, the way in which a minority group is situated within Hollywood’s cinematic racial order hinges upon ‘how and when it entered this system of structural commonalities’ (p. 25). It suggests that the representations should be read in ‘a fractured, discontinuous system [...]’, a system that is constantly being revised in light of new understandings’ (Denzin, 2002, p. 25). From this perspective, I suggest that the representation of Shao as a career-obsessed, man-eating woman evokes the castrating Dragon Lady, a gendered and racialised image associated with Chinese women in Hollywood cinema. In the ensuing discussion, I will demonstrate how the narrative and visual construction of Shao resonates with the Dragon Lady whose power is potentially threatening, as well as how her power is eventually modified by Hollywood in order to engage with the Chinese audience.
While the Dragon Lady wields sexuality as her power, Shao’s power derives from her possession of the advanced technology that can protect (or destroy) the world. In the scene where she introduces her remote-piloted drone programme at the PPDC’s base, more than just showcasing her technology, she also poses a ‘threat’ to the staff and cadets at the PPDC, as her drone robots will render the current Jaeger pilots obsolete. Despite her attempt to clarify and emphasise the importance of collaboration (‘We are not here to shut you down. Cooperation between our programmes has never been more vital.’), her speech stirs up a commotion amongst the PPDC staff present. As the story progresses, it turns out that her drone robots, once being globally deployed, indeed bring about a catastrophe which unleashes Kaiju monsters to the world that threatens humanity (although she is not the mastermind behind it). In addition to this, as previously mentioned, she is constructed as a coldblooded businesswoman with questionable moral principles. Then, the narrative tends to depict her power as threatening (although this is followed by a twist, which I will explore later). Interestingly, the narrative arranges a white male, Geiszler, to work for her and subject him to her disagreeable personality and work ethics. In some way, symbolically, Shao – as a Chinese – has dominated over a man that represents the Western world.

In visual terms, Shao’s costuming further complements and cements the power she possesses. The costumes she wears are predominately business attire in uniformly white, black, or grey colour. In a way, these formal suits and dresses are marked by their lack of colour. For example, in Shao’s introductory scene, she appears in a white-palette formal business suit. The ivory-coloured top is tailored to the body. The flared trousers are white, complemented by a draped-sleeve, padded blazer of similar white hue (see Figure 5.4). Furthermore, the suit seems to be made of unpliable fabric. The blazer is angular in shape, notably accentuating her neck and shoulders. The top and trousers create obvious pleats around her waist and hip as she walks, simultaneously revealing her womanly curve. Her white-toned complexion starkly contrasts with her crisp burgundy lips, as well as her dark and thick eyebrows. Similarly, her brownish hair
is combed up and immaculately shaped. This makeup creates a defined-featured face, while her hair adds to the sense of rigidity. Her sting-shaped earrings further complement the overall sharp aesthetic. Shao’s appearance exudes power, formality, seriousness, and unapproachableness, aligning closely with her status as an entrepreneurial woman, but also effectively reinforcing Shao’s personality and demeanour in the narrative.

Figure 5.4 The first costume of Shao Liwen (in the middle) in Pacific Rim: Uprising

The representation of Shao as a potentially threatening Dragon Lady resonates with the discourse of the ‘China threat’ in Western contexts. Emerged in 1993 in the US, the ‘China threat’ is a response to the growing visibility of China on the international stage as a rising power since the 1990s (Yee and Storey, 2002; Scott and Wilkinson, 2013). Conveying similar meanings as the ‘yellow peril’, it primarily conceptualises the nation as a destabilising force in global politics and economics, posing a challenge to the existing world order and systems (Scott and Wilkinson, 2013, pp. 764-766). In this sense, it can be argued that Shao’s young appearance, which contradicts to the representation of the outdated selfish feminist, serves as a national allegory that reflects China’s burgeoning power and influence on the international stage since the 1990s. Hence, this character is a pastiche of the gendered stereotype of 1970s’
feminists and the racialised stereotype of the Dragon Lady. It is a role that largely shaped by Hollywood’s gendered and racialised politics towards Chinese women.

However, as I have stated in the beginning of this section, *Pacific Rim: Uprising* has a discernible orientation toward the Chinese film market. To engage with the market (and the Chinese government), Hollywood has to rectify its historical perpetuation of anti-Chinese prejudice and embrace a more inclusive comprehension of global political dynamics that ‘transcends the dominant paradigm of patriotism/ enemy othering’ (Homewood, 2021, p. 96). In other words, Shao cannot be depicted as a villain, as it will not be a positive image of China. In the latter half, the film introduces an interesting twist for the character. As audiences are led to belief that Shao is accountable for the Sydney attack and unleashing the Kaiju monsters to earth, the narrative discloses that her right-hand man, Geiszler, is the real mastermind behind these attacks. At this juncture, Shao undergoes a transformation from a perceived villainess to a humanised ally, as she joins the protagonist’s team to assist in eliminating the Kaiju threat. She provides pivotal assistance in killing the largest Kaiju monster, and she saves the protagonist’s life. In this sense, Shao’s power leans towards protection, rather than threat. She ultimately embodies China’s ‘peaceful rise’, which counters the discourse of the China threat, by ‘working alongside American allies to vanquish imaginative threats to global security’ (Homewood, 2021, p. 100). It is a twist that responds particularly to the Chinese market.

As such, the character is caught between two confronting powers – the gendered and racialised politics that Hollywood employs to depict Chinese women, and the imperative of catering to the Chinese market as Hollywood’s major concern for box office returns. For the actor who plays Shao, Jing finds herself situated within the complexities of Hollywood’s ongoing navigation of race, gender, and profit. In this process, Jing is (mis)cast in a role that is a) traditionally reserved for actresses associated with a generation linked to the radical feminists in the 1970s, despite the fact that she is a young actress clearly distanced from this stereotype, and b) recycled
from historical stereotype of Chinese women, although the power she wields is eventually modified to be benign. Moreover, while this role and her role in *The Great Wall* share similarities in regard to female empowerment, Lin and Shao represent two contrasting femininities – one is the postfeminist subject, and the other is the abject feminist. The inconsistency between the two characters inhibits Jing from constructing a coherent persona. It suggests that Hollywood lacks interest in not only investing in her role in *Pacific Rim: Uprising*, but also in fostering her potential as a transnational star.

Furthermore, the film’s market orientation towards the Chinese audience impacts the way in which Jing is positioned as a star in the marketing and promotion. Despite the film’s mainstream distribution in the US market, its box office performance heavily relied on the Chinese market. It generated a total of 290 million dollars globally, with China contributing 99 million dollars and the US 59 million dollars (Box Office Mojo, 2023b). China accounted for one third of the worldwide box office takings of this film. Noticeably, Jing did not take part in the film’s American premiere held in Los Angeles (Legendary.com, 2018). Instead, she promoted the film in Beijing alongside other cast members (Zhang, 2018). In other words, apart from her presence in the film, the sense of ‘trans’ in the idea of transnational stardom was obscured in Hollywood’s employment of her. Thus, beyond the lack of investment in her role, Hollywood demonstrated a lack of interest in developing Jing as a star within its own industry.

If the Chinese audience constitutes the primary viewership for this film, the character Jing plays – a stereotyped strong woman drawn from an othered image of feminists and the Dragon Lady – prompts questions not just in relation to facilitating her transnational stardom but also whether this image would serve her domestic stardom. The film received a mediocre rating of 5.4 out of 10 on Douban (Douban, 2023f), with

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28 While indicative of Hollywood’s disinterest in promoting her in the US market, Jing’s absence in the film’s American promotion in 2018 was also influenced by her recalibration of the ‘transnational’ construct within her star image in early 2017. This adjustment has contributed to her attainment of celebrity status in the Chinese public, which I will discuss in Chapter 7.
her role drawing mixed reception. In what follows, I will concentrate on the mixed comments and reviews in relation to her role and examine the extent to which her role resonates with the Chinese audience. I will argue that like her role in The Great Wall, this role also to some extent distanced her from domestic audiences. Although she had already achieved celebrity status in China by the time the film was released (which I will explore in Chapter 7), the mixed reception surrounding this character did not contribute to stabilising her national stardom.

The dispute among Chinese audiences regarding the character stems primarily from two specific aspects: the visual representation of Shao as a Chinese career woman and the narrative arrangement of Shao speaking Mandarin. The compatibility of her makeup and her identity as a Chinese woman (and to a lesser extent, a career woman) elicited divergent opinions. A prominent review appearing at the top considered Shao’s lip colour as overly emphatic and wrote, ‘her lips look like she’s been poisoned’ (Zhaomuxue, Douban, 23 March 2018). However, it was confronted by a user in the reply section, arguing that ‘it looks perfect on a proud, strong woman’ (Xiao’ayao’a, 23 March 2018, cited in Zhaomuxue, Douban, 23 March 2018). Rather than mocking, a review commented that ‘the purple-inflected [sic] lipstick looks very raddled on her. It is not suitable for Asian’s white jade [sic] skin’ (Ebimotousi, Douban, 2 April 2018). In these comments, the way in which Hollywood utilised makeup to present its cultural imagination of a career woman from China engendered controversy. Audiences’ perceptions of the suitability of this makeup are subjective, as there is not a definitive beauty standard dictating how a Chinese career woman should appear. However, the disagreement implies the possibility that this makeup may adhere to a Western aesthetic for a career woman of non-Western origin. Consequently, some Chinese audiences may find it visually jarring, while others may consider it suitable for a (Westernised) career woman. In this regard, Hollywood demonstrated cultural ignorance in its portrayal of a Chinese career woman, making her unrelatable to some audiences.
In a similar vein, the narrative arrangement of Shao speaking Mandarin attracted contradictory perceptions. For the opponents, the inclusion of the Chinese language seemed like a distraction and negatively impacted their viewing experience. First, some audiences considered the inclusion intrusive, and therefore awkward in a Hollywood film. As a reviewer wrote, ‘the “Work on your Mandarin!” cliché [sic] sounds really crude and hasty (“cu xian tiao”) in a world where advanced Jaeger exist […]’ (Muwei’er, Douban, 25 March 2018). In this view, the scenes with Mandarin dialogue fit uneasily within the English-speaking default of a Hollywood film, to which Chinese audiences have been accustomed. Notably, the argument that the futuristic setting of the film somehow renders the insertion of Chinese language ‘crude and hasty’ implies a linguistic hegemony which posits English as the lingua franca. It could be argued that as English is often taken for granted as the primary communicative language in mainstream Hollywood blockbusters, *Pacific Rim: Uprising* is subconsciously assessed with this assumption. Second, some audiences considered the Chinese lines unnatural. One review mentioned, ‘the lines were obviously not written by Chinese speakers, as Chinese people don’t speak in that way; they were directly translated from English, without much consideration for localisation’ (Wangxiexie, Douban, 25 March 2018). In this view, the criticism is directed at Hollywood’s hasty treatment of the Chinese language – an issue which could have been remedied if more attention had been paid to the screenplay, rather than the Chinese language being not suited in a Hollywood film reflected in the first view. In this regard, Hollywood failed to adequately cater to the Chinese market. In this context, Mandarin becomes a token Chinese element that is jarring to native Chinese speakers. Similar to the dispute over her makeup, this view underscores Hollywood’s lack of interest in paying sufficient attention to Jing’s role.

On the other hand, some audiences viewed Shao speaking Mandarin as one of the many symbolic elements that reflects China’s strength and power in the film. One review described it as a manifestation of China’s cultural confidence and wrote, ‘[Shao] naturally speaks Chinese, not English. If you [sic] come to work for me, I’ll use Chinese.'
If you can’t understand it, that’s your problem. I can really relate to this narrative arrangement. This character symbolises cultural confidence. [...] It reflects the strength of our nation’ (Zhangdahu, Douban, 25 March 2018). This perception interprets Shao speaking Mandarin as a reflection of China’s increasing significance on the international stage. This nationalistic sentiment often coincided with Shao’s presence as a strong character. Some audiences considered it a progressive representation that breaks racialised stereotypes. As one review noted, ‘she no longer appears as the Orientalist, sexual fantasy for white men, but a strong, powerful woman who takes the dominant position – whether they like it or not, white people have to adapt themselves to the new order’ (Ebimotousi, Douban, 2 April 2018). Also, another review wrote, ‘she is no longer the stereotypical role such as the action woman who knows kungfu, like Li Bingbing in Transformers, nor the perfunctory character who no one cares about, like her character [sic] in Kong: Skull Island’ (Zhangdahu, Douban, 25 March 2018). Both reviews drew on Hollywood’s cultural legacy of stereotypical representations of Chinese women and addressed the progressiveness of Shao as a strong character that diverges from the previous constructions.

The contrasting reviews on Douban suggest a lack of consensus regarding Jing’s role in this film. Consequently, it can be argued that the character, to some degree, fails to relate to a home audience and serves as a problematic image to cement Jing’s stardom in China. Furthermore, audiences’ resistance to Hollywood’s cultural ignorance and lack of interest in developing the character of Shao parallels their discontent with the flatness of Lin in The Great Wall. To these audiences, whether it is a supporting role like Shao or a leading role like Lin, Hollywood’s construction of Chinese (female) characters consistently lacks investment. Their perception of the poor character construction broadly mirrors my argument of Jing’s role in this film and the systemic forces that led to her failure in achieving star status in Hollywood. For this reason, Hollywood’s industrial practices as such not only raise concerns about the potential for Jing to transnational stardom, but also create challenge, obstacle, and complication for her stardom.
As my analysis of her roles in *The Great Wall* and *Pacific Rim: Uprising* has demonstrated, Hollywood lacks interest in promoting a transnational Chinese star figure to appeal to its domestic market and international markets. Instead, Hollywood seems to be only interested in the Chinese market and tends to use Chinese stars as a publicity mechanism to access the market in the 2010s (see my discussion in Chapter 3). As such, it calls into question regarding the purpose, function, or even necessity of *transnational* Chinese stars in contemporary Hollywood, especially if the industry is primarily focused on engaging with just one market. Jing’s role in *Kong: Skull Island* is an interesting but representative case that reflects this new trend, which I will now turn to.

5.3 Nothing but a Chinese face? The redundant ‘huaping’ in *Kong: Skull Island*

In *Kong: Skull Island*, Jing plays a biologist, San, who works for Monarch, a secret organisation that studies unknown supernatural beings. In stark contrast to the other two roles, her role in this film is purely perfunctory. She has less than 7 minutes of screen time in the film (including the post-credit scene), during which she speaks 11 short and inconsequential lines. These lines fail to construct her character arc or contribute to the narrative. Due to her brief presence, her identity as a biologist is hardly recognisable, except for a line that directly mentions her as a biologist (‘[W]e are also pleased to be joined by […] the company by biologist, Ms San’) and a scene where she appears to comment on the readings on a piece of scientific equipment (‘The seismic response is incredible’). In effect, this is a walk-on character that could be removed without inflicting any damage on the integrity of the narrative.

Jing’s role in this film is part of a larger trend discussed in Chapter 3, where a surge of Chinese female stars appeared in mainstream Hollywood blockbusters in the 2010s.
Due to their fleeting appearance, these Chinese female stars are often derided by Chinese audiences as ‘huaping’ (literally meaning flower vase in Chinese), a word that suggests their presence as a beautiful decorative object in the film’s mise-en-scène (Schwartzel, 2016). Huaping associates strongly with femininity, in which ‘hua’ (flower) in Chinese refers to feminine beauty, and the word itself contains an objectification of (female) stars. In some way, huaping roles echo what Mulvey refers to as the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of women in Hollywood narrative cinema (1989, p. 19). Given Hollywood’s institutional tradition of using female stars as spectacle, there exists an industry precedence that Chinese female stars can easily slot into. In the following discussion, I will demonstrate how she is used by Hollywood as a huaping for the film’s promotional purpose in the Chinese market. In doing so, I will argue that the sense of ‘trans-’ in the idea of transnational stardom is erased by Hollywood in this process. Also, by examining the reception of this role among Chinese audiences, I will argue that playing such roles is inimical to Jing’s domestic stardom.

As far as the narrative significance is concerned, ill-defined Asian characters are commonly seen in Hollywood cinema. Owing to Hollywood’s institutional structure that privileges whiteness, Asian characters often lack fully developed characterisation (as I have discussed in the previous section). As Mark Gallagher identifies, the representation of Asians, regardless of their national and ethnic specificities, is often corralled into an ‘undifferentiated, exotic mass’ (2004, p. 113). In the time period prior to the booming of the Chinese film market, transnational Chinese female stars embodied the idea of ‘huaping’ in ways that their foreign identity and bodies offered an orientalised visual spectacle brimming with exotic sexuality to an American audience. However, following Hollywood’s increasing interest in the Chinese market, these stereotypical huaping representations necessarily veer away from exotic spectacles to more positive depictions that align with accepted Chinese femininities. On the one hand, it liberates Chinese female stars from playing explicitly orientalised roles. On the other hand, it further marginalises their already insignificant presence in Hollywood films, as they are not even portrayed as exotic spectacles.
Jing’s character San resonates with the poorly developed Asian characters in the way that it is cursorily arranged and ultimately rendered redundant in the film, yet she is decisively not presented in an exotic way. In visual terms, San wears light makeup, everyday clothes (dungarees, shirt, and jeans) and functional accessories (watch, hairband, and satchel), all of which emphasise her ordinariness. She is not seen as an exotic spectacle, and she is not important to the narrative either. Put differently, she cannot impress as a star or an actor through playing such a role, for she is nothing but an Asian face on screen. It calls into question regarding the possibility of establishing transnational stardom through playing this type of role, especially considering that Jing may now be perceived, to tweak Gallagher’s (2004, p. 113) words slightly, as part of the undifferentiated, unexotic mass to an American audience.

However, to a Chinese audience, she is not an undifferentiated Asian face, but rather a Chinese face, or more precisely, the face of a distinct, recognisable Chinese female star. In this sense, this *huaping* representation in contemporary Hollywood moves beyond the to-be-looked-at-ness Mulvey (1989, p. 19) identifies and substitutes the emphasis on the female body with the display of a Chinese face on screen. As such, it is no longer the female body, but the Chinese face that is exploited by Hollywood in the 2010s. Moreover, since this Chinese face does not generate meanings beyond the Chinese market, the ‘trans-’ in the idea of transnational stardom loses its relevance. As such, Hollywood arranging this minor role for Jing is to capitalise on her recognisability in the Chinese market, rather than fostering a path for transnational stardom.

It comes as no surprise that in the marketing campaigns for *Kong: Skull Island*, Jing was primarily utilised to promote the film specifically in the Chinese market. Despite the minor significance of her role in the narrative, Jing is deceptively presented with heightened narrative significance within the promotional materials targeting the Chinese market. First, Jing’s character is featured alongside the other three major
characters (played by Tom Hiddleston, Brie Larson, and Samuel L. Jackson) in the Weibo post shared on the official social media account of MonsterVerse Series (‘Guaishou yuzhou xilie dianying’) (MonsterVerseSeries, Weibo, 9 March 2017, see Figure 5.5, where Jing’s character is featured in the fourth picture). In addition to this, in one of the major promotional posters for the Chinese market, her character also appears among the other three characters, occupying a space within the word ‘Kong’ (see Figure 5.6, where her image is displayed in the letter ‘O’). No other supporting characters, even those with greater narrative significance than hers, are given the same level of prominence as her character in these promotional materials in the Chinese market. Also, Jing appeared as one of the four cast members to promote the film in Beijing (China Daily, 2017). In contrast, Jing’s role drew minimal media attention in the US. American trade press such as Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, and The New York Times rarely introduced Jing’s character or herself as one of the film’s casts in their articles and critical reviews (e.g. Dargis, 2017a; Gleiberman, 2017; McCarthy, 2017). While Jing also attended the film’s premiere in the US (JingTian, Weibo, 9 March 2017), she garnered little media attention in American news reports (e.g. Galuppo, 2017; Thorne, 2017). The disparity between her advertised significance in the Chinese market and her actual significance in the film and the US media coverage suggests that her presence in the film merely serves as a publicity mechanism in the Chinese market.
While this role was tailored for the Chinese market, it generated significant backlash in Chinese reception. Among her three Hollywood roles, Jing’s presence in *Kong: Skull Island* received most criticism from Chinese audiences, with reviews being overwhelmingly negative. Specifically, her identity, costume and makeup, and narrative significance were subject to strict scrutiny. While her identity in the narrative was revealed as a biologist named San, audiences challenged her profession; ‘Is Jing Tian a tourist there?’ (shuli23333, Douban, 24 March 2017) (Douban, 2023g). Her Chinese identity drew criticism; ‘Except a Chinese audience, no one knows whether this mysterious oriental woman is Chinese, Japanese, Thai, or Vietnamese (given that all four Asian countries are involved in the film)’ (pillbug, Douban, 18 March 2017) (Douban, 2023g). Her costume and makeup were foregrounded as out of place; ‘Everyone else wears stain-resistant clothes [sic], only [sic] she wears a red-white checked shirt and a red hairband and leaves her hair unbound. [...] After scuttering on this island for a few days, her face is not dirty, her hair not messed up, and her clothes still perfect [sic]’ (Bushi henxiaode xiaolin, Douban, 12 March 2017). Her minimised narrative significance was highlighted; ‘She has no personality nor narrative function.'
Just when audiences are about to forget her, she pops up again, saying some meaningless words’ (Nisideyu, Douban, 17 March 2017). These comments received a significant number of helpful clicks. Expressed in sarcastic, disappointing, or rational tones, they underscored Chinese audiences’ discontent with Jing’s character.

A shared feature in these comments is that Jing Tian’s name replaces the name of the character to become the target of criticism. Given the role’s minimal narrative significance, it makes sense that Jing’s intertextuality as a star takes precedence over the character. Yet at the same time, Chinese audiences’ disappointment of the role was predominantly directed toward the star herself. In other words, their discontent with Hollywood’s lack of investment in constructing an engaging Chinese (female) character is masked. In a large measure, their expressed frustration with this role mirrors their discontent with Jing’s roles in *The Great Wall* and *Pacific Rim: Uprising*. In these stances, their frustration stems from their disappointment with the way their viewership is sold. In this sense, while Chinese audiences do express frustrations with Jing, as I have demonstrated, the root cause of these frustrations is not inherently tied to the star herself but rather to the way that Hollywood has used and continues to use Chinese actresses to access the market. Consequently, Jing becomes a symbol to Chinese audiences of their exploitation by Hollywood.

As Sabrina Yu (2015) once remarked, while the chance of ‘an international [sic] career’ is slim for Chinese stars who play dispensable roles in Hollywood cinema, the fact that they are cast in a Hollywood blockbuster and play alongside big Hollywood stars translates to ‘more publicity at home, and subsequently more parts and higher income [...] in their own country’ (p. 114). However, I would suggest that the publicity they gained from these roles is potentially inimical to their domestic stardom. Being labelled as *huaping* in a mocking way is just one manifestation of how Chinese actresses are perceived by the domestic audience. For some critics, the driving force behind these stars’ acceptance of such roles is their vanity, as the halo of Hollywood symbolises success, recognition, and celebrity status (Que, 2016; Huang, 2017).
Negative reception of this nature can hardly be considered conducive to bolstering their domestic stardom. When Jing just attained celebrity status in China in early 2017, her presence in Kong: Skull Island, which was released in China in March 2017, caused Chinese audiences to perceive her negatively, labelling her as ‘the most hated actress’ in China during that time (Liu, 2017). In this sense, far from boosting her stardom, Jing’s minor role in this film was detrimental to her public image in China.

As I have examined so far, Jing’s roles these three films have always been presented and/or perceived as ‘Chinese’. In this sense, the different levels of narrative significance of her roles become interesting. While these films to varying degrees seek to engage with the Chinese film market, they nevertheless remain mainstream Hollywood blockbusters that target a global market. Given the reality that Chinese films often struggle to find an international audience even if they perform well in the domestic market (Coonan, 2015; see also my discussion in Chapter 4), the proportion of Chinese elements in a Hollywood film emerges as a critical issue. As film studies scholar Stanley Rosen comments, ‘the danger [of putting more Chinese elements] there [...] is whether [these Hollywood films] will still be successful globally – how much Chinese content can you put in there and still get the international market?’ (quoted in Brzeski, 2016). As such, the shifting narrative significance of Jing’s roles – one being major, another supporting, and the third minor – in these three films tantalisingly reveals an ongoing industrial experiment through which Hollywood seeks to balance the Chinese market, the domestic market, and the international markets. In this sense, rather than investing in Jing as a potential star, Hollywood tended to utilise her as a test case to gauge its business operations and strategies for the global market.

Conclusion

This chapter explored Jing’s career in Hollywood years (2015-2017) and framed her
situation as being caught between China and Hollywood. I have explored the ways in which her roles in three Legendary blockbusters – a postfeminist girl hero, a career woman merging stereotypes of the racial feminist and the Dragon Lady, and a meaningless *huaping* – have been shaped by the gendered and racialised politics in the structure of Hollywood and complicated by Hollywood’s considerations of and negotiations with the Chinese film industry and market. These roles inherit Hollywood’s institutionalised discrimination towards women and racial minority, but they are simultaneously refashioned and sugar-coated in a limited way to speak to the Chinese film industry and market. In this process, Hollywood exhibits a lack of interest in creating compelling Chinese female characters, which has resulted in Jing’s roles to varying degrees failing to resonate with a Chinese audience. Moreover, Hollywood also demonstrates a lack of interest in developing transnational Chinese stardom as a commercial enterprise for its domestic and international markets. Instead, Hollywood exploits Jing’s labour in a disposable way to engage solely with the Chinese film industry and market. Consequently, Hollywood has repurposed the idea of transnational stardom in the 2010s by imbuing it with a strong sense of the national. In other words, the industry’s commercial agenda for the Chinese market has rendered the idea of transnational stardom obsolete in this era.

As a transnational worker in a Hollywood context, Jing has encountered the systemic limitations in the structure of Hollywood and its negotiations with China that are beyond her control as an individual star. She is ensnared in the vortex of gender, race and (trans)nationalism that limit her ability to establish transnational stardom in Hollywood. Despite this, as I have introduced in Chapter 1, rather than being completely powerless in front of the industrial structure, stars are agentic workers who actively navigate and negotiate their image and career within the industry. In this sense, during her employment in Hollywood, Jing cannot be entirely seen as a passive pawn exploited by the industry, but rather an agentic being who negotiates with those systemic constraints. In the following chapter, then, I will examine how Jing navigates and negotiates within the two industrial structures as a transnational actor through
her screen performance in *The Great Wall*. 
Chapter 6 Caught between East and West: Jing Tian’s transnational performance in *The Great Wall*

Introduction

As was discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, cognizant of the lucrative Chinese film market, the Hollywood film industry has cast an increased number of Chinese female stars in its mainstream blockbusters as both a cultural emblem and a marketing device to court the Chinese audience and the Chinese government bodies in the 2010s. Whilst this industrial practice was seemingly positive in promoting Chinese female stars in Hollywood cinema, the roles arranged for them were largely perfunctory and at times cringeworthy within the narrative. By playing such roles, these Chinese actresses did not have much screen time and room to exert their performative agency. Consequently, they hardly had much hope of establishing themselves as transnational stars within Hollywood. Jing’s role in *The Great Wall* (2016), however, was a marked reception. The film provides Jing with arguably one of the most significant characters in the narrative and grants her approximately one third of the screen time to perform. Compared to her contemporaries, she was endowed with a much greater chance to transnationalise her stardom to Hollywood, owing to the film’s mainstream theatrical exhibition and much-hyped media publicity in the US. However, Jing did not achieve transnational star status in Hollywood through her performance in *The Great Wall*. Furthermore, she was awarded the most disappointing actress for her performance in this film at the Golden Broom (a Chinese equivalent of the Golden Raspberry Awards of the US) in the Chinese public in 2017 (Douban, 2017). Her performance was also criticised by a Variety critic for being ‘wooden’ and ‘expressionless’ (Lee, 2016). While I have argued that her inability to achieve transnational stardom in Hollywood is due to the structural limitations, these two cultural perceptions in both China and the US nevertheless

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29 *The Great Wall*’s media hype includes ‘the most expensive film made in China’, ‘the biggest Sino-Hollywood coproduction to date’, ‘the test case for Sino-Hollywood filmmaking collaboration’ (Faughnder and Meyers, 2016; Qin, A., 2016), and the criticism of ‘whitewashing’ prior to its release (Thorne, 2016).
indicate that she failed to employ quality film acting as a pathway to achieve transnational stardom.

In this chapter, I challenge the cultural perception that deems her performance in *The Great Wall* as inadequate and argue against the idea that it was her performance that led to her failure to establish transnational stardom in Hollywood. I will explore her performance by contextualising her acting labour within the transnational industrial environment that characterises the production of *The Great Wall* (which I will discuss in the following paragraphs). First, I consider Jing a performative agent and examine the ways in which she utilises her face, voice, and body to create screen performance in the film. In addition, I also examine how she exerts her acting agency to promote herself as a star emerging from a different film industry. In doing so, I understand her as an individual actor who performs the character and assumes responsibility for her own career crossover from a character-performer to a transnational Chinese star in Hollywood. Second, I situate her within the wider industrial environment and examine the exogenous factors in filmic and cinematic terms – including the director’s instructions and visions, her performance with other actors (I focus on the male lead Matt Damon), the complexity and richness of the character, casting requirements, as well as Damon’s stardom – which also ‘create’ her screen performance. While doing so, I focus on film acting as a form of collaborative labour and the industry as institutional forces that shape her performative agency. In the main, this chapter will argue that rather than her lack of agency, she is let down by a multitude of exogenous factors in filmic and cinematic terms within the wider negotiations between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood during their partnership in producing a transnational film project.

The methodological approach of reading Jing’s performance from the perspectives of her own agency and other exogenous determinants necessitates a consideration of the transnational sensitivity of the film project itself, as this backdrop by and large prescribes the ways in which we understand Jing’s performance that criss-crosses two
disparate cultures, languages, and industries. Infused with high expectations in both the Chinese and American film market, *The Great Wall* stands as a testimonial case of the two industries’ practising of competitive and concessional transnationalisms (Lim, 2019, pp. 2-4). While I have illustrated in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 the specific ways in which the competitive and concessional ideas were employed in the industrial practices within two industries (Huallywood cinema and Hollywood’s modifications of roles to engage with the Chinese market), in *The Great Wall*, these ideas converged and collided within one single film project. As such, in this chapter I consider Jing’s performance within a film project that encompasses a greater level of competition and collaboration, in which the two industries are situated in a milieu with imbalanced power relations. With over a century’s development and maturation, Hollywood has achieved transnationalism and maintained its hegemonic status in the global film economy. The industry is experienced in making films that are tailored to a global audience. It also has a global distribution network which ensures the exhibition of these films. In contrast, the Chinese film industry has only developed its transnational cinema (Huallywood cinema) since the early 2000s. It is culturally and industrially disadvantaged when exporting its films to the West. In this sense, in this collaborative project between the two industries, Hollywood has the power over the Chinese film industry in the way that it is more advanced, more experienced, and therefore more authoritative in making and selling films to a global audience. Hollywood’s industrial superiority is especially crucial to contemplate, when it comes to coproducing a blockbuster (*The Great Wall*) which targets a global audience with a developing film industry (China).

As such, the transnational sensitivity of *The Great Wall* emerges as the precondition of the ways in which Jing’s performance is scrutinised. First, as a Chinese/non-Hollywood actress who has received acting training in a Chinese drama school (Beijing Film Academy), Jing performing in *The Great Wall* raises issues around how her performance should be interpreted in a transnational context where different performance traditions, styles and aesthetics collide. It prompts contemplation
regarding whether it is appropriate to adopt a Western standard of good/bad performance on a non-Western performer, as well as whether the good/bad acting dichotomy is still applicable to performances that intersect between China and Hollywood. For the actress herself, whether Jing is able to establish transnational stardom is contingent upon the ways in which she handles the transnational sensitivity in her performance. Second, Hollywood’s and China’s respective visions towards *The Great Wall* and the industrial negotiations over form and content complicate the ways Jing’s performance should be read. On the one hand, as the superior partner in this collaboration, Hollywood’s discursive power over production, global distribution and marketing necessarily impacts on Jing’s performance in filmic and cinematic terms. Hollywood’s power regulates the extent to which Jing adapts her performance in accordance with Hollywood’s blockbuster aesthetics. In addition, it also regulates how she as a Chinese/non-Hollywood star responds to the ways her image is constructed and sold (an image merging the representation of the Chinese warrior woman and the rhetoric of girl power). On the other hand, Jing’s presentation of the character is modulated by the Chinese film industry’s aspiration to present a positive national image to a global audience and achieve ‘Chinese culture going out’. From this perspective, she is not just a performer, but also a reification of Chinese ethos, which invariably conditions how her transnational star image is constructed and received in the US.

6.1 The acting paradigm: What kind of performance?

The fact that Jing Tian – as a Chinese actress – performs in a Sino-Hollywood film underlines the nuance and complexity of her performance, as it is a performance that straddles two cultures. As Baron, Carson and Tomasulo point out, film acting ‘is best understood as a form of mediated performance that lies at the intersection of art, technology, and culture’ (2004a, p. 1, emphasis in original). In other words, film acting cannot be discussed in isolation from the artistic input of the individuals – both in the
sense of the performer and the creative personnel, the effect of film medium, as well as the cultural specificity of performance traditions, styles, and aesthetics. Whilst three dimensions are intricately interconnected, the former two are invariably impacted by the cultural dimension. The cultural dimension shapes the way the creative individuals are nurtured and trained, as well as the particular ways they interact with the camera. As such, prior to the close textual analysis of how specifically Jing employs her face, voice, and body to create performance that responds to the transnational sensitivity of the film, I will first investigate the performing traditions, styles, and aesthetics in Hollywood (and the West more generally) and China respectively. While doing so, I will identify the disparities and parallels between Chinese and Hollywood/Western performance cultures. Then, I will engage with the various analytical tools that have been employed by scholars in their examination of screen acting and compare their strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, I will construct an analytical framework for examining Jing’s performances in the film.

In an American context, the realist aesthetic in film performance has dominated the acting tradition in Hollywood cinema, as many scholars have identified (Naremore, 1988, p. 2; Butler, 1991, p. 10; Krämer, 1999, p. 167; Maltby, 2003, p. 378; Wojcik, 2004, pp. 1-2; Hollinger, 2006, p. 8). Within this paradigm, the construction of believability is the vital instrument to achieve the effect of ‘the actor is the character’. Consequently, the naturalistic performing style emerges as a major style that actors adopt in their performance. There are several performing approaches to achieve the effect of naturalness, but the approach Constantin Stanislavski devised has been profoundly influential. In Stanislavski’s theory, naturalistic performance requires actors to achieve a psychological ‘unison’ with their characters by internally experiencing emotions that are analogous to those of the character, rather than mechanically portraying them externally (Stanislavski, 1991, pp. 20-21, 31). In this regard, merging oneself with the role entails an ‘extremely complicated creative work’, wherein actors must exert control over their consciousness to stimulate the subconscious, thus enabling them to ‘act truly’ (Stanislavski, 1991, pp. 20-21). Stanislavski’s naturalistic approach was later
taken on by Lee Strasberg and introduced into the Hollywood studio system. Strasberg, known for refashioning Stanislavski’s naturalism into the Method, highlights the significance of the activation of ‘affective memory’ – a combination of sense memory and emotional memory – which holds the key to the creation of a ‘real experience on the stage’ (Strasberg, 1991, p. 48). Compared with Stanislavski’s approach, the Method allows the actor to draw from his or her sensory memory to evoke emotional memory, enabling the creation of a performance that does not necessarily require the actor to precisely mirror the thoughts of the character (Strasberg, 1991, pp. 46-47). Instead, the actor is encouraged to reflect on what feels genuine and authentic to them in that particular moment to bring out naturalness and spontaneity in their portrayal of the character (Strasberg, 1991, pp. 46-47). Rather than seeking to replicating the exact feelings of the character as advocated by Stanislavski, Strasberg affords the actor a certain degree of flexibility to incorporate their own emotional repertoire to create a portrayal that resonates with the character’s emotional state.

Alternative approaches to acting have also existed to achieve a presentation of naturalness that diverges from, and occasionally contradicts, the Stanislavskian and Strasbergian methods. For example, the employment of François Deslarte’s taxonomy of gestures and human expressions in performance represents a technique-based approach to bring out the naturalness (Baron and Carnicke, 2008). As Baron and Carnicke note, concentrating on the connection between outward physical expressions and internal emotional states, Deslarte categorises external signs such as postures, hand gestures, and facial expressions to correspond with different expressions of emotions (2008, p. 171). Given that the Deslarte approach identifies how certain body language and expressions convey specific emotions based on human’s basic physiology, it provides actors with a structured framework to perform from the outside in, rather than the inside out, as demanded by Stanislavskian or Strasbergian methods. The anti-emotionalistic approach is another performing approach that takes a radical stance against the inside-out methods, which rely on the actor’s emotional memory (Hollinger, 2006, p. 18). Influenced by Denis Diderot, this approach contends that, as Karen
Hollinger succinctly summarises, ‘the best actor expresses emotion on stage by actually feeling absolutely nothing in common with the character’ (2006, p. 18).

Furthermore, the effect of naturalness is not always the objective in certain narratives or contexts. As Paul McDonald notes, the construction of believability is ‘only at issue where performers are placed in the formal conventions of realist narrative cinema’ (1998, p. 34). Similarly, Carole Zucker also cautions that although the notion of film as a recording apparatus has been challenged in film theory, the performance aesthetic that advocates for naturalistic acting has yet to be re-examined (1993, p. 56). Zucker’s comment serves as a reminder of the existence and importance of alternative, non-naturalistic performance styles. For example, the anti-naturalist Bertolt Brecht (1991, pp. 69-70, 71) rejects actors’ identification with characters and calls on their critical awareness of opposition to the character they play. This approach aims to provoke audiences’ reflection and criticism rather than their emotional identification (Brecht, 1991, pp. 69-70, 71; Butler, 1991, p. 67). As such, a Brechtian actor ‘examine[s] the relationship between roles on the stage and roles in the society, deliberately calling attention to the artificiality of performance, foregrounding the staginess of spectacle, and addressing the audience in didactic fashion’ (Naremore, 1988, p. 3). Carole Zucker (1993) develops the concept of ‘excess’ in film acting as an ‘innovative, transformative and subversive performance style’ (p. 57) in contrast to the naturalistic style, wherein the actor, while performing, displays varying degrees of self-consciousness of role-playing, which creates a clear split between the act and the actor (pp. 56, 59, 61). Performance styles are also influenced by factors such as genre, cinema, technology, leading actors to employ different technique(s) to construct their characters. This is evident in works such as Christine Cornea’s edited collection Genre and Performance (2010), Daniel Smith-Rowsey’s Blockbuster Performances (2018), Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson and Frank P. Tomasulo’s edited book More than a Method (2004b) and Lisa Bode’s Making Believe (2017). These different approaches actors employ suggest that first, the naturalistic performance style is not the only type of the performance style in Hollywood, and second, it should not be considered the standard of evaluating
Since the actor’s adoption of one or more styles hinges upon the generic context and the specific texts he or she deals with, to examine Jing’s performance in a transnational film where two performative cultures intersect, I will now look at the dominant performance style(s) in China. The realist aesthetic has not only dominated Hollywood cinema, but also deeply impacted on Chinese performance aesthetic since the film medium was imported as a Western invention in the end of the 1890s. Before the arrival of cinema, Beijing opera was the dominant form in Chinese theatre (Teo, 2013, p. 210). As a traditional performing style in China, the Beijing operatic acting style was commented by a Chinese critic of the time (Gu Kenfu) as ‘exaggerated and overly stylized’, and thus ‘irredeemably unrealistic’ (McGrath, 2013, pp. 402, 403). By presenting the example of the ‘reclining fish’ pose that imitates the drunken state in The Drunken Concubine, Jason McGrath notes that this acting style relies on ‘semiosis, or inscription of symbolic meaning by convention’, in which the actor follows ‘highly codified sign systems shared by performers and spectators’ and performs within narratives that demand semiotic reading from a culturally literate audience (2013, pp. 404-405). Gu’s criticism was legitimate in some way, but it was made under the influence of Western realism, where the acting style underwent a shifting paradigm from what Roberta Pearson (2004) terms the histrionic code to verisimilar code. In her study of the Biograph films in early Hollywood, Pearson found that the actors who adopted histrionic code resorted to mechanical formulations and prescriptions in which hyperbolic bodily movements are emphatic to externalise emotions, whereas those who adopted verisimilar code tended to ‘mimic reality and create individual characterisations’ with the help of gestures, expressions, glances, and props (2004, p. 62). Whilst the histrionic code tends to involve larger, more emphatic, and more discrete in movements, the verisimilar code tends to feature smaller, less emphatic, and more continuous gestures (Pearson, 2004, p. 65). Notably, according to Pearson, actors who adopted the verisimilar code in their performance tended to be perceived as possessing good acting skills (2004, p. 65). Although the Chinese operatic acting
style is perceived as more semiotic than mimetic (McGrath, 2013, p. 404), it broadly runs parallel with the histrionic code in Pearson’s work, in the sense that Chinese actors adopted exaggerated and stylised performing styles.

Gu’s predilection for the naturalistic/realistic performance style in part reflects that film acting in China at inception demonstrated a propensity toward the naturalistic/realistic aesthetic. Ruan Lingyu, one of the most famous Chinese female stars in silent Chinese cinema, can be considered a representative case for this. Through an analysis of Ruan’s films, Mette Hjort (2010b) identified that Ruan as a performer demonstrated excellencies in ‘the expression of emotional complexity; the communication of intent through carefully modulated facial expressions and bodily movements; and the articulation of complex characterization as a result of versatility and range’ (p. 37, emphasis in original). All three areas, according to Hjort, are reflective of her performance style as ‘departing from the pantomime tradition of exaggerated and clearly codified gestures, and as contributing instead to the development of the performance modes that James Naremore identifies in terms of “psychological realism”’ (2010b, p. 37). On the one hand, Ruan’s case suggests that the naturalistic/realistic acting style of the West has clearly impacted on the Chinese performing aesthetic. On the other hand, the wide acceptance/praise of realism, illustrated by Ruan’s mainstream success, mirrors not only China’s assimilation, but also an adaptive tactic toward the particularity of the camera – close-ups – shared by both China and Hollywood.

The Stanislavskian naturalism was introduced in the late 1930s and witnessed a renewed interest in socialist China in the 1950s (Tong, 1992, cited in Lu, 2010, p. 103). Owing to the nation’s ideological liaison with Socialist Camp, led by the Soviet Union, China’s performance aesthetic and pedagogy adhered to the principles of socialist cinema. ‘Socialist realism’ in the Soviet Union cinema was remodelled by the chairman

30 I am aware that naturalism and realism can be seen as slightly different modes of performance, but I use both terms in an interchangeable way which corresponds with popular perception and usage.
Mao Zedong as the ‘combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism’, predicated on China’s historical and aesthetic heritages (Clark, 2012, p. 42). In more specific terms, Stanislavski’s method within the socialist Chinese context did not only work as pragmatic acting techniques for truthful acting, but also transcended as a normative force in transforming actors into good socialists (Lu, 2010, pp. 103-104). However, Stanislavski’s accentuation on ‘living the part’, which requests a psychological control over the actor’s subconsciousness, was downplayed by the Chinese actors at the time, considering the obscurity and abstraction in the approach (Lu, 2010, p. 105). Instead, Chinese actors focused more on ‘experiencing life’ to prepare for their characters, immersing themselves in real-life environments such as the countryside or factories to physically relive the character’s experiences (Lu, 2010, p. 105). Aside from their different approaches in constructing the character – one is psychological and another physical – Chinese actors’ appropriation of Stanislavski’s method suggests that the widely accepted performance style in socialist China maintained predominantly realistic.

Regarding the performing styles in the Reform era, there appears to be a general lack of enthusiasm in scholarship for mapping out the dominant performing style(s), as indicated by the limited available research literature. One potential explanation, as Sabrina Yu (2014, p. 142) points out, is the prevalence of the Hollywood realistic acting style. It has resulted in the neglect of other styles, with the Hollywood model often being viewed as the universal standard by which non-Western acting styles are also measured (p. 142). In addition to this, many studies on the performance of contemporary individual actors and stars do not serve as representative cases that implicate generality. Rather, the research work often concentrates on the resistant cases which proffer evidence that diverges from the realistic dominant and unpacks the idiosyncrasies and idiolects of individual performers. This is evident in, for example, Yingjin Zhang’s (2017) examination of Tony Leung Chiu-Wai’s performance, Felicia Chan’s (2014) work on Maggie Cheung, and Cynthia Baron’s (2004) study of John Woo’s *The Killer*. Also, many of these cases exclusively underscore the performing landscape
of Hong Kong, which may not fully align with, or represent the performing landscape of mainland China. Another possible explanation could be the internalisation of Western realistic performing styles in the Reform era, as China adopted opening-up policies that facilitated cultural exchange and exposure to Western influences. This exposure may have contributed to an increasingly homogenous criterion that favours naturalistic/realistic acting.

Despite the scarcity of academic research in this respect, the widely circulated and approved industrial truism ‘zhen ting, zhen kan, zhen ganshou’ (to listen, to observe, and to feel truthfully) in actors’ training programmes does reveal the tip of the iceberg of today’s dominant acting style in mainstream Chinese cinema. The spin-off book from the eponymous talk show Biaoyanzhe Yan (Movie Talk) in 2019, edited by Wang Jiuping, is indicative of a shared view over the dogma of ‘acting truthfully’ amongst Chinese actors when they prepare for different roles. Despite its official English translation being Movie Talk, the programme’s title, Biaoyanzhe Yan, literally means ‘performers talk’. The book compiles and consolidates the interviews with 22 actors (most of them have achieved domestic stardom) in China, in which they shared their professional viewpoints and acting experience. In these interviews, it is noticeable that many actors frequently refer to terms such as ‘ganshou’ (to feel), ‘tiyan’ (to experience), ‘guancha’ (to observe), ‘zhenshi’ (to look real) when they honed their acting skills and prepared for roles. From these actors’ experiences, it seems that their primary focus was on constructing the believability of the character, reflecting a training practice associated with the Stanislavskian method and an acting style rooted in realism.

While the dominant acting style in China seems to be driven by realism, it would be inaccurate to assume that the Chinese performance aesthetic is superseded by Western realism. In an early study of Chinese performing arts, Colin Mackerras (1981) observed that
such a Chinese acting style does exist, in the sense that it is possible to distinguish a Chinese film from that of any other country by the *acting alone* and without hearing the language spoken or seeing the background scenery. The mannerisms, hand gestures, the walking style and the general way of integrating the movements of the various parts of the body are quite distinctive and identifiable (p. 138, my emphasis).

This observation did not specify what a Chinese acting style is like, as well as what kind of mannerisms, gestures, and gait are particular within the Chinese context, but Mackerras’s reference to the statement of Chinese actor Zhao Dan (a star in socialist China) was noteworthy and suggested the presence of a distinguishing quality inherent in Chinese acting. Zhao pointed out that inspirations could be drawn from the rich cultural heritage in acting, where there are various types of Chinese operas to be of referential value (quoted in Mackerras, 1981, p. 138). He also compared acting with traditional Chinese painting, where the profoundness in meaning is evinced in simple strokes (Zhao, quoted in Mackerras, 1981, p. 138).

Zhao's comment at once resonates with the Chinese *xieyi* aesthetic. Factually, as a time-honoured Chinese aesthetic, ‘*xieyi*’ (inscription of the essence/meaning) was deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese performing culture long before the introduction of the camera from the West, and this aesthetic principle continues to be applied by contemporary Chinese performers. In stark contrast with ‘*xieshi*’ (inscription of the real), *xieyi* is a philosophical notion related to conceptualism or expressionism that emphasises the abstract, spiritual aspect of the artist’s subjective experience (McGrath, 2013, p. 409). In other words, while *xieshi* invites a straightforward, mimetic, verisimilar reading of the object, *xieyi* is open to various interpretations from the reader. In theatrical terms, the operatic performance style conveys a highly codified sign system that borrows from *xieyi* aesthetic, wherein the grasping of its essence relies on the different ways in which audiences interpret these signs (McGrath, 2013, pp. 404-405). In cinematic terms, *xieyi* is reflected in Chinese
directors’ ‘hanxu’ (concealment) style, in which the concept of minimalism is foregrounded (Zhang, 2012, p. 63). As a result, the minimalist performance style circumvents excessive dialogue and dramatic facial expressions to achieve the effect of ‘less is more’, so that audiences are left with ample room to interpret the actor’s words and emotions (Yu, 2014, p. 151). In some way, the two seemingly incompatible acting models – the dramatic operatic performance and the minimalist performance – fundamentally share the similar root within the rubric of Chinese xieyi aesthetic. Both acting models prioritise readers’ perception, interpretation and imagination of performances and texts, all of which are encapsulated in the concept of yi (essence/meaning). Therefore, apart from the dominant realistic performance style, the minimalist style which incorporates the Chinese xieyi aesthetic can be seen as a culturally tinted acting style for Chinese actors.

It appears that while realism is favoured in the dominant performing traditions, approaches, aesthetics of both Hollywood and China, the minimalist performing style in traditional Chinese acting remains distinct from this emphasis on realism. In this sense, a challenge immediately surfaces in terms of how Jing’s transnational performance which straddles two performing cultures in The Great Wall should be read and evaluated, especially when it comes to judging its quality as either good or bad. First, the employment of the good-bad binary to assess screen acting is inherently insufficient. In David McGowan’s (2017) work, he firmly challenged the dichotomy of good and bad in relation to the assessment of Nicolas Cage’s performance (p. 210). After establishing his cultural status as a star, Cage pursued an eclectic approach to acting, opting for a variety of roles across different genres including comedies, thrillers, independent dramas, and action films (McGowan, 2017, pp. 210, 211). However, his unconventional career choices and performance styles have elicited both derision from critics, scholars, and fans, as well as veneration from the Academy Awards (McGowan, 2017, p. 210). The paradoxical reception of Cage’s performance problematises the good-bad binary so often levelled at sites of screen acting. As Daniel Smith-Rowsey observes, for a long time, critics and scholars have tended to appraise
film acting in a polarised fashion; a performance is either categorised as either bad, described with adjectival comments such as unconvincing, predicted, stiff, stilted, ordinary, normal, plain, and plastic, or good, accompanied by terms such as convincing, unpredicted, protean, honest, verisimilar, lifelike, and inhabited (2018, p. 4). The good-bad binary is inadequate for evaluating performances, as it fails to accurately describe the nuances between the two opposing ends. For instance, it does not adequately capture situations where an actor remains within character but may not be celebrated as exceptionally well-done. Furthermore, Jing’s performance in a transnational film adds complexity to the good-bad binary. It prompts us to look beyond this traditional dichotomy and take into account the differences in performing cultures between China and Hollywood. In some way, the evaluation of whether her performance is good or bad becomes irrelevant, as the transcultural nature of the performance is muddled by divergent perceptions of what constitutes quality. Instead, the focus shifts to the specific performative approaches she employs – whether drawing from Hollywood, Chinese acting traditions, or blending both – and how effectively she applies them in the film. In what follows, I will outline the analytical tools employed by scholars in their examination of actors’ performance.

To identify and analyse an actor’s approaches in delivering roles is notoriously difficult in the sense that the way in which an actor constructs the character is an internal process that takes place within his or her mind. As Karen Hollinger (2006) points out, acting per se is often perceived as ‘a phenomenon and a mythical art beyond the scope of methodical investigation’ (p. 4). As a result, acting is not seen as a ‘systematic or standardised’ process which allows critical investigation, but rather as an individualised practice characterised as ‘intuitive, quasimystical, and elusive’ (Hollinger, 2006, p. 4). One methodical approach that adheres to this logic involves considering actors’ recollections as primary sources. However, the often-elliptical way in which they depict their acting experiences renders these materials unreliable and ineffective for analysing performance (Hollinger, 2006, pp. 4-5). Similarly, the psychologically based approaches such as the Stanislavskian system and the Strasbergian Method are
criticised for putting too much emphasis on the rhetoric which ‘valorises the actor’s ‘inner feelings and their [sic] putative authenticity’, which in return disavows acting as a skill-based craft that requires specific techniques to construct characters (Wexman, 1993, p. 20). Moreover, as Sharon Carnicke (2004) remarks, instead of sticking to one single approach, actors often adapt their performance style(s) and techniques to meet the requirements for different film narratives, cinematic and shooting styles (pp. 47, 63). Carnicke’s viewpoint strikes a chord with Jing’s case, given that her performance in this film was inevitably negotiated between two cultures and industries, and transcended one defined performance style. Therefore, rather than concentrating on unpacking the actor’s thinking process, it would be more effective to take actors’ performative instruments – their face, body, and voice – as the entry point to analyse their performance. As Brenda Austin-Smith (2012) pertinently points out, although the actor’s contemplations on how he or she creates the character is invisible to us, the results of those inward considerations are always presented on screen and available for analysis (p. 20). In this sense, Jing’s facial expressions, eye movements, vocal variations, and body movements emerge as transparent identifiers that reveal how she approaches her character in The Great Wall.

Scholars have employed different analytical methods to examine how actors use their face, body, and voice to present the character. By putting the acting body into a sign system, John Thompson (1991) borrowed the commutation test, a semiotic technique from linguistics studies, to analyse screen performance. The core of this approach is to substitute the actor or the features of an actor with an imaginary other, and to evaluate performances based on whichever ‘turn out to be pertinently differential’ or ‘effect a single thematised contrast’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 192). Paul McDonald (2004), who employs the diacritical technique as an analytical tool, readjusted Thompson’s approach (which he critiqued for not focusing on the acting but rather on the actor) and compared the performances of two actresses who played the same role in the original film Psycho and its 1998 remake. With two tangible, and thus readily comparable examples, McDonald discovered that the two actresses’ different
presentation of appearance, facial expressions, and body language led to the varied viewing experience of two films (2004, pp. 27-32). Virginia Wexman’s (1978) integration of kinesics into analysing film acting shares similarities with the abovementioned approaches. Using Humphrey Bogart’s performances in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Big Sleep* (1946), she examined the ways in which Bogart’s physiognomy and physique, gait, mannerisms, gestures, as well as his use of voice contributed to transferring a type into an individuated character (pp. 43-55). The employment of semiotics and kinesics decode the various parts of the acting body and interpret the meanings (the symbolic, cultural, and ideological) as well as the effects generated from them.

While the interdisciplinary use of semiotics and kinesics are potentially illuminating, Karen Hollinger (2006) points out the risk of treating acting within a sign system in which the fluidity of performance is invariably undermined (p. 20). Moreover, their accentuation on the visual (and I would add the aural) is at the expense of the dramatic aspects of acting, which consequently ‘de-emphasise[s] acting as a craft and reduce[s] the actor to an aspect of the film’s *mise-en-scène*’ (Hollinger, 2006, p. 20). That said, it does not mean scholars’ adoption of semiotics and kinesics are ineffective. Rather, Hollinger’s view invites us to treat performances with the awareness of ‘living’ and being attentive to the connection between acting and its dramatic context. Andrew Klevan’s (2012) analysis, which dissected actors’ voice and body within the dramatic continuum in a meticulous, bit-by-bit manner, provides a good example that pays much attention to the details of performance itself as well as its effectiveness in making dramatic sequences fluent and alive. However, Klevan’s approach, as Martin Shingler (2012) critiqued, focuses more on the performance rather than the performer, which downplays the actor’s contribution to bringing out that liveness and pleasure (p. 41). In this sense, an actor’s performative agency is precluded in favour of the appreciation of the performed result.

Having identified the strengths and weaknesses in these methodological approaches,
I will adopt an eclectic approach by assimilating their merits while remaining mindful of their limitations in my own analysis of Jing’s performance. First, Jing’s own recollection of how she approached her character will not be considered, but the director’s instructions and demands will be used as indicators of how she intended to construct her character. Second, a close textual analysis of Jing’s use of face, voice, and body will be conducted, and in doing so I will compare my analysis with the director’s instructions to determine whether Jing’s performance reflects, contradicts, or complicates her intentionality. Third, her performance will be put into the dramatic context, but more attention will be paid to how her acting contributed to the overall effect and where her performance (e.g. a posture, gesture, a facial expression) imparts a wider meaning of the film, or lack thereof. Finally, while I questioned the plausibility of taking a Western perspective to examine a non-Western performance, I do not entirely abandon it either. This is because Jing’s performance in this coproduction necessarily oscillates between the Chinese and Hollywoodian acting styles, especially considering that the dominant performing style in China and Hollywood tends to be driven by realism. As such, the analytical focus is primarily put on Jing’s acting body and identifying the nuance and complexity in her performance.

6.2 Somewhere between naturalism and minimalism? Jing’s screen acting

As I have argued in Chapter 5, Jing’s character Lin Mae in *The Great Wall* is fundamentally a postfeminist girl hero encapsulated in a Chinese context. This is a strong, ‘empowered’ girl hero character in the narrative on the one hand and a Chinese warrior woman which is meaningfully infused with Chinese cultural values and ideologies on the other. In terms of how to approach this character, the director Zhang Yimou provided Jing with a clear expectation. In a behind-the-scenes video, Zhang recalled how he instructed Jing to act; he told Jing that ‘These acts are not particularly challenging for her, given her acting experience. Thus, it is important that she does not
over-prepare for them, as excessive preparation only makes her nervous. The crucial thing is for her to relax, allowing spontaneity to emerge, and to speak English fluently’ (YimouStudio, Weibo, 5 December 2016). Zhang’s instruction was also echoed in Jing’s interview featured in The Great Wall’s character featurette (2017), in which she stated, ‘When we are in the studio, I remember [the director] would always remind us... if you feel it inside, your eyes will show it too’ (quoted in The Great Wall DVD, 2017). In addition, in her interview (2016) with Chinese trade press Dianying Jie, Jing provided a more detailed account of the director’s instruction. She recalled that Zhang deliberately asked her to ‘shouzhe yan’ (act with restraint) in a scene where Damon and she had an exchange of thoughts (Jing, quoted in Dianying Jie, 2016). More broadly, she recollected that ‘the director attended to even the minutest details, providing instructions on how to convey emotions through the eyes. He told me to refrain from overtly dramatic expressions and instead, allow my eyes to tell the story. This was especially crucial in close-up shots’ (quoted in Dianying Jie, 2016). In this sense, it appears that the director’s vision on Jing’s acting aligns with a naturalistic performance standard, where maintaining a relaxed and spontaneous manner is essential for an effective embodiment of her character. In the meantime, his emphasis on restraining one’s performance bears traces of the minimalist acting style in which the emotions are transmitted with subtlety and concealment. As such, rather than approaching the character within a singular acting paradigm, Jing was tasked with adopting two different acting styles – the naturalistic performance style and the minimalist performance style – within a single performance.

For analytical purposes, I have selected one particular scene to analyse her performance (and also Damon’s performance in the next section). According to McDonald (2004), if the significance of film acting is judged by the standard of ‘how the minute actions of the actor reveal a larger understanding of the character’s involvement with the circumstances of the narrative, analysing performance need not require reading a performance for the totality of its actions but only the key selected parts’ (p. 32). In this light, to evaluate how an actor’s performance contributes to the
construction of the character and enhances the overall understanding of the film, one can select the key scenes, or even smaller units (a fleeting expression or movement) that mark the development and climax of the narrative. Through this process, I am enabled to contemplate whether Jing’s performance effectively dramatises the narrative conflict and achieves the impersonation of Lin. There are a few scenes available based on the narrative structure and industrial negotiations between China and Hollywood, but I have selected one representative scene which effectively encompass the points I want to address in the analysis of her performance – the scene when Lin lectures Garin (played by Matt Damon) about the meaning of ‘trust’ on the Wall, in which she is meaningfully infused with both active agency and ideological undertone. In this scene, Lin is not only portrayed as a well-trained and powerful female leader (which highlights her characterisation associated with the rhetoric of girl power), but she also serves to symbolise the countless Chinese soldiers who share similar noble beliefs (which underlines the Chinese film industry’s pursuit of a positive national image). Narratively, this scene lays the foundation for Garin’s subsequent transformation which culminates in the eventual collaboration between Lin and Garin in the climactic battle. Furthermore, from the perspective of analysing her acting per se, this scene also serves as a suitable example to dissect the ways in which she utilises her face, voice, and body to perform. It involves several (big) close-up shots which clearly capture her facial expressions, as well as several medium shots, including over-the-shoulder sized and bust sized shots, and full shots that display her body movements. In addition, the background sound in this scene minimally disrupts the clarity of Jing’s voice. Her articulation of lines can be distinctly observed and analysed.

The scene takes place after Lin’s conversation with Garin about ‘what to fight for’. Upon hearing that Garin fights for food and money rather than his country, she expresses that they are not the same kind of people and then invites him to meet her at her battlefield – the attacking device of her division – where she and her fellow female soldiers engage in combat against the Tao Tei monsters by bungee jumping off the Wall with spears and then returning after their attack. The sophisticated device
resembles the fanning-out tail of a peacock (see Figure 6.1). The central part consists of two layers: the upper layer houses the wheels, where male soldiers operate the cords, while the lower layer serves as a rallying platform capable of accommodating multiple soldiers. The extension part includes five springboards, serving as the soldiers’ jumping points. In this scene, Garin experiences his initial exposure to the virtue of the Chinese people, encapsulated in the Chinese word ‘xinren’ (trust), a concept which he does not readily identify with due to his upbringing. While Lin elucidates the significance of teamwork and collaboration through trusting each other and further expands this idea to encompass ‘fighting for something more’ such as honour and the good of others, Garin, as the recipient, remains fundamentally unmoved, despite any emotional impact he may feel. I break down this scene into two parts. In the first half, Lin and Garin engage in communication as representatives of two disparate cultures. In the second half, Lin assumes the role of the primary speaker, addressing to Garin (and by extension, to the audience) regarding the values she upholds.

Figure 6.1 The structure of the attacking device in The Great Wall

Jing Tian enters the frame with a full length shot in which her body is displayed from a low angle. Standing steadily with her legs slightly separated, Jing’s left arm is hung down by the weight of the loop and straps she carries. Her right arm swings up,
following a light and soft articulation of a one-word English line ‘come’ and a minute tilt of her lips. The camera then cuts back to Damon. The shooting angle from bottom up, coupled with Jing’s posture and her well-fitted armour collectively enhance Jing’s strong and muscular body, symbolising Lin’s physical dominance in her world and exuding a self-assured and authoritative aura of Lin. Whereas Jing’s gesture of invitation, soft and welcoming voicing of the line and befriending smile neutralise the seemingly superior aura, transforming it into an airy invitation to Lin’s world. Through these actions, Jing’s acting helps soothe the tension between Lin and Garin. If Lin is seen as the token of East and Garin the West, Jing’s gestural and vocal performance here is effective in bridging the cultural distance between the two sides. In the meantime, Jing’s facial expression, vocal delivery, as well as body movement suggest a naturalistic performing approach, accompanied with a minimalist touch. Jing’s body appears completely at ease standing upon a narrow performing space, meanwhile her palpable yet not excessive smile, as well as her reserved body movement reflect Jing’s assimilation of the minimalist performance aesthetic.

While she continues to negotiate between the two styles, Jing’s employment of the naturalistic approach becomes more pronounced in the following sequences. After Damon climbs up, there is a panoramic shot in a full-sized frame from left to right, demonstrating their communicative space and capturing the body movements of both actors (see Figure 6.2). Damon stands on the left, casting a cautious gaze across the spectacular yet desolate landscape beyond the Wall. The stiffness of Damon’s arms betrays Garin’s evident uncertainty and unease in the surroundings, confirmed later by his seemingly half-hearted interest in responding to Lin’s question (‘You wish to try?’). His restrained voicing of an interjection, ‘Ehm...’, further underlines his apprehension. Simultaneously, Damon looks away again to check the environment; his body movement reflects the hesitance in his voice. At the same time, Jing moves closer to Damon and briefly looks around as he does so, while she naturally shifts her loop and straps from her left to right hand. Judging by the spontaneous dangling of Jing’s visible left arm when the loop is taken away and her quick glance at the environment,
Jing acts out Lin’s familiarity with the surroundings and her relaxed demeanour at her battlefield. Jing poses the question ‘You wish to try?’ in a tender, non-provocative way, with a rising tone at the end, followed by a gesture of extending the straps to Damon. Here, Jing incorporates props in her hands to prevent her character from appearing completely motionless while she awaits Damon’s response. However, in the subsequent moment, Jing’s articulation of the question does not synchronise with her gesture of offering the props – her words and movements occur in succession (see Figure 6.3). This discontinuity between words and action breaks the naturalistic performative norm, where, as James Naremore (1988) points out, actors ‘devise situations in which the characters talk about one thing while doing something else’ (p. 42, emphasis in original). In Jing’s case, she certainly does not talk about one thing and do the corresponding action at the same time. Whilst her relaxed face and body suggest that she continues to employ a naturalistic approach, this rupture suggests that Jing clearly does not entirely adhere to the naturalistic doctrine. Rather, it is indicative of her negotiating between the two performing styles, which momentarily collide at this point.

Figure 6.2 The sequence of Garin (Matt Damon) and Lin (Jing Tian) looking around on the Wall in *The Great Wall*
However, the subsequent sequences demonstrate Jing’s return to a visible integration of both naturalistic and minimalist approaches. After noticing Garin’s clear hesitation, four fellow female soldiers behind Lin make a light-hearted joke about Garin in Mandarin – ‘Men are too heavy. Do you think we can pull him up?’. The conversation between Garin and Lin now is captured in medium, waist-sized and over-the-shoulder shots, allowing for clearer observation of the actors’ faces. When Damon notices their giggling and expresses curiosity, Jing turns her head away, looking offscreen, and toys with the straps and loop between her hands, emitting an ostensible snigger (see Figure 6.4). Here Jing effectively uses the props to present a natural, relaxed status of Lin. Lin appears clearly amused by the jest, as evidenced by Jing’s smile. In the meantime, as the leader, Lin refrains herself from a direct engagement with the jest, even if Garin does not understand it at all. In contrast to the fellow soldier actors’ giggling (with their heads moving around and bobbing, accompanied by their clearly discernible giggling voices), Jing remains more restrained, displaying minimal head movement and making no noticeable sound. Following this, Lin fabricates a lie – ‘she says men have so much to teach us’, coupled with a faint but observable smile. Jing’s tone carries a tinge of badinage, with a slight emphasis on the word ‘so’, conveying a mix of smugness and
enjoyment, but her facial expressions still suggest Lin’s restrained emotion. Jing’s eyes look down below the Wall, and not until she said ‘much’ her attention is shifted back to Damon. After a slow blink, Jing raises her eyes and gazes at him. Jing articulates the line smoothly, without palpable pauses, and the relaxed state of her mouth muscles suggests that she maintains a naturalistic acting approach. Also, Jing’s refrained facial expressions and less animated bodily movements denote her minimal use of face and body to deliver Lin’s emotions.

Figure 6.4 The sequence of Lin (Jing Tian) being amused in *The Great Wall*

Garin does not believe Lin’s translation; ‘I don’t think that’s what she said’. He lets out a slight titter, puckers his lips, and looks away to avoid eye contact with both Lin and other female soldiers. Until Lin speaks his attention is drawn back. Lin picks up the conversation; ‘You know what I think? I think you’re afraid’. Upon hearing her provocation, Garin looks away again to observe his surroundings. He then responds, ‘You said that this morning and yet…’ before concluding with a direct look at her, saying ‘here I am’. Lin responds ‘Yes. Here you are’, while extending the straps towards him in a gesture of invitation. This sequence is captured through crosscuts and framed with waist-sized and over-the-shoulder shots. Jing maintains a relatively restrained upper body posture each time the camera returns to her, with subtle movements of her head
as she speaks. As she performs Lin provoking Garin, Jing’s facial features are only partially revealed within the frame. When visible, her face presents a relatively subdued expression. However, her voice grows louder, firmer, and more varied in intonation (accompanied by intermittent gestures of fiddling with the straps, suggesting a naturalistic approach). In this sense, although her face does not suggest much provocation, her vocal performance conveys a sense of provocativeness and challenge, which sets the stage for Lin’s subsequent action of handing her straps to Garin. Jing keeps a restrained body posture and instead employs vocal changes to express the emotion of Lin. While doing so, she continues to minimise her gestures and facial expressions while maintaining a naturalistic approach.

In the first half of this scene where the two actors engage in conversations, we can clearly sense the variations of emotions of Lin Mae through Jing’s adoption of both naturalistic and minimalist performance styles. Jing’s relatively composed mannerisms, along with her natural facial and bodily reactions, align well with Lin’s status and qualities as the leader of her division. Her vocal performance also serves to mitigate a potential collision of the two performances styles when Jing does not use her facial expression to articulate Lin’s provocation. Although at one moment Jing struggles to orchestrate the two styles (the discontinuity between words and action, where I identified in my analysis), which for naturalists this is considered evidence of stiffness, the overall tone and atmosphere of this segment of the scene does not necessitate characters to display strong emotions or emotional intensity. As such, this temporary rupture does not result in visible dramatic incongruence. Therefore, she by and large succeeds in merging the two performing styles and achieves impersonating Lin Mae in this part of the scene.

The second half of the scene takes place on the extension of the attacking device. For the purpose of continuity, I now briefly introduce how the shifting of venue has occurred. Upon hearing Lin’s provocation ‘Yes, here you are’, Garin, instead of taking the straps Lin offers, directly walks the long and narrow springboard. When he reaches
the edge of the springboard, his body leans forward as he cautiously peers down the Wall, where he is now able to see numerous corpses clad in blue armour strewn across the ground below. He then turns around and takes a few steps back. On the contrary, Jing follows Damon, walking faster with steadier paces, demonstrating clear familiarity with and dexterity of passing through the springboard (which fits Lin’s status as a well-trained soldier). She asks Garin, ‘Will you jump, or not?’. Instead of offering a response, he poses a question, ‘These men know what they’re doing?’, while gesturing toward the male soldiers operating the cords. Lin pushes him forward to the edge again, responding, ‘Wrong question. Whether or not a cable is attached. That is the question’. Garin follows up with ‘And the answer?’. At this moment, Lin introduces the concept of xinren to him. It is worth noting that now both actors stand on the edge of a slender springboard, where the performing space becomes the narrowest for them.

In the second half of the scene, there is a noticeable shift in dynamics compared to the first half. While in the first half Damon and Jing take turns to create dramatic effects and push the narrative forward, in the latter half the focus shifts significantly towards Jing. In some way, Jing emerges as the primary driving force behind the drama, propelling the narrative forward, whereas Damon reacts to her performance in this part of the scene and serves to intensify the dramatic tension in the final sequence. In this part, Lin illustrates how Chinese soldiers rely on ‘trust’ to fight together, as well as how their belief of trust anchors several consecrated purposes such as fighting for the country (patriotism), for its people (collectivism), as well as for honour (altruism). In portraying these values, a sense of nationalism also emerges. Lin’s function as an ideological mouthpiece for these values becomes particularly apparent in this half of the scene. In the following sequences, rather than blending the two performing styles, Jing tends to mainly adopt a minimalist approach to perform.

The second half is filmed in crosscuts, with a melange of long shots, mid-shots, and close-up shots. Jing’s speech about the concept of xinren primarily depicted in long or extra-long shots, showcasing the precipitous Wall and the forbidding, bleak
environment surrounding them. These shots offer clear visibility of both Jing and Damon's body movements as they interact. Jing stands behind Damon, her hands resting on Damon's waist as she delivers the extensive lines 'Xinren means trust [...] at all times' (see Figure 6.5). As the camera dollies in, Jing’s body remains stationary, and she turns her head sideways in order to talk to Damon (see Figure 6.6). Jing’s eyes fix on Damon’s right ear. Her head rocks gently from time to time as she delivers lines. The mid-shots here preclude detailed observation of the nuanced facial expressions. However, they indicate no explicit emotional shifts apart from the movements of her mouth muscles. As Jing’s facial expressions and body movements appear to adhere to the minimalist approach, Jing’s voice emerges as the primary performative instrument to emote. Many film scholars have discussed an actor’s vocal performance and how the creative manipulation of voice can produce markedly diverse effect in his or her portrayal of the character (e.g. Morgan Freeman’s voice in Sergi [1999], Bette Davis’s in Shingler [2006], and Rock Hudson’s in Wojcik [2006]). Through creatively altering the paralinguistic aspects such as volume, pitch, metre, rhythm, tempo, and accents, actors break free, in part, from the limitations of the script, and infuse their own idiolect into their performance. In this sense, the way in which Jing handles her lines becomes crucial in determining whether this propagandistic speech achieves its intended impact – powerful, persuasive, and abundant in emotion.
Jing’s lines exhibit simplicity in terms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Each word is straightforward, typically containing no more than two syllables. The sentences, totalling five, are generally concise, with most comprising fewer than ten words. The sentence structure is uncomplicated, lacking subordinate clauses and word order inversions. In terms of modality, one sentence employs the imperative mood, while the remainder are declarative. In Jing’s delivery, the individual sentence is further broken down to three or four words in most cases, as reflected in the perceivable pauses between phrases (which I shall denote with forward slashes ‘/’). The totality of these lines hence breaks into ten smaller units. Her delivery stresses several words (which I shall denote with italics) and further highlights certain syllables and/or consonants (which I shall denote with underlines); ‘xinren means trust, / to have faith. / Here, / in this army, / we fight for more than food or money. / We give our lives to something more. / Xinren is our flag. / Trust in each other, / in all ways, / at all times.’ In doing so, Jing manages to accentuate the core ideological idea by repeatedly
stressing the words ‘xinren’ and ‘trust’. While she emphasises these two words, other stressed nouns – ‘faith’ and ‘flag’ – are connected to the idea of trust. The emphasis on ‘more’ and ‘all’ further underscores the extent of trust required. However, possibly burdened by the frequent stress placed on certain words, Jing appears to employ patterned cadence when she delivers these lines. Her delivery tends to begin with a level pitch and end with a falling strain, except for the stressed words ‘here’ (where she used a rising pitch) and ‘xinren’ (where she always employs a lower pitch). At the same time, these lines are enunciated in a slow tempo, with each word clearly pronounced in precision. While Jing clearly delivers the meaning and importance of xinren, the lack of variations in her delivery results in a somewhat recitational tone. Consequently, this recitational tone detracts from the emotional resonance of the speech, making it sound more like indoctrination than an emotionally engaging expression. Moreover, as these lines are broken down into several segments and articulated in a slow and emphatic manner, her delivery loses smoothness and natural flow. As such, while Jing’s body maintains a minimalist approach, her delivery here becomes an on-and-off reminder that she is acting, as it does not adhere to a naturalistic performing approach, or minimalism.

However, rather than attributing her vocal performance as ‘poor’ acting, I would suggest that her acting is encumbered by these lines being in English. Furthermore, I would suggest that the narrative arrangement to have her speak English in this Chinese-themed blockbuster stems from the imbalanced dynamics between China and Hollywood in this collaboration, where China is structurally at a disadvantage. It is worth noting that the criticism of her vocal performance tends to be explicitly linked to her English, both within Chinese and American contexts. On Douban, the top review that criticised her performance specifically highlighted her English: ‘when this facially paralysed [sic] woman says “xinren means trust” […] I just realised that she delivers her lines in a way that is utterly cringeworthy and embarrassing to listen to’ (Xuruocheng, Douban, 15 December 2016). Another popular review noted that ‘she speaks English, […] how should I put it, [in a] very Chinglish [sic] way’ (Huahuahua,
However, her delivery of Chinese lines was not singled out as a subject of focused criticism amongst Chinese audiences. In an American context, Maggie Lee (2016) from Variety also noticed her English, writing ‘perhaps the sheer amount of English dialogue constrains her performance [...]’. Another critic wrote ‘[Jing] needs a way better dialogue coach’ (Landreth, 2017b), referring to her poor delivery of English lines. Given that her delivery of Chinese lines did not receive targeted criticism, it could be argued that her vocal performance may not be inherently poor, but rather encumbered by performing in the English language.

The English language is a particular issue that concerns transnational performers in Hollywood. As highlighted by Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (2006), proficiency in English has historically been a primary hurdle for transnational stars, impacting on their ability to secure roles and achieve performative agency (pp. 11-12). For the former, English becomes a source of mockery if it was poorly delivered, as well as an identifier of hard work and smartness if otherwise; for the latter, English as a second language introduces unnaturalness in their body movement and affects more broadly their overall performance (Phillips and Vincendeau, 2006, pp. 11-12).

Although Phillips and Vincendeau refer particularly to European star labour, it also resonates with the situation of transnational Chinese stars. For example, Sabrina Yu (2012b) identifies that Jet Li’s inadequate English has presented one of the greatest obstacles for him to develop an acting career in the West (p. 113). Dorothy Lau’s (2018) work, on the other hand, demonstrates that Zhang Ziyi’s effort in learning English has enabled her to enhance a lingua-crossing star appeal that adapts the Anglophone and Sinophone cultures (p. 25). In an interview, Jing also acknowledged that English presented a hindrance for her, and she was nervous about ‘performing her very best’ (quoted in Hsia, 2015). Furthermore, despite the collaborative nature of the film, the Chinese film industry (has to) adhere(s) to the regulations set by Hollywood. While Jing plays a Chinese warrior woman within an ancient China context, she (has to) speak(s) English. Given the imbalanced power dynamics between China and Hollywood, Jing’s vocal performance failure here is, at least in part, attributed to Hollywood’s
exclusionary practice of requiring actors to perform in English and China’s disadvantaged position in this collaborative partnership.

The remainder of this scene following Lin’s introduction of the concept of trust to Garin is filmed in crosscut shots and emphasised by prominent close-up framing. Different from other shot types, the close-up offers the clearest display of the actor’s facial details. Its intimate scrutiny, as Richard Maltby notes, demands ‘the slightest level of expression’ (2003, p. 379). As such, whether it is a loud guffaw engaging every facial muscle or a fleeting twitch of the lips, emotions become immediately discernible and significant in the magnified space of close-ups, facilitating highly legible emotional cues. Following Lin’s elucidation of xinren, Garin insists on his own belief, saying ‘Well, that’s all well and good, but I’m not jumping. I’m alive today because I trust no one’. Upon hearing Garin’s outright rejection, Lin proceeds to say, ‘A man must learn to trust / before he can be trusted’. Here, while Lin is supposed to be disappointed with Garin’s response, she remains rather calm and composed. In terms of Jing’s delivery of lines, the flow is more natural, as she speaks slightly faster compared to her xinren sequences earlier. Her articulation is calm and patient in tone, but faintly divulges a sense of disappointment and sullenness. As she breaks the line into two parts, it becomes ‘a man must learn to trust’ (which reinforces what she just lectures him, while also suggesting a directive), and ‘before he can be trusted’ (with ‘be’ being stressed, it implies that her trust is conditional, if he refuses to collaborate). As she speaks, her gaze remains fixed on him, and she blinks just once right before she begins to talk. With the second blink, Jing raises her eyelid, exposing her eyes more prominently. While doing so, there is a faintly perceivable frown on her right eyebrow and an observable pouting, betraying Lin’s disapproval of his opinion on trusting no one to survive (see Figure 6.7). Apart from these muscular movements on her face, there are no further visible expressions. Then, in this final scene, it appears that she primarily adopts minimalism to achieve the effect of less is more, while downplaying naturalism. However, as she downplays naturalism, Lin’s emotional intensity continues to be repressed. In the final sequence, upon hearing Garin saying ‘And you were right.'
“We’re not the same”, the camera captures only a faint smile on her face, without revealing visible expressions that might suggest her discontent with Garin’s blatant disavowal of her advice.

Figure 6.7 The close-up of Lin (Jing Tian) after Garin (Matt Damon) refuses to accept the concept of xinren in The Great Wall

Through a close textual analysis of Jing’s performance in this scene, it is evident that Jing has followed the director’s instructions of ‘being natural’ and ‘acting with restraint’, as well as merged two acting aesthetics – the naturalistic and minimalist performance styles – within her performance. Her approach has yielded different cinematic effects within the scene. When intense emotional outpouring is not necessary, the combination of naturalistic and minimalist acting styles generally works well, as exemplified by Jing’s performance in the first half of the scene. However, when the scene requires stronger emotional emission, she is weighed down by her delivery of English lines and the minimalist approach in the final sequence. Given Jing’s control in merging two styles in the first half of the scene, the reason behind her failure in the final sequence may stem from the inherent incompatibility between the two performative styles in delivering high ostensive expressions. Through my analysis, I have demonstrated the messiness and complexity of assessing screen acting in a
transnational context and argued against the good-bad binary in evaluating her performance. As such, her perceived failure in achieving transnational stardom cannot be considered her own failure to employ quality acting as a pathway. Rather, it is influenced by the complexity of transnational acting and the imbalanced power dynamics in the partnership between China and Hollywood.

Jing’s screen acting remains largely unnoticed by Western critics in their reviews of The Great Wall, except for the previously cited instances where her insufficient vocal performance in English was criticised (Lee, 2016; Landreth, 2017). Maggie Lee (2016) offered a more detailed commentary on Jing’s performance: ‘Jing is completely wooden in her exchange with Damon, even though Lin and Garin are supposed to develop a grudging respect and warmth for each other. Their dynamic feels especially awkward in static close-ups (and hers are numerous), when she’s most expressionless’. In contrast to my own analysis, her minimalised facial expressions and body movement were read as ‘wooden’ and ‘expressionless’ by Lee. With naturalism dominating the discursive terrain of evaluating performance, it comes as no surprise that Jing was criticised for not delivering a ‘satisfying’ performance. However, I also do not agree with Lee’s remark on Jing’s acting being solely accountable for generating the awkward dynamic between the two characters. As Robert T. Self (2004) notes, acting in the cinema is always ‘the site of a complex interaction among three forces – the script […], the actors […], and the director […]’ (p. 126, my emphasis). Apart from the actors’ own creative autonomy, the final presentation of a screen performance is inevitably linked to factors such as the script, the collaboration with other actors, and the director. In this sense, I argue that rather than putting the blame on Jing’s acting, the partner actor Damon, the script, and the mise-en-scène have collectively contributed to creating this ‘awkward dynamic’. Of representative value, the scene I selected for analysing Jing’s acting also primarily focuses on the interaction between Jing and Damon and involves a framing of close-ups. Therefore, I will continue to utilise this scene to explore the exogenous factors that also ‘create’ Jing’s performance.
6.3 Film acting as collaborative work: Performing with Damon and interacting with the *mise-en-scène*

As was stated in the previous section, naturalistic actors tend to devise situations where they can multitask different things while delivering lines to present a natural status, so that ‘acting’ becomes invisible (Naremore, 1988, p. 42). In some ways, the ‘things’ are, as Sharon Marie Carnicke (2006, p. 25) identifies, ‘the objects of attention’. Drawing on Stanislavski and Strasberg, she further illustrates the importance of working with the objects of attention, including both the material world surrounding the actor and his/ her acting partner (Carnicke, 2006, pp. 25-26). Helpful objects of attention such as furniture, hand props, clothing, can ‘mark out the emotional geography of a scene and construct its dynamic shape’ (Carnicke, 2006, p. 26). The actor’s attentive engagement with his/ her partner actor facilitates the establishment of a ‘causal link’ between their lines and reactions to each other (Carnicke, 2006, pp. 25-26). As such, both the performing environment, including the attacking device of the Crane Corps and available props to interact with, as well as her partner actor Damon, are engaged in the final presentation of the scene. In the following discussion, I will examine the *mise-en-scène* and Damon’s interaction with Jing in this scene, along with a brief discussion of the narrative arrangement here. In doing so, I will argue that the perceived ‘wooden’ performance of Jing is also attributed to the performing environment and her partner actor Damon.

In this scene, the performing space for Jing and Damon is exceedingly constrained, in terms of both the actual performing space and the available objects of attention. Whilst magnificent as an element of the filmic spectacle, the attacking device, where the conversation between the two actors takes place, makes the acting space extremely limiting for them. Although the scenery and the breath-taking height of the Wall in the long shots are created using digital effects, the elongated extension itself is the actual physical environment for them (see Figure 6.8). In other words, whilst
they perform in the open air, their body movements are to a large extent confined. As Lisa Bode (2017) writes, placing actors in real locations provides them with ‘more genuine experiences so as to evince truthful behavior that will heighten the affective dimensions of the drama’ (p. 165). In this regard, walking on the real springboard – something similar to a single-log bridge – on set is evidently helpful in eliciting authentic bodily reactions from both actors. The physical impediment is particularly evident when Damon teeters towards the edge. His attention is thoroughly drawn to the slender path he navigates, while his arms are raised to maintain balance. The springboard is so narrow that he must maintain a very straight posture and proceed slowly and cautiously; in fact, he cannot stand at ease anywhere on the springboard. Given that this is the first time Garin walks on this springboard, Damon’s reaction aligns well with his character – he must be constantly mindful of his steps. Jing, on the other hand, walks steadier, faster and with more ease, which also corresponds to Lin’s dexterity as a well-trained soldier and familiarity with the device. Placing Jing and Damon on this springboard enhances audiences’ viewing experience, as the actors’ body reaction appear authentic, which adds the credibility that they really are walking on a plank that is so narrow and therefore ‘so dangerous that one simply cannot afford one slip’.

Figure 6.8 The *mise-en-scène* of the learning to trust scene in *The Great Wall*
However, while having them walk on the springboard visually heightens the sense ‘danger’ and to some extent serves to underline the concept of ‘trust’ in this scene, when they stop moving on the springboard and begin to have a conversation to push the narrative forward, the limiting performing space immediately presents a challenge for both actors. Damon’s bodily stiffness and discomfort is most explicit when he attempts to understand the Chinese word *xinren*. Upon hearing Jing’s line ‘*xinren*’, he repeats ‘*xinren*?’ with an interrogative tone, while his right arm, visible to the camera, involuntarily retracts. When his hand brushes against Jing’s hand on his waist, he quickly stretches his arm back to avoid further physical contact. Although fleeting, this moment reveals Damon’s unease regarding where to position his hands, rather than portraying Garin’s processing of the word *xinren*. When Jing is explaining ‘*xinren*’, both of his arms remain open in midair, and he keeps this posture throughout (see Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3). His body largely remains motionless apart from his head. While Jing speaks behind him, Damon intermittently tilts his head to the right side, where Jing’s voice comes from. However, during the whole time, Damon’s facial expression remains generally unchanged (see Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.9). As he listens, Damon stares at the imaginary ravine and the numerous dead bodies, blinking constantly as Garin processes Lin’s words. His mouth slightly opens and stays that way until Jing finishes her lines (see Figure 6.6). At a fleeting moment when Jing delivers the line ‘we fight our lives to something more. *Xinren* is our flag.’, Damon seems to emit a slight sigh and engage in a longer blink, suggesting an emotional reaction to her words. But apart from these minimal movements, Damon’s facial expression remains static, showing no visible changes in his facial muscles. His slightly opened mouth throughout suggests a state of confusion. It makes certain sense, as the concept of *xinren* is unfamiliar to Garin. However, what Garin encounters is more than a new concept; it is the contradiction between this so-called idea of entrusting his life to another person and the horrendous consequence of this trust he sees in his own eyes (i.e. numerous soldiers’ dead bodies below the Wall). Damon’s blankness makes Garin’s internal struggle between trust and distrust almost undetectable.
After Jing finishes her lines, Damon takes a few steps forward and observes more attentively the depth of the ravine and the dead bodies strewn across the ground below. An emotional fluctuation can be captured from a slight quiver of his lips and faint pouting (see Figure 6.10). Garin’s reluctance is evidently visible in this moment. Expectedly, he turns to Lin, saying ‘Well, that’s all well and good, but I’m not jumping. I’m alive today because I trust no one’. While he articulates this line, Damon’s gaze on Jing remains unbroken (without even blinking) and he speaks in a calm, rational way that borders on coldness. Apart from his moving mouth muscles, Damon shows no observable facial expression. In his exchange with Jing, as I have demonstrated so far, Damon’s unease in his body movements and blankness on his face are prominent. Therefore, attributing the ‘awkward dynamic’ in this scene solely to Jing is unjust.
Furthermore, given his identity as a Hollywood star, Damon’s blankness in this film can be argued to bear consistency with his previous screen performances. As Paul McDonald (2012) notes, ‘stardom introduces a further dynamic into the character/actor relationship’ (p. 169). While using their voice and body to achieve the effect of star as character (McDonald, 2012, pp. 173-177), they also employ their voice and body to ‘preserve continuities across their most popular and commercially successful roles (McDonald, 2012, p. 177). In other words, for stars, their performances need to not only construct the character, but also establish connections with their previously successful roles to reinforce their existing star persona. For Damon, this blankness mirrors his successful portrayal of Jason Bourne in the Bourne series (2002; 2004; 2007; 2016). As Sarah Thomas (2018) notes, to impersonate Bourne as ‘an empty vessel devoid of identity’, Damon draws from the traditional realistic acting style, using minimalism and blankness as the primary method to dramatise Bourne’s real, extraordinary identity beneath his masquerade of ordinariness (p. 37). The characterisation of Jason Bourne and William Garin shares similarities in the sense of ‘lack’. While Bourne’s identity is the missing piece of the jigsaw, Garin is characterised as an empty vessel devoid of purpose. Growing up as an orphan, Garin is depicted as
an individualistic, aimless mercenary who was born into battle, fighting for ‘greed and gods’ (Legendary, *YouTube*, 28 July 2016). As both characters can be seen as in search of an identity and a self, it is not a surprise that Damon’s construction of Garin also finds consistency with the star’s acting style in the *Bourne* series. Moreover, Garin’s character arc also bears similarities to Damon’s screen persona, as he maintains a pattern of performing ‘the vulnerability of the little boy’, who is socially or physically powerful, yet ‘emotionally precious, in need of some quasi-parental guidance’ (Lennard, 2012, p. 14). In *The Great Wall*, Jing’s character is positioned to fulfil the role of providing such guidance. In this sense, while Damon’s Garin establishes an interfilmic connection with Bourne, his star performance gets in the way of delivering Garin’s struggles and uncertainty, which consequently diminishes his engagement with Jing. In American reception, while the blankness in his performance was not a subject of targeted criticism, Damon was criticised for appearing disengaged with his role, alongside other criticisms. For example, Christopher Orr (2017) commented that Damon for the first time ‘seems to have no idea what he’s doing onscreen’. Similarly, Steve Davis (2017) criticised his ‘lackadaisical commitment to the role’. The dramatic effect of Garin’s negotiation of differences with Lin is disrupted by Damon’s overall lack of emotional engagement. Since the actors’ interaction with one another is equally important for delivering a successful performance, Damon falls short in fulfilling his role as Jing’s acting partner.

However, the ‘awkward dynamic’ between Jing and Damon’s exchange extends beyond the actors’ performance and is linked to the *mise-en-scène* itself. The scene occurs at a point when Garin has yet to establish trust in this place or in Jing’s character Lin. Faced with a springboard which is clearly too narrow for him to stand steadily, Garin’s decision to walk on it seems inherently irrational. From his perspective, there

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31 Damon’s portrayal was perceived as a misfit for the role (e.g. Davis, 2017; Brunson, 2017; Crouse, n. d.). Additionally, the Irish accent he attempted was criticised as a failure. Critics described his accent as ‘on-and-off Irish’ (Dargis, 2017b), ‘weirdly Irish-inflected’ (Abrams, 2017), ‘flattened-out grumble that one occasionally gets when British actors try to play Americans’ (Orr, 2017), ‘pronounced Boston[ian]’ (Brunson, 2017), and ‘flat and ever-changing’ (Campbell, 2017; Crouse, n. d.).
exists a palpable risk that Lin could easily push him off the Wall. Logically speaking, then, Garin would not have walked on the springboard in the first place, risking his life with someone he does not trust. Furthermore, when the script dictates that Garin walks on the springboard, his assertion ‘I’m alive today because I trust no one’ directly contradicts his behaviour, as the very act of walking on it strongly signals entrusting his life to another person. Here, the narrative arrangement contrasts Garin’s status as a mercenary who does not trust others, causing inconsistency in his behaviour. The sequence presents a challenge for Damon in portraying his character effectively.

This key issue here lies in the mise-en-scène. Jing and Damon’s positioning, the camera movements, composition, as well as shooting angles bear a recognisable resemblance, whether intentional or unintentional, to a famous scene from the Oscar-winning *Titanic* (1997). In this scene, Rose (played by Kate Winslet) and Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) develop a romantic relationship at the ship’s bow, a narrow performing space where both actors’ bodies are constrained within a small triangular area. Similar to Jing and Damon, DiCaprio and Winslet need to use their upper bodies and voices to emote, when their lower bodies are rendered immobile in order to maintain balance. However, the relationship dynamic between Jack and Rose is markedly different from that of Garin and Lin. Jack and Rose are engaged in a romantic relationship, and at that stage they have already developed affections for each other. Whereas Garin and Lin are engaged in comradeship, and at that stage they had conflict over ideologies. Consequently, when Jack gently asks Rose ‘Do you trust me?’ near her ear, Rose responds with a clear and unwavering answer ‘I trust you’. While the acting space is narrow and their movements are confined, the two actors can effectively use their face, arms, and hands to create *interactions* to evoke the romantic aura as the scene expects. In contrast, Jing and Damon’s characters have no emotional bond at that time. When Jing speaks in a close and almost intimate distance, it leaves Damon in a rather awkward situation, as Garin and Lin have not cultivated ‘grudging respect and warmth’ yet, as Maggie Lee (2016) put it. Furthermore, the relationship between Garin and Lin at this stage dictates that verbal communication is the only means of interaction.
available to them, which limits Damon and Jing from effectively using their upper bodies to interact with each other. As a result, Jing (is forced to) put(s) her hands around Damon’s waist, while Damon (has to) keep(s) his arms open in midair, as any touching would seem excessive considering the relationship dynamic between Garin and Lin. It is a forced and strained scenario for both actors, in which the dynamic inadvertently accentuates differences and distrust, rather than fostering identification and intimacy. In this sense, both actors are weighed down by the narrative arrangement, as their performative agency is restricted by the performing environment in which they are situated. Therefore, this section demonstrates that rather than her failure to deliver quality performance, Jing is negatively impacted by external factors such as Damon’s performance and the narrative arrangement.

6.4 Looking into the industry: Jing’s transnational acting labour in Hollywood

Beyond the filmic elements such as performing styles, Damon’s performance and mise-en-scène that impact on Jing’s screen acting, this section discusses the ways in which the wider industrial negotiations in the production of The Great Wall shape her performance. Mainly, it examines how much room Jing is really given to perform this character. In addition to this, I will also examine how she attempts to transform her status as a transnational performer to a transnational star through this role in Hollywood. Although The Great Wall is a Sino-Hollywood coproduction, it was Legendary’s then CEO Thomas Tull who conceived the idea of making a film in relation to the Great Wall of China and spearheaded the film project (Landreth, 2017b). As was mentioned in Chapter 5, the script was also created entirely by a team of Hollywood writing talent, including Max Brooks, Edward Zwick, Marshall Herskovitz, Carlo Bernard, Doug Miro, and Tony Gilroy (IMDb, 2023). In an interview, when questioned about the absence of Chinese screenwriters, the director Zhang Yimou responded that ‘it is a story for a global audience, so it is better to source the writing talent in their
In this collaborative partnership, the Chinese film industry was positioned as inferior and inexperienced, and therefore it has to concede to the industrial superiority of Hollywood due to the film’s global reach. In this sense, it is not surprising that Jing’s character Lin Mae is a postfeminist girl hero at the core, coated with Chinese values and elements (see Chapter 5). Here, I do not want to engage with Lin’s identity as a postfeminist girl hero. Rather, I will focus on the character itself as a role for an actor to perform and how this impacts on Jing’s acting labour within a context where China is structurally at a disadvantage in this Sino-Hollywood partnership.

While Damon’s character Garin undergoes a clear character development, Jing’s character Lin, despite her ample screen time, lacks depth, complexity, and a discernible character arc. The story unfolds from the perspective of Damon’s character, centralising his development and transformation from a greedy, aimless mercenary to a saviour fighting for an honourable purpose. In contrast, Jing’s character is not complicated. Her upbringing is succinctly described in a few lines in the film; she was brought to the army not until five years old and has since been trained to defend the Wall. Lin is not presented with many dramatic conflicts or profound psychological struggles, except for the scene in which she feels ‘betrayed’ by Garin, prompting her to vacillate between trusting and distrusting him. As Jing introduces her character in The Great Wall’s character featurette, Lin is ‘a woman with many virtues. She’s strong; she’s brave, determined, and daring. She has all the talent and the wisdom needed to lead the entire army. As a female general, she’s the girl power in a film dominated by male characters. The character is the balance in this film’ (quoted in The Great Wall, 2017). Lin’s bravery, reliability, and determination stem from her military background, while her strength and daringness, also shaped by her upbringing, showcase her physical competence. However, despite possessing these characteristics, there is no inherent contradiction or complexity in her personality. As I have examined in Chapter 5, the flat construction of this character was a major subject of criticism by Chinese
audiences. As James Naremore (1988) notes, for any film aiming to showcase an actor’s professional acting skill, it must ‘provid[e] moments when the characters are clearly shown to be wearing masks – in other words, exhibiting high degrees of expressive incoherence’ (p. 76). However, it appears that Lin Mae maintains a unified, positive image, displaying a high degree of expressive coherence. Then, this leaves Jing with little space to explore and perform the emotional complexity and psychological layers of the character.

The casting requirements for Jing’s character lean significantly towards meeting the standards and preferences of Hollywood rather than those of the Chinese film industry. As the director Zhang Yimou (2016) disclosed in various interviews, there are a set of conditions one must meet to play this role: a) age – an actor in her twenties; b) language – a proven ability of performing in English after undergoing dialogue coaching; c) schedule – a commitment of one year solely dedicated to preparing for the role, including 6 months’ training in the US without engaging in any unrelated activities to the film; d) qualities – expertise in dancing as well as capacity to do action stunts; e) acting experience – experience in acting and the ability to perform opposite Matt Damon (Sohu Entertainment, 2016; Wong, 2016; Xu, 2016; YimouStudio, Weibo, 5 December 2016). One of the producers from Legendary East, Peter Loehr, underlined that given that the female lead will take on such an important role and that she will play opposed to the talented actor Matt Damon, the stakeholders require a very hardworking actress who is willing to undergo rigorous physical training and English coaching (Sina Entertainment, 2016). In Zhang and Loehr’s statements, the actor’s age, English-speaking ability, professional availability, and physical qualities are specifically singled out as crucial criteria. These requirements reflect Hollywood’s exclusionary practices and longstanding scepticism towards acting talents from other film industries.

More broadly, the flat construction of the supporting Chinese characters in *The Great Wall* is a significant criticism shared by Chinese audience (see Chapter 5). This sentiment has also been noted by some Western critics. For example, Maggie Lee (2016) commented they appear as ‘glorified cameos’ and ‘looking like cardboard cut-outs with no emotional dimension’; and Orr (2017) remarked that ‘to call the supporting characters two-dimensional would be to insult planar surfaces’.
a trend dating back to classical Hollywood (see Phillips and Vincendeau, 2006). Though Jing is in a collaborative project, she still needs to abide by the criteria set by Hollywood. First, while Jing’s age was not an issue (she was in her twenties), the criterion of age nevertheless suggests a gendered practice regarding the way in which age is associated with female acting labour in Hollywood (see McDonald, 2013, p. 30). Second, the requirement for English reflects Hollywood’s preference, as it accommodates the convenience of Damon, an American actor who can more naturally respond to lines in his native language, and it also enhances the viewing experience for an American audience, who do not have to read subtitles. Yet, it presents more obstacles for Jing as a transnational performer. Third, to work within the Hollywood system and act against its home-grown star Damon, Jing must accommodate, or even sacrifice her own career in her home country.

Notably, physical investment is highlighted in Jing’s preparation of this character. Jing exerted strenuous effort through dieting and physical training to look and act like Lin Mae. Through her own social media account on Weibo, Jing documented her journey. This includes sharing her experiences with dieting in order to develop muscle mass (JingTian, Weibo, 10 November 2016), posting training videos demonstrating aerobatic moves on wires (JingTian, Weibo, 29 May 2015), sharing images of her practising with a long stick in the gym (see Figure 6.11, JingTian, Weibo, 7 May 2015), and showcasing her horseback-riding sessions (JingTian, Weibo, 25 April 2015). On the one hand, it reflects Hollywood’s discursive power over the Chinese film industry in this project, in which she has to fulfil Hollywood’s requirement of physical qualities in order to play this role. On the other hand, her active engagement in preparing this character is also reflective of Jing’s ‘complicit’ alignment with Hollywood in her efforts to establish herself in the Hollywood industry. Jing’s investment in action stunts can be considered a strategic, compensative move for particularly Asian action stars when their proficiency in English poses an obstacle to their career (Yu, 2014, p. 147). Characteristic of transnational Chinese action stars, the display of their exceptional martial arts prowess serves as the predominant pathway to penetrate the Hollywood film market.
and validate their status as action stars. Stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li attained international stardom in Hollywood by crafting and showcasing their distinctive, personalised martial arts styles on screen (Yu, 2012b, p. 62; Funnell, 2013, p. 122).

However, Jing’s resemblance to a physical strong female warrior and her execution of action stunts tended to escape notice in Western critical reviews. Instead, in these reviews, the focus tended to centre on her feminine beauty (e.g. ‘gorgeous’ by Fetters, 2017; ‘photogenic’ by Turan, 2017; ‘comely’ by Zacharek, 2017). First, this skewed focus may be attributed to the generic expectation of a postfeminist girl hero, where her appearance takes precedence over her actions. Second, as the film centralises Damon’s stardom and character, Jing’s presence is relegated to secondary importance. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the film does not allocate enough screen time for her to showcase her action stunts. Jing’s action stunts are limited to just three scenes, comprising two to three minutes of screen time. Throughout the remainder of the film, her character is predominantly engaged in dramatic scenes rather than action combat sequences. Consequently, in the sparse number of reviews that did comment on her
acting, the focus was primarily on accusations of her being wooden, expressionless, and inept at performing in English. This not only marginalises her physical performance, but also adversely impacts on her image as a performer, which further diminishes the possibility of her developing a career in Hollywood.

Furthermore, after the film’s release in the US, mainstream American media seemed to largely overlook her response to the criticism regarding her performance in *The Great Wall*. The evidence of Jing’s own narrative of her acting, however, can be found in her interviews with Chinese media. For instance, considering herself to have met the director’s requirement for ‘acting with restraint’, Jing stated that she could sense that she conveyed those subtle emotions through her eyes and expressions, which, in turn, gave her great satisfaction (quoted in Lü, 2016a). In other interviews, she also mentioned the rigorous physical training and dieting she underwent, as well as the considerable time and effort she invested to secure the role in *The Great Wall* (e.g. Felicia, 2016; Lü, 2016b; Cheng, 2017). The media coverage in China surrounding her own reflection on her onscreen performance and her own construction of a hard-working image associated with her role suggests that Jing was able to exert her agency as a star within the Chinese context to negotiate the criticism regarding her performance. Occasionally, her interviews in relation to her performance in *The Great Wall* appeared in English-language media outlets, such as the Singapore-based *The Straits Times* (Yee, 2017), during the film’s promotional period. In this interview, when asked whether she hoped to be the next big action star, Jing revealed that ‘I hope I don’t get typecast as an action star because it’s too tough. I had so much fun doing the stunts for *The Great Wall*, but sometimes, you just want to take a break from all of that. Directors, please offer me more dramatic roles in the future’ (quoted in Yee, 2017). Jing’s statement functioned as a self-disclosure of her significant investment in action stunts for her role, so much so that she ‘want[ed] to take a break’. Her interviews which highlighted the ‘action’ elements in her role can be considered examples of the star navigating the negative comments on her ‘wooden’ performance in the dramatic scenes in reception. By contrast, such media coverage in relation to Jing’s own
narrative of her acting and hard work associated with the role in the American context was scarce.

As such, while Jing is seemingly given ample screen time to perform, her performative agency is constrained by the character’s lack of complexity and the casting requirements that prioritise the interests of the Hollywood industry. These limitations ultimately stem from the structural disadvantage of the Chinese film industry in this collaborative project with Hollywood. Therefore, Jing’s perceived failure of establishing herself as a transnational star in Hollywood though acting cannot be attributed to her own inability. Rather, she, as well as the way her acting labour is exploited, is negatively impacted by the broader industrial negotiations between Hollywood and China, where Hollywood maintains a dominant position.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored Jing’s transnational performance and framed her situation as being caught between East and West. As one of the few Chinese female stars who plays no perfunctory role in Hollywood blockbusters in the 2010s, Jing’s screen acting provides great value in unravelling transnational performances that straddle two cultures and the status of transnational Chinese acting labour in the Hollywood system. I have explored how her screen acting is caught between the minimalist and naturalistic acting styles and negatively impacted by Damon’s star performance and the issues of *mise-en-scène* in filmic terms. Also, I have situated her acting labour in the industry and discovered how her performative agency is constrained by Hollywood’s exclusionary practices on foreign talent. Of representative value, *The Great Wall* tests the waters for Sino-Hollywood collaboration. Jing, in a similar fashion, tests the waters for transnational Chinese acting talents who aspire to enter in the Hollywood film industry.
Given Hollywood’s lack of interest in assimilating her in its own industry structure and the predominantly negative publicity surrounding her careers in Huallywood and Hollywood, there appears to be a pressing need for the star to employ an alternative approach to attain popular acclaim in the Chinese public. In the next chapter, I will explore how Jing actively navigates her star image and responds to the negative reception in the Chinese public as a celebrity figure through one of China’s most popular and influential social media platforms Weibo.
Chapter 7 From the transnational to national: Jing Tian’s celebrity practices on Weibo

Introduction

While Jing faced heightened criticism for her presence in The Great Wall when the film was released in December 2016 in China, her domestic fame began to turn around during this time. Noticeably, she appeared to gain increasing popular acclaim among the Chinese public after her self-recorded video on social media demonstrating how she washes her face became viral online in February 2017. Interestingly, it was not through cinema, which was once regarded as ‘the ultimate confirmation of stardom’ (Gledhill, 1991, p. xi), but rather through an extra-cinematic pathway, social media, that Jing attained popular acclaim among the Chinese public. Also, it was not through her status as an actress, domains associated with professional and public sphere, but rather through her status as a celebrity, a realm entwined with private life and leisure, that she achieved popularity and recognition within domestic media environment. Jing’s celebrity presents an interesting case regarding the way in which social media functions as an effective tool for (female) stars to manage their star image and career.

In this chapter, I will explore the way in which Jing navigates her star image and persona away from the cinema screen and how this has enabled her to achieve celebrity status. I will examine her ‘celebrity practices’ (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 141), a term I will return to later, by contextualising her performative labour on the Chinese social media platform Weibo (which I will provide further background information in the following paragraphs) within the broader media environment which has shaped her public image in China, as well as the Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s that have impacted her persona and career movements. I see her as a performative agent and investigate how she exercises her agency to navigate and negotiate within these broader cultural and industry dynamics that often work against
her. I will survey her celebrity practices on Weibo between 2011 and 2021 and explore how (the change of) her self-presentation contributes to shaping her star image and reception in China. While doing so, I pay close attention to two pivotal events where she (re)gained celebrity status: a) the face-washing video post that played a crucial role in redressing her notoriety and establishing an offscreen image that resonated with the Chinese public, and b) the promotional posts in relation to her role in the net drama *Rattan* (2021), wherein she merged herself with (and into) her character, Si Teng, and established a persona that was embraced by a home audience. In the main, this chapter will argue that Weibo provides a pathway through which Jing is enabled to proactively respond to her domestic reception and strategically (re)construct her star image beyond the confines of cinematic realm.

Before embarking on an analysis of Jing’s performative labour on Weibo, it is necessary to capture the specificity of the platform as a form of national social media. Weibo, which means microblog in English, stands as one of the mainstream social media platforms in China. It was first launched by Sina Corporation in August 2009, subsequently followed by other Chinese media giants NetEase (January 2010), Sohu (April 2010) and Tencent (April 2010). However, the general adoption of Weibo in contemporary China refers particularly to the microblogging service provided by Sina Corporation. First, Sina is recognised as the pioneer company that developed the microblogging platform and has utilised the URL address ‘weibo.com’ since as early as 2011 (Sina Tech, 2011). Second, despite competition among the abovementioned media giants, Sina Weibo firmly and quickly established its dominance. According to China Internet Network Information Center’s (CNNIC) semi-annual report published in July 2015, following two years of brand competition in the microblogging field, NetEase, Sohu and Tencent decreased their investment in their own weibo services in 2013 (2015, pp. 37-38). Within another two years, Sina Weibo cemented its industrial position as the largest microblogging operator in 2015, capturing 69.4 percent of users, which marked the company’s eventual triumph (CNNIC, 2015, pp. 37-38). The Weibo this chapter explores refers to Sina’s microblogging platform.
Weibo’s emergence and rapid, unencumbered growth in the domestic market are, to a large extent, indebted to the regulatory environment enforced by the Chinese government on the Internet. Recognising the Internet’s potential as a powerful medium, the Chinese government established a robust firewall to restrict websites that could ‘pose a threat to the stability of the general society or the authority of the central government’ (Wu, 2017, p. 66). Consequently, national social media platforms flourished, benefiting from the blocking of Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and later Instagram. Weibo filled the void left by the absence of a microblogging service after the government’s ban on Twitter in July 2009 (Bamman, O’Connor, and Smith, 2012, p. 1). The firewall also impacted on Chinese celebrities’ adoption of social media, with Weibo emerging as their primary option of social media engagement.

Beginning as a localised Chinese replica and replacement for Twitter, Weibo shares many similar characteristics with this US microblogging platform in terms of its function and operation. Although since its inception Weibo has experienced several updates and developed its own unique features, basic functions relevant to stars’ social media performances such as posting and reposting (plain texts, images, and videos), commenting, liking, following, and the real-time trending list ‘hot search’ (‘resou’) remain core features akin to Twitter. However, Weibo distinguishes itself with its greater capacity for content within a singular post, or a ‘weibo’. A weibo can accommodate a maximum of 2,000 Chinese characters (equivalent to 4,000 English letters since January 2016), 18 photos (previously 9 photos prior to October 2019), and a 15-minute video if uploaded from a local server (with no restrictions on length if the source already exists on the Internet). To an extent, Weibo resembles a composite of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Without a doubt, Weibo offers stars an original online space and a mode of freedom to present and promote themselves on the platform by conveying a large amount of information across different formats within a single post.
In addition to its technical features and functionalities, it is crucial to recognise Weibo’s status as a national social media platform when analysing Jing’s celebrity performances on it. First, while Western social media platforms can be accessed via VPN (Virtual Private Network), the presence of firewall renders Weibo a readily accessible microblogging option for Chinese users. Second, despite Weibo’s accessibility beyond borders, the dominance of Western social media platforms in the global market has rendered Weibo a less appealing choice for users from other countries, particularly those in the West. As such, while Weibo aligns with the grand narrative of social media’s promised global connectivity, its primary user base consists of Chinese nationals and individuals residing in China. Paradoxically, while as a social media platform Weibo should in theory eliminate national boundaries in the production of celebrity (see Driessens, 2018, p. 245), it provides a mode of ‘disconnected connectivity’ that firmly ties Chinese stars to a Chinese audience, with its reach and impact confined within the national border and rarely extending beyond it. The national sense of Weibo invariably establishes the parameters of Jing’s performances, dictating to whom she performs, what she performs, and how she performs. It is against this backdrop that her celebrity practices on Weibo are examined.

Jing joined Weibo on 28 August 2009 shortly after the platform’s launch. As of 31 May 2022, she has posted a total of 1,980 weibos, indicating her frequent visits to, and her enduring relationship with the platform. For the analytical purpose of this chapter, I will take into account her historical posts spanning from her first weibo (26 February 2012) to the last promotional post in relation to her character Si Teng (5 April 2021). Having surveyed the gamut of Jing’s posts during this time, I have classified them into 6 main themes: a) sharing behind-the-scenes moments and presenting a workaholic/
hardworking persona; b) promoting films and television dramas; c) sharing her private life, including details that reveal her lifestyle and personality as well as providing backstage access to information such as her relationship status, family, and friends; d) endorsing products; e) participating in or initiating philanthropic projects; and f) expressing patriotic sentiments in response to posts composed by the Party or government bodies. While all these aspects collectively construct her star image and play a role in shaping her reception in the Chinese public, I will focus on the three themes – a, b, and c – which are most relevant to her ongoing management of (the negative reception of) her persona associated with Huallywood and Hollywood and her attainment of celebrity status. I will conduct a discursive analysis of the content, tone, and function of her posts and unravel how her strategised employment of Weibo has contributed to her popular acclaim in both 2017 and 2021.

7.1 Social media and stardom: A new way to the production and maintenance of celebrity

The widespread popularity and adoption of social media since the late 2000s has arguably changed the ways in which stars have been produced, circulated, and consumed. Over the past ten to fifteen years, star studies scholars have increasingly recognised and explored the relationship between social media and celebrity. Broadly, the critical discussion has concentrated on two interrelated themes: the microcelebrity phenomenon, which relates to how social media serves as a pathway to the production of celebrity; and the impact of social media impact on the management of stardom, which involves how it functions in the maintenance of celebrity status. To understand how Jing leverages Weibo to manage her star image and attain celebrity status, it is necessary to tease out the role social media plays in the creation and maintenance of stardom.

The microcelebrity phenomenon is indebted to the user agency enabled by Web 2.0.
The technology offers a ‘social element’ that allows users to generate and distribute content and therefore encourages ‘participation, creativity and interactivity on the web as a whole’ (Creeber and Martin, 2009, pp. 3-4). This participatory and interactive property of Web 2.0 led to an identity shift of the Internet users from an assumed passive information receiver to a more visible active content producer and sharer. Consequently, this provides a pathway for ordinary people to obtain (online) celebrity status, fostering a demotic turn of celebrity (Turner, 2014, p. 92). Often referred to as the microcelebrity, these ordinary people ‘amp up’ their popularity online through performances in video, blogs, and social networking sites (Senft, 2008, p. 25). Building on Senft’s work, Marwick and boyd (2011) further conceptualise the microcelebrity as ‘a mindset and a set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others’ (p. 140). In this sense, the idea of celebrity in the term microcelebrity is not a fixed set of personal attributes or external labels, but rather ‘an organic and ever-changing performative practice’ (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 140, emphasis in original). Given this, as some scholars argue, the microcelebrity phenomenon is not elicited by the media technology per se, but by the neoliberal individualistic ideology that encourages the (edited) presentation of self (Marwick, 2013, p. 192; Williamson, 2016, pp. 115-116; Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017, pp. 191-192). Then, microcelebrity is an ideology where individuals perceive themselves as celebrities and behave accordingly, and social media merely serves as facilitators that extend this access to stardom to ordinary people. Through manipulating the interactive and presentational features on social media, they can practise celebrity to achieve celebrity status.

Through viewing celebrity as a performative practice, social media can be seen as a new avenue for established stars emerging from traditional pathways such as film and television to manage and maintain their celebrity. P. David Marshall (2010) observed a changed media culture from the era of dominance by representational media to what he terms presentational media (p. 38). While the representational media such as film,
television, radio, and the press continue to produce and shape the structures of media culture, they appear to be less profound and less ubiquitous in their influence than the presentational media such as social network sites (Marshall, 2010, p. 38). This changed media culture impacts the way traditional celebrities are (re)presented. Owing to its presentational nature, social media enables an authored voice of stars where the traditional intermediaries are seemingly erased, and thus stars, by posting content on their own social media account, appear to be the primary agent that actively constructs and manages their image and identity. In this sense, as Muntean and Petersen (2009) note, ‘[social media] emerges as the privileged channel to the star him/herself’ (n. p.).

As both microcelebrities and traditional stars employ social media to attaining and/or maintaining celebrity, their strategies and behavioural patterns bear similarities to each other. For example, the performance of intimacy and authenticity have been adopted by both microcelebrities and traditional stars to cement their celebrity status (see Marwick and boyd, 2011). However, traditional stars’ employment of social media is in fact more diverse and heterogenous. As Sarah Thomas observes,

[s]ome of the diversifications of star representation on [social media] revel in achieving levels of ‘authenticity’, ‘ordinariness’ and ‘closeness’, while others don’t. Some obscure the performative practices of celebrity and self-representation, while others display it. Some emphasise the object-product status of celebrities, and others downplay the need for consumerism. Some strive towards interactivity, while others favour a broadcast model (2014, p. 243).

Stars’ different approaches to social media reflect their disparate interests in their construction of persona and their self-positioning in the industry, even for those stars who shy away from social media. Notably, for certain Hollywood A-listers, their absence from social media signals an ‘aura of distance’, making they appear ‘elusive and extraordinary, “knowable” only through gossip and traditional mediation’
It is a type of image construct that harks back to the classical Hollywood stardom where stars were seen as mythical, unattainable figures (Thomas, 2014, p. 245). Likewise, the stars who embrace social media and their varying behaviours and presentations of the self on these platforms also reveal varying intentions in constructing their image. It makes stars’ social media account a valuable site to investigate into the ways in which they manage “(online) image, identity and “reality”” (Thomas, 2014, p. 243).

While not all stars’ management of their image and identity directs at self-promotion, social media’s connection to the creation of celebrity often suggests a potential for such promotion. As ‘star images are always extensive, multimedia, [and] intertextual’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 3), social media’s convergent nature emerges as a useful aid for the star in consolidating various forms of star texts that scatter across media such as film, television, news, magazines, and the Internet onto a single platform. With the agency to collect, filter, and display (some of) the star texts on their own social media account, stars are provided with a comprehensive virtual site for self-promotion. Here, viewers and social media users engage with, and disseminate, these texts to a significant broader audience, potentially resulting in headlines on the trending list, which eventually increase stars’ visibility. Drawing upon the knowledge of convergence, Internet studies, star studies and the social and structural implications of connection, Elizabeth Ellcessor (2012) proposed ‘the star text of connection’ to critically examine the way in which the star Felicia Day harnessed the power of Twitter to brand herself as a subcultural star. Ellcessor argues that ‘the star text’ in this notion is ‘not merely a product of convergence, but an agent of further convergences, facilitating connections between various media platforms, texts, audiences, and industries’ (2012, p. 53, emphasis in original). In this way, the star on social media promotes (as an active agent), and is promoted (as images and identities), in an unprecedented way where s/he acts as a ‘uniting force’ (Ellcessor, 2012, p. 53).

In summation, traditional stars derive advantages from social media in two principal
ways: firstly, through the agency social media affords users; and secondly, through social media’s capacity for converging star texts. Social media provides stars with direct access to engage in the management of their image and identity; and it serves as a platform where they can gather a diverse array of texts and strategically display themselves on their account for self-promotion. Many empirical case studies have explored social media’s workings and value associated with stardom through looking at stars from diverse professions, at various stages of their careers, and with differing levels of celebrity status. For instance, the Hollywood A-lister Dwayne Johnson’s adept use of social media bolstered his wrestling persona and contributed to his career success in the Hollywood film industry (Ward, 2019). The ageing action star Sylvester Stallone employed social media to challenge perceptions of his redundancy (McKenna, 2019). The Danish singer Medina leveraged Instagram selfies to promote her celebrity persona and maintain star-fan relationship (Jeslev and Mortensen, 2016). The ‘Sadsters’, comprised of B-list celebrity participants, turned to YouTube to seek microcelebrity status (Ingleton, 2014). These case studies, along with others, not only showcase the agency of stars and their labour of managing their public image, but also indicate their negotiations with both the industry and the public/audiences.

In a Chinese context, there is a growing body of research work exploring how social media serves as a pathway to induce fame and produce celebrities and how its functionalities have been harnessed to maintain celebrity. However, there appears to be a disproportionate focus on the Internet celebrity (microcelebrity). From I. D. Roberts’s (2010) examination of the Internet phenomenon Furong Jiejie as the first generation of Internet celebrities, to the increasing attention paid to wanghong (the vernacular Chinese term for Internet celebrity emerging from social media) in recent years (for example, Abidin, 2018; Xu and Zhao, 2019; Zhang and De Seta, 2019; Craig, Lin and Cunningham, 2021; Han, 2021), scholarly interest seems to primarily centre around investigating these newcomers as a sociocultural phenomenon, as well as how they have changed the landscape of China’s celebrity culture, whereas the employment of social media by traditional stars has received little attention. Shaohua
Guo’s (2023, p. 524) article, which discusses the manner in which Zhang Ziyi utilises Weibo to recalibrate her stardom by presenting herself as a ‘good wife and virtuous mother’, was one of the few examples that addresses Chinese stars’ use of social media.

Thus, I acknowledge that whilst this chapter’s focus is on a Chinese social media platform and a Chinese star, much of the research literature drawn on above is derived from a Western perspective, in the sense that the platforms they analyse are Western, as well as the examples of stars they reference are also Western. However, the crux does not lie within the social media platforms themselves, as they essentially serve as comparable tools with different names and service providers. Whether it is Twitter or Weibo, these platforms offer largely universal functions that stars can employ to manage their images and identities. Rather, the key aspect is the specific context in which stars’ employment of social media is situated, including the celebrity culture, the industry dynamics, and the audience. Having identified how social media serves as a pathway for creation and maintenance of celebrity, I will now analyse Jing’s celebrity practices on Weibo.

7.2 Performing an authentic self: From a transnational construct to a familiar girl next door

Between 2011 and 2016, Jing’s authenticity was constantly called into question, sparking an intense tug-of-war between the star and the Chinese public regarding her ‘real’ identity. On the one hand, the Chinese public believed that she secured leading roles in large budget productions through industrial connections (through a neoliberalistic, gendered lens, see Chapter 4). On the other hand, she claimed to be an ordinary girl plucked from obscurity who secured those roles through hard work and luck (e.g. Wang, 2011; Sun, 2012; Chen, 2013; Liu, 2013; Chen, 2016). Jing’s notoriety during this time arose as a consequence of the unresolved contradiction between her own narrative of ordinariness and the public’s perception of her well-
connectedness. In a way, the public’s perception of her as an inauthentic star was the central issue that hindered her from attaining popular acclaim. In this section, I will explore her self-presentation on Weibo through the framework of authenticity in the realm of social media. I will focus on how (in)authenticity is played out through her celebrity practices on Weibo as she navigates her image associated with Huallywood and Hollywood and responds to the negative reception in the Chinese public through transforming from a transnational construct to a girl-next-door image that aligns with her narrative of ordinariness.

The significance of authenticity for stardom was addressed by Richard Dyer (1991, p. 137). He states that authenticity is what

we demand of a star if we accept her or him in the spirit in which she or he is offered. […] [i]t is the star’s really seeming to be what she/he is supposed to be that secure his/her star status, “star quality” or charisma. Authenticity is both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies (such as girl-next-door-ness, etc.). It is this effect of authenticating authenticity that gives the star charisma […]’ (Dyer, 1991, p. 137).

For Dyer, authenticity is regarded both as a quality and a function; it represents a set of qualities of being real, and it serves as a function that enables other qualities to be perceived as real (1991, p. 137). In a representational media culture, the authenticity of a star operates in a way that is revealed. As a product of capitalist consumerism, stars are widely acknowledged as manufactured and promoted by the studios, publicists and agents (Dyer, 1991, p. 139). Consequently, the star (as text) circulated from the anterior star system is perceived as tainted with artificiality (Dyer, 1991, p. 139). On the other hand, the star (as the real person) captured by the posterior channels, such as paparazzi, gossip columns, scandal magazines, unauthorised biographies, candid camera photojournalism, tends to display a higher level of
authenticity, unearthing a piece of fragmented ‘truth’ of who the star really is (Dyer, 1991, p. 140). Whilst these traditional ways continue to exist and play a part in revealing certain reality in a star in contemporary times, the rise of social media has reinvigorated discussions around celebrity and authenticity for the new mode of interaction. With stars’ adoption of social media, these pieces of reality can now be disclosed by themselves. However, the act of posting to the public introduces a paradox to authenticity, because in so doing ‘rather than authenticity being something that is produced of one’s own will or intention, it [becomes] an act of co-creation between user and audience’ (Taylor, 2022, p. 8). In this sense, since stars choose what parts of the life they want to reveal on social media, the revelation in effect becomes a ‘public private self’ (Marshall, 2010, pp. 44-45) where their authenticity relies on how this ‘reality’ is performed. Then, different from how authenticity operates in a representational media culture, a star’s authenticity on social media operates in a way that is achieved.

The authenticity of a star on social media is achieved through two layers. The first layer, and also the fundamental layer, is that a star’s identity is genuine or real. In an online environment where identities cannot be completely substantiated, the identification of ‘I am who I said I am’ or ‘I am who you believe me to be’ becomes pivotal. The implementation of a verification system ensures the identity associated with a star’s account is authentic. On Weibo specifically, a verified account is distinguished by a yellow ‘V’ logo next to the star’s profile picture, indicating that the account belongs to the actual star and not an imposter. Moreover, since the emergence of Weibo, celebrities have been utilised as a business strategy to promote the platform; with their employment of the platform, the company was enabled to differentiate products and attract users (Zhang and Negro, 2013, p. 201). As such, the authentic identity of a star on Weibo is almost taken as a given. Although the verified account status does not provide definitive confirmation of the star’s personal involvement, it significantly limits the potential operators of the account to either the star themselves or their authorised representatives. The second layer involves the performative aspect of authenticity,
which revolves around the notions of ‘I am what I said I am’ or ‘I am what you believe me to be’. It is about the star’s performative labour invested in crafting specific posts to achieve authenticity.

Similar to how authenticity is ‘revealed’ in a representational culture, granting audiences backstage access serves as a way of bolstering the authenticity of the star on social media. However, this practice of presenting the private self is challenged by social media-led context collapse, a phenomenon typified as ‘the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients’ (Vitak, 2012, p. 451). While the collapse of context facilitates communication and interaction between diverse audience groups, it also generates tensions regarding the self-presentation across different audiences (Vitak, 2012, p. 452). For stars, the collapse of context challenges the context-based frontstage and backstage performances (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 144), consequently undermining the authenticity of posts about their backstage, ‘real’ selves. In an online environment where regular users, fans, anti-fans, celebrities, and intermediaries coexist, the behaviour of stars becomes self-consciously more circumspect, leading to a potentially more performative display of self. Additionally, since stars post selective content they intend to share, the ‘reality’ has a performative effect that serves to constructing a certain identity.

The backstage-granting approach was reflected in Jing’s early posts during her Huallywood years, where she shared the behind-the-scenes moments and personal reflections related to her work, as well as social gatherings from her private sphere. For example, she shared a photo from behind the scenes of the film Special ID, expressing her excitement about performing a dangerous action stunt on the roof of a car (‘They say that you should at least do one crazy thing in your life! I’ve had a pretty crazy couple of days recently!!!!!! How satisfying!!!!!! […]’: 26 April 2012). She also shared a personal perception related to her work (‘I had such an exhausting day! Everyone’s completely worn out! It is a really, really tough job to make a visually
In the next few years as her career extended to Hollywood, Jing’s self-presentation on Weibo continued to reinforce a transnational construct, which engaged with her positionality in (Hu)ollywood and Hollywood. Her posts not only featured behind-the-scenes glimpses of the film projects she was involved in but also included selfies and group pictures with internationally renowned stars. For example, she posted several photos featuring herself with the main cast of The Great Wall, including Matt Damon and Pedro Pascal (‘We headed downtown for a meal this weekend and had a great time [...]’: 11 April 2015; ‘It’s the first time we meet without costumes, [I’m] excited [...]’: 2 July 2015; ‘Just finished off my work in New York [...]’: 10 October 2016), pop singer Rihanna (‘Riri [sic] says she’s going to watch The Great Wall [...]’: 3 October 2015), the main cast of Kong: Skull Island, including Tom Hiddleston (‘[...] happy birthday to our dancing king Dousen [Hiddleston] [...]’: 9 February 2016), Brie Larson
‘Congrats to Brie for winning Best Actress at the Oscars […]’: 29 February 2016), and Samuel Jackson (‘Congrats to Sam for wrapping filming his part! [...] It’s been a great honour to work with him, and I’ve learnt a lot […]’: 4 March 2016), as well as Orlando Bloom (‘Looking forward to working [with him]! Elf prince is so adorable!’: 18 June 2016). These selfies and group pictures, resonating with her career trajectory from China to Hollywood, exuded a strong sense of transnationalism. These posts positioned her within a quasi-Western context surrounded by Hollywood stars, creating a strong sense that she ‘entered’ Hollywood. Beyond working with these stars in film projects, she also ‘expanded’ her network in the West, as evidenced by her picture with Rihanna. Yet, while the transnational construct in her off-screen image mirrors her association with Hollywood cinema, it continued to be discordant with her own narrative of ordinariness. It further alienated her from a home audience, leading to an increased sense of her inauthenticity.

Moreover, Weibo’s status as a national social media platform reinforces the artifactuality of the transnational element in these posts. Characterised by connectivity, social media encourages phatic communication. As P. David Marshall (2010) notes, within a presentational media culture, we present an ‘intercommunicative self’ on social media through ‘a multi-layered form of communication’ that ‘kneads mediated forms with communication’, ‘allows photos to be the starting-point for reactions and discussions’, and ‘produces […] very simplistic and phatic forms of communication that invite response’ (p. 42, my emphasis). For celebrities on social media, this phatic communication extends beyond interactions with their fans (see Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016) to include the interpersonal communication among celebrities themselves. For celebrities, this phatic communication extends from their fans (see Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016) to include celebrities’ interpersonal communications. Thus, celebrities’ phatic posts involving other celebrities not only encourage responses from fans, but also entail a desire to connect with other celebrities, and at times they may further indicate the real relationship between celebrities in private (see the Johnson/Diesel rivalry in Ward,
2019, pp. 485-486). From this perspective, given Weibo’s disconnected connectivity, a national platform that precludes, however involuntarily, global connection, Jing’s posts on Weibo do not, and cannot, establish phatic communication with Hollywood stars. As a result, these posts with Hollywood stars were highly performative and served to reinforce her transnational image.

To better illustrate my point, I take one specific post featuring Jing alongside Brie Larson and Tom Hiddleston in a selfie and a group picture as an example (see Figure 7.1). The weibo was posted a day after Larson won the Oscars for Best Actress, within which Jing extended her congratulation to Larson. She wrote, ‘Congratulations to our fellow Brie for winning the Best Actress at the Oscars!! [...] The Kong squad is sending our best wishes from Vietnam[..] We’ll celebrate with champagne when you return! [...] You’re magnificent, so proud of you!!! [...] PS: Dou Sir [Hiddleston] you want to bite us[?]~ [...]’ (29 February 2016). Generally, the caption conveys an upbeat, celebratory tone, complemented by a bantering description of Hiddleston’s posture. In both pictures, Jing and Larson exhibit closeness as their bodies nestle closely together. Larson wears a bright smile as she leans her head against Jing’s, with her arms wrapping around Jing’s shoulders. Meanwhile, in the second picture, Hiddleston stands at the rear, arms flailing in the air, with his mouth agape in a whimsical, wacky expression. Together, the post shows a close and harmonious relationship between the actors, evoking a joyful off-work ambiance. Furthermore, in the pictures, it is Larson who demonstrates warmth towards Jing. It suggests that Jing is perceived as an endearing figure, who seamlessly integrates into the cast of a Hollywood film project as a transnational actor. However, the social media platform Weibo Jing chose to post this content incurred a problem of interaction. Jing’s direct address of both stars as ‘you’ extended a phatic gesture to them, indicating her desire to establish a connection with Hiddleston and Larson. Yet neither Larson nor Hiddleston were not on Weibo at that time, and thus they could not see or respond to her post.  

34 As of 31 May 2022, Brie Larson does not have a Weibo account. There is a zombie account @BLarson, but apart from the verification, no posts indicate the star’s involvement. Tom Hiddleston, on the other hand, joined
communication she extended to both stars is rendered meaningless. In this sense, Jing’s content was highly performative and served to reinforce her transnational image.

Figure 7.1 Jing Tian’s Weibo post featuring Brie Larson and Tom Hiddleston (29 February 2016)

Jing’s self-presentation on Weibo during this period of time (2011-2016) constructs and reinforces a transnational star image off screen, which responds to her own careers within, and image associated with, the transnational elements in Huallywood and Hollywood cinemas. However, this transnational off-screen image poses a challenge to her own narrative of ordinariness, making her an inauthentic star in the eyes of the Chinese public. To stabilise her stardom in the domestic market, Jing had to resolve the incongruence between her ordinariness and transnational-ness. As I have discussed in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, the transnational persona in association with Huallywood and Hollywood cinemas was both poorly received by the Chinese public. For Jing, it appears that to gain celebrity status in China, she must sever the tie with her transnational-ness.

Weibo on 22 February 2017.
Around February 2017, Jing constructed a familiar girl-next-door image that runs parallel with her own narrative of ordinariness and authenticated this image through Weibo. Subsequently, this girl-next-door image has contributed to her attainment of celebrity status in the Chinese public. The crucial event that facilitated this image was her self-recorded video demonstrating how she washes her face. This 6-minute video went viral on Weibo, sparking a hot search under ‘#JingTian Xilian#’ (Jing Tian face-washing) that drew 33 million views and 66 thousand online discussions (Weibo, 2024a). It was often cited by Jing herself as the moment she gained celebrity status; she highlighted the irony that her celebrity did not stem from her hard work as an actor, but rather from a low-cost, effortless, and impromptu face-washing video (see, for example, Jing’s interviews with *Esquire* [Anon., July 2017], *L’officiel* [Mi, November 2017], *Harper’s Bazaar*, [Yang, February 2018], *Marie Claire* [Ruo, June 2018], and *L’officiel* [An, August, 2021]). Given the significance of this video, I will take it as the main subject of observation, examining how Jing performs ordinariness in the video and in this process how she employs authenticity as a crucial marker to authenticate her presentation of ordinariness.

Before my analysis, it is important to acknowledge the function of Jing’s personal studio Weibo account JingTianStudio in this process of celebrification. More broadly, the creation of her personal studio’s Weibo account, an account that has begun posting Jing’s promotional materials since 30 September 2016, represents a turning point that marks Jing’s strategic employment of the platform as a method of self-promotion. While it is not uncommon for Chinese stars to establish personal studios for the purpose of tax shelter and gain more autonomy in managing their career apart from their representative agencies (Song and Yuan, 2021), the online presence of a star’s studio primarily serves for promotion and publicity, often managed by publicists.

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35 Unlike Twitter, Weibo employs two hash symbols before and after the text to generate a hashtag.
36 In China, if a star pays taxes as an individual (under the category of ‘individual income’), the tax rate can reach 45 percent on a progressive basis. However, if s/he pays taxes through a studio (‘independent business’), the tax rate can range between 5 to 35 percent. Since the star’s income is typically substantial, registering a studio can serve as a means of ethically managing tax obligations (Song and Yuan, 2021).
The emergence of JingTianStudio as a separate entity from, yet allied with the star, as I will demonstrate, helps Jing to not only eschew a direct, excessive use of her own account as a form of self-promotion but also achieve authenticity through creating an illusion of revealing.

The face-washing video was posted by JingTianStudio (Weibo, 20 February 2017) and reposted by herself afterwards (JingTian, Weibo, 21 February 2017). In this process of celebrification, JingTianStudio plays a key role in reshaping the star’s presentation of her ‘public private self’. To recall Marshall’s (2010) point, since stars select what aspect of their private life to share, the authenticity of backstage access is compromised (p. 44). Here, by personifying the studio as an active agent that manages a Weibo account to promote her and shares content in relation to her private self, Jing’s active act of ‘granting backstage access’ (an act of self-disclosure) is transformed into a passive mode of ‘being disclosed’ (an illusion of revealing). In this way, the staff who operates the studio account ‘enters’ Jing’s private life as an observer and posts this face-washing video as a ‘revealer’. This offers a third-person narrative perspective: we see what the staff sees, rather than what the star wants us to see. It operates under the premise of ‘revealing’ rather than ‘presenting’, even though the star and her staff’s interests are in fact aligned. The purpose of posting on the account JingTianStudio is to create an illusion of revealing. Thus, rather than an ‘effortless’ video, or a fortuitous occurrence in how production of celebrity operates differently for Jing, it is a strategised promotion orchestrated by Jing and her staff. This approach leverages the mechanisms of authenticity on social media, which eventually leads to the celebrification of her ordinariness.

As the video is posted on JingTianStudio, there is no need to conceal its promotional intention. The caption was written with a playful tone: ‘#JingTian# Super bonus – Let me share an exclusive video of Tiantian’s secret face-washing knack [doge emoji] All these years we’ve been washing our faces wrong [petrified face emoji] [smirky face emoji]’ (20 February 2017, see Figure 7.2). The statement itself contains evident cues
regarding the promotion of the star. The star’s name is incorporated in a hashtag, accompanied by words such as ‘bonus’, ‘exclusive’, and ‘secret’ to enhance its appeal. In addition, the theme of ‘face-washing’, a mundane daily ritual, serves as a striking contrast, raising the audiences’ curiosity about how they may have done it wrong. Although the post does not specifically target a particular audience (as indicated by the inclusive use of ‘we’, encompassing individuals from various backgrounds), the repeated use of Jing’s first name ‘Tiantian’ signals intimacy and closeness, a strategy that fosters a bond between the star and (potential) fans. As Jing is revealed in this post, the face-washing video that audiences see, although promotional in nature, represents Jing’s staff’s privileged access to the star’s backstage life.

Figure 7.2 The face-washing video posted by JingTianStudio on Weibo (20 February 2017)

The intention behind recording and (re)uploading this video on Weibo also suggests a promotional purpose. It was reported that, 9 months later after it went viral online, the video was requested by a group of entertainment journalists on WeChat (Mi, L’officiel, November 2017). Jing confessed in an interview with L’officiel that it was recorded for them in a WeChat group chat regarding the marketing campaigns of her latest television drama, The Glory of Tang Dynasty (aired in January 2017), while she
was in Australia shooting *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (quoted in Mi, November 2017). Some journalists in this group engaged in casual conversation with her, which sparked their curiosity about how she washes her face to maintain such a good skin condition (Jing, quoted in Mi, *L’Officiel*, November 2017). Regardless of whether this request was indeed made, the act of reposting on Weibo suggests an intention to reach a broader audience. Then, using the account JingTianStudio to post mitigates the sense of self-promotion, while simultaneously fulfilling the promised backstage access for audiences. Nevertheless, the crux remains how Jing performs ordinariness in this video and how she employs authenticity as a crucial marker to authenticate her presentation of ordinariness. In my following analysis, I focus on how the sense of authenticity is created through an array of prepared and unprepared ‘signals’ (Marwick and boyd 2011, p. 149) in the video. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to how visual, contextual, behavioural, and discursive elements signal authenticity, as well as how Jing establishes a connection between these signals and her display of ordinariness.

As markers of authenticity indicate ‘lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy’ (Dyer, 1991, p. 141), Jing’s choice of location, the environment, the filming angle, and herself in this video collectively foster a sense of authenticity in visual terms (see Figure 7.2). This video is filmed in a bathroom, a private place in contrast to the public areas, notably serving as a backstage location inaccessible to the public. In addition to this, it appears to be a functional bathroom lacking luxurious décor. The bathroom door is equipped with two hooks, serving a functional feature for hanging towels. The colour scheme predominantly consists of beige and white tones, with horizontal stripe-shaped black tiles spanning across the wall. An access panel on the ceiling is visible in the frame. On Jing’s left, there appears to be a compact shower enclosure which does not occupy much space. On her right, the overhead lighting seems to be one of the two lighting sources in the room, while the other one within the shower remains turned off. The monochromatic white lighting primarily serves the function of illumination, rather than ambiance creation. Additionally, based on the positioning of the overhead lighting, it can be inferred that the bathroom is of moderate size. All
these features of the bathroom collectively suggest its emphasis on function and practicality. This bathroom environment presents a stark contrast to the capitalist cultural perception of ‘being a star’. The extravagant lifestyle of a star that represents ‘the values of the consumer economy’ (McDonald, 2000, p. 32) is notably absent in Jing’s private life, or at least when she is on travel (as indicated in the interview, she was in Australia shooting *Pacific Rim: Uprising* [Mi, *L’officiel*, November 2017]). The location suggests a lack of extravagant décor and consequently creates a strong sense of ordinariness.

The filming environment signals a strong sense of authenticity. In the video, only the light on her right is illuminated, suggesting potential issues with insufficient lighting and suboptimal placement, which could affect the quality of the video and the overall filming effect. The apparatus used to film the video appears to be the front camera of her smartphone, which is the most common and easy-to-operate camera available. Jing also asserted in her *L’officiel* interview that she used her smartphone (quoted in Mi, November 2017). The camera is positioned on the right-hand side, slightly higher than the wash basin but noticeably lower than Jing’s chest. Possibly leaned against the wall (according to Jing, it was placed on the wash basin [quoted in Mi, *L’officiel*, November 2017]), the camera places Jing’s face at the centre yet from a lower angle which is not ideal for photo shooting. The lighting, filming apparatus, and filming angle all indicate the rawness of the filming environment, pointing to a lack of premeditation. In the video, Jing is devoid of makeup, jewellery accessories, or elaborate hairstyles. Instead, she wears a white T-shirt featuring black letter graphics reading ‘Myself’, complemented by a kitten-ear-shaped hair band that pins her black hair, which is pulled back fully to expose her makeup-free face. Coupled with the beige wall and white light, Jing exudes an aura of simpleness, cleanness and to some extent girliness (through the kitten-ear hair band). She lacks what Marshall described the ‘careful preening’ (2010, p. 40) that emphasises the star’s glamour and sophistication. Instead, she emphasises her authentic self by appearing original without excessive embellishment or being glossily attractive. Although the ‘Myself’ print on her T-shirt
may imply an excessive attempt to assert ‘This is my true self’, the visuals overall indicate a video prepared with minimal effort, thus signalling a strong sense of authenticity tied to a narrative of ordinariness.

In addition to the visual cues that signal authenticity, Jing also strengthens a sense of privateness by (re)constructing a context in this video. This is achieved through her direct address of a perceived audience as ‘you’ (‘nimen’). While the actual audience of this video remains unknown (i.e. whether this was an actual request from the entertainment journalists cannot be confirmed), Jing’s ‘interaction’ with a perceived audience reconstructs a ‘context’ which social media ‘collapses’ (see Vitak, 2012). Surely, when the audience is designated, the context-based performance can fall on either the performative (public) or authentic (private) side. However, considering the visual signals highlight authenticity, Jing’s effort can be argued to be put to establish an authentic context. By saying ‘You guys want to see me washing my face, then I’ll wash my face [and] make a video for you.’, she grants backstage access to a discursively ‘limited, designated’ group of ‘you’ who are interested in her private life, rather than all audiences. Whether the video is eventually (not) expected to be posted on Weibo, at that moment of her recording, her statement constructs an authentic performative effect, signalling that she is addressing to a real, limited group of audiences (despite the fact that this video could be intended for all audiences after all). By doing so, a boundary is established between the ‘you’ and the ‘all’, ensuring a private experience for that particular (imagined/ real) group of audience. The intermittent ‘interactions’ with her audience further enhance the authentic sense of a private context; ‘How do you guys wash your face? Same as me?’; ‘Once I’m done washing my face, we can pick up our chat again’. Particularly, ‘picking up our chat again’ creates an illusion that this video is an interlude between an ongoing conversation. Through (re)constructing a context, the face-washing demonstration becomes a private act for a targeted audience, creating a sense of intimacy that promises authenticity.

During her face-washing, the spontaneity and naturalness in the way Jing speaks in the
video enhances the aura of authenticity. According to David C. Giles (2018), ‘chat is important because it is seemingly unscripted and, therefore, provides audiences with [a] glimpse into the “truth” of the celebrity self. [...] [T]he spontaneity of chat offers glimpses of the unguarded, even unconscious self, playing on the Freudian belief that slips and errors reveal the working of the unconscious and, therefore, authentic, mind’ (pp. 136-137). In other words, as Jing speaks, linguistic imperfections such as errors, pauses, unfinished or incomplete sentences and repetitions, as well as an inconsistency of her logic while speaking (e.g. saying whatever comes to mind or whatever relates to what is happening at that moment) are important indicators of authenticity.

These indicators appear quite frequently in her speaking. She starts with explaining the background music; ‘I like to play some music while washing my face, or [sic] I think...it’s actually a very tedious process.’. Yet Jing does not continue to talk about the song she plays but rather jumps to why she records this video; ‘You guys want to see me washing my face, then I’ll wash my face [and] make a video for you.’. Then she pauses for a few seconds to rub the cleansing gel evenly on her face, and continues speaking while rubbing her face, ‘In fact cleaning [the face]... remains most important [for face-washing]. So when I don’t wear makeup, I won’t use... that... cleanser oil or anything like it. I’ll just wash with cleansing gel. But if I have to wear makeup, [I] will be needing cleanser oil... so [sic].’ Then she pauses for a few seconds again to remove some of foam from her face. She picks up a cotton pad, which is out of the frame, and continues to talk about how she cleans the residual foam; ‘I think the water can’t fully wash away the foam, so I will use ...those... cotton pads to wipe... [the foam off].’ While doing this, she proposes a question ‘How do you guys wash your face? Same as me?’, although this video is a one-way communication. Then again, she returns to talking about cotton pads; ‘I’m a bit afraid, a bit afraid of using that kind of [sic] sponge. I think that kind of sponge... after being used for a long time... can get very dirty.’ Then, her topic digresses again, and this time, it contradicts her earlier statement about recording the video upon request; ‘Anyway chatting with you guys will take some time.
I’m thinking washing my face, putting on a facial mask… and then [picking up the] chat … this way, I can make the most of my time.’ The purpose of this video, here, now shifts to making the best use of her time while she ‘chats’ with her perceived media audience. The ambiguity remains open to interpretation, though. On the one hand, it reflects that her utterances are instant and unscripted. While the purpose is to show them how she washes her face, at that moment she is also considering saving time: if she applies a mask during the chat, the time waited for the mask to take effect could be used to engage in chatting. From this perspective, it is a linguistic error when she says, ‘I’m thinking washing my face…’. On the other hand, there may never have been a request for this face-washing demonstration, and she simply spills the beans during filming. Yet interestingly, both interpretations lead to a display of authenticity. Whether it is a slip of tongue, or accidentally revealing the true purpose, her statement indicates an unconscious self processing the ‘realities’.

The constant back and forth of her logic, linguistic mistakes, unfinished or incomplete sentences, pauses, and repetitions which suggest spontaneity continues throughout the remainder of the video. Moreover, in the second half of the video, there are accidental situations which also augment the sense of authenticity (see Jerslev, 2016, p. 5243) at a gestural level. When Jing finishes washing her face, she leaves the bathroom to fetch tissue (‘[I’m going to] grab some tissue to wipe my face.’). After she returns and wipes her face, she picks up a bottle of eye wash on her left side while she speaks, ‘Normally when I’m done washing my face, I will use that [sic] to wash my eyes because I think wearing eye makeup everyday seems… bad for… that [sic]… the eyes. So, every time… I finish washing [my face], I will wash my eyes. [...] This stuff works pretty well, I almost…oh, why do I sound like I’m selling this thing… [giggling] well I use it almost every day.’ Then, she looks for her mist. As she mumbles ‘[I’m] looking for my… mist’, she leaves the room again. Around about 15 seconds she returns, but still looking around and talking to herself, ‘[I] didn’t find the thing I looked for... Where did I put my mist... Gee, where did I put it?... [I] wanted to spritz some mist... couldn’t find it anywhere’. These unexpected occurrences, such as her actions of leaving and coming
back into the room, fetching tissues, and looking for her mist, suggest a lack of control and preparation. This heightens a sense of immediacy and nowness, which fortifies authenticity.

As she employs authenticity as a crucial marker in this process, she actively constructs a narrative of ordinariness and forms an online identity as a familiar girl next door. I now turn to the discursive aspects regarding how she authenticates her ordinariness (the authenticity of ‘what she claims to be’) based on the authentic aura created in this video. There are a few moments that reinforces her narrative of ordinariness, which are naturally inserted in her ‘chatting’ with an audience. First, as she wipes her face with cotton pads, Jing gestures towards her kitten-ear-shaped hairband and says, ‘I bought this from Taobao… this [pointing to the hairband] … hair band. Isn’t it neat? [I’ve] been using it for a long time.’ Taobao stands as one of China’s largest mainstream online shopping platforms, on which the average pricing of a similar hairband ranges between 10 to 20 Chinese Yuan (approximately £1-£2) – an affordable price point for ordinary consumers. The mention of this hairband – purchased from a website familiar to every Chinese individual, with accessible and reasonably priced items that cater to the budget of every girl/ woman – accentuates her everydayness while cultivating a girl-next-door identity. The hairband’s enduring usage contrasts with the extravagant lifestyle typically associated with a star (see McDonald, 2000, p. 32). Then, after wiping off the foam, she rinses her face with water. While doing so, she mentions the water temperature,

[When I’m] on the set shooting… in winter… I would use… cold water to wash my face. But [it is] not for, not for tightening my skin… I think it is for waking myself up. But [sic] normally I would still prefer tepid water, or even hot water, to wash my face because it feels warmer. [I’m] not much of a fan of cold water. [But when I’ve got] an early call time… [there is] no other way. I worry that I can’t get up… Like tomorrow morning, this [schedule of] getting up at 4 am, I... [a fleeting frown] will probably have to wash my face with cold water.
While it remains a topic around how she washes her face, her mention of why certain temperatures she uses (to awaken herself for the work) and her struggle with early mornings become relatable to ordinary people. Additionally, the mention of cold water serves as a marker of her hard work: her use of cold water becomes a tool of self-discipline when she needs to get up at 4 am. At the same time, getting up at 4 am reveals the less glamorous aspect of a star’s profession as an actor. Jing’s own narrative of ordinariness has long been intertwined with her hard work. Here, this hard work image is naturally brought up in passing. The third moment is when she applies a facial mask; ‘But [sic] [as for] facial masks… I don’t have time… to do them every day... because... [they’re just] too much hassle... mainly [because I’m] lazy.’ Her self-disclosure of laziness here also resonates with ordinary people. Then, the reference to her hairband (indicating its affordability), struggles with early mornings, reluctance to apply facial masks daily, along with her earlier behaviours such as playing music to pass the time and misplacing her mist, all contribute to creating a strong resonance with ordinary people (see Giles, 2018, p. 133). In doing so, Jing’s narrative of ordinariness is constructed by drawing parallels between the lives of a star and those of ordinary people.

I have examined how Jing has adeptly constructed an authentic image associated with her ordinariness through visual, contextual, gestural, and discursive dimensions in this video. By displaying a range of signals that suggest authenticity such as backstage access, intimacy, spontaneity, and the reconstruction of context, Jing has managed to create an authentic environment for her presentation of ordinariness. When promoting her ordinariness, by posting on the account JingTianStudio, Jing distances herself from ostensible self-promotion and creates an illusion of revealing. Later, by reposting this video to her own Weibo (‘repost: [image]’: 21 February 2017), Jing employs her star power to amplify the visibility of the video and her image of ordinariness. More importantly, it can also be considered a symbolic moment suggesting the transformation of her star image from a transnational construct to a
familiar, approachable girl next door. As I mentioned earlier, her studio account has been active since 30 September 2016, which marks her strategic employment of Weibo as a platform for self-promotion. Here, the timing of the presence of her studio account is of importance, because until late 2016, the Chinese public had not embraced the transnational construct in her image. As such, the construction of a familiar girl-next-door image which contrasts directly to this transnational image is her strategic response to the negative domestic reception of her image associated with Huallywood and Hollywood. At the same time, while she establishes the girl-next-door image in early 2017, there is also an attempt to pre-emptively counteract any potential negative impact brought by her upcoming Hollywood films Kong: Skull Island (released in March 2017) and Pacific Rim: Uprising (her casting announcement was made in September 2016 [Kroll, 2016]) in the domestic market, considering how her presence in The Great Wall and her previous engagement in Huallywood films were received.

7.3 Severing ties with the past: The waxing and waning of Jing’s celebrity (2017-2020)

If her girl-next-door image was initially cultivated to redress her national notoriety and establish popular acclaim in the Chinese public, her continued reinforcement of this image while severing ties with her transnational image afterwards can be seen as a strategic response to the changing Sino-Hollywood relations since mid-2017 and her employment condition in Hollywood. The strained relations between China and the US since mid-2017 impacted the cinematic environment in both nations and signalled the decoupling of the Chinese film industry and Hollywood. On China’s side, the Chinese government increased scrutiny over outbound capital flows, with a particular focus on Wanda’s finances, limiting the company’s ability to borrow from Chinese banks for overseas deals (Cain, 2017). On the US’s side, the US government addressed increasing concerns with respect to China’s infiltration of American media since Wanda’s acquisition of Legendary (Zhu, 2022, p. 243). In 2018, the Chinese government
assigned the film division to the Party’s Ministry of Propaganda, thereby strengthening the film’s role as a party organ (Zhu, 2022, p. 244). At the same time, the Trump administration waged a trade war against China, casting a shadow on large-scale Sino-Hollywood collaborations (Su, 2019, pp. 134-135). The diplomatic tensions between the two nations will inevitably have an impact on the transnational flow of Chinese acting labour to Hollywood. Given this broader industrial environment, it is not a surprise that following Jing’s attainment of celebrity status in the domestic market in early 2017, she shifted her career focus back into the domestic film and television industries.

In addition to this, it appears that her redirection of her career focus was also a response to her employment condition in Hollywood. As Paul McDonald (2013) notes, ‘age intersects with the gendered economy of Hollywood stardom to differentially affect the decline of male and female stars’ (p. 30). While no glass ceiling is formally instituted, it has been an industrial truism that female stars in Hollywood often face limitations in their early 30s, beyond which they tend to be offered increasingly undesirable roles (McDonald, 2013, p. 30). After The Great Wall, Jing’s roles already became less desirable in her subsequent Hollywood films (i.e. she was arranged a minor role and a supporting role, each with no more than 10 minutes of screen time). By the time she finished shooting Pacific Rim: Uprising, Jing was 28 years old. Coupled with Hollywood’s lack of investment in her, Jing appeared to have withdrawn completely from Hollywood after shooting Pacific Rim: Uprising. Then, Jing’s further consolidation of her girl-next-door image can be considered a strategic move as her career focus shifted back to China.

During the years 2017 and 2018, she reinforced her narrative of ordinariness on Weibo, while further distancing herself from the transnational image associated with Hollywood. She gradually downplayed the presence and importance of her subsequent two Hollywood films. In the posts related to the promotional activities of Kong: Skull Island in March 2017, there was a perceived focal shift from her to the film.
First, she eschewed addressing to the Hollywood stars involved in her descriptions, directing attention solely to promoting the film: ‘#0324KongSkullIsland#Fancy watching it? [doge emoji]’ (JingTian, Weibo, 9 March 2017); and ‘Kong’s premiere in Beijing[.] Good work guys[.] It’s been a great day[.] Good night [kissy face emoji] [moon emoji]’ (JingTian, Weibo, 16 March 2017). Second, although she still appeared in pictures with these Hollywood stars, these photos were promotional photos taken at premieres, rather than her personal photos offering backstage access. These two posts centralise the film, enhancing the sense of work, rather than her personal relations. In the posts related to Pacific Rim: Uprising, she minimised posting relevant contents, while also directing the focus on the role rather than herself, including shooting (‘Hello, Shao Liwen [rabbit emoji]’; 16 January 2017), trailer promotion (‘[I] played a different character this time’: 9 October 2017) and the film’s Beijing premiere (‘I now believe that all cool female CEOs are cuties at heart […]’: 12 March 2018). The tone and content in these Hollywood-related posts suggests her ongoing effort to separate herself from her previous transnational image.

While she continued to sever ties with her Hollywood roles, Jing’s narrative of ordinariness was further reinforced by her self-disclosure of her family and relationship status, two aspects associated with her personal life that have captured the sustained interest of the Chinese public for years. Jing posted two photos featuring herself with her parents before her performance on the annual CCTV’s Lunar New Year Gala; ‘The Spring Festival Gala goes on every year, [but] this year [sic] is particularly special […]’ (JingTian, Weibo, 15 February 2018). Both pictures – one an old photograph from her childhood, and the other seemingly more recent – underscore the ordinariness of her parents. The ‘specialness’ she expressed in the caption, then, not only referred to her first-time performance in the Gala, but also, discursively, to her first-time revelation of her parents. Contrary to the public’s

While the discourse of canary (see Chapter 4) dominated the public perception surrounding Jing’s presence in Hollywood, there existed a minority perspective attributing her presence to her parents’ well-connectedness (e.g. Li, 2011; Wang, 2011).
speculation about her parents’ industrial connections, Jing’s act of posting her parents’ photos suggested their ordinary background, while simultaneously aligning with her being an ordinary girl plucked from obscurity. Her openness about her relationship also established her approachability and relatability, contributing to her narrative of ordinariness. In 2017, she openly acknowledged her single relationship status on Weibo (‘[Posting some] Valentine’s Day vibes while being single’: 14 February 2017). It was the first time that her relationship status was explicitly mentioned. Moreover, in doing so, she distanced herself with the discourse of canary that has been attached to her star image since 2011. In March 2018, she also openly acknowledged her relationship with Zhang Jike, the Olympic champion in table tennis, on Weibo (CRIonline, 2018). Furthermore, the Internet revelled in their relationship, with the hashtag ‘#ZhangJike JingTian Gongbu Lianqing#’ (Zhang Jike and Jing Tian announced their relationship) drawing 390 million views and 164 thousand online discussions (Weibo, 2024b), which was 10 times more engagement compared to her face-washing video hashtag ‘#JingTian Xilian#’. Jing’s openness about her family and relationship status further enhanced her narrative of ordinariness and contributed to her celebrity in 2018.

However, celebrity is characterised by ephemerality (Turner, 2014, p. 37). The waning of that status, except for those who meet untimely deaths or opt for retirement, is the inevitable trajectory for every star (McGowan, 2017, p. 214). As Sean Redmond (2014) notes, while the celebrity industry endeavours to ensure a star’s longevity, it also constantly manufactures ‘new faces with a limited life span, ensuring an endless stream of profit possibilities from those that role off the production line’ (p. 69). As such, it is important for celebrities to continuously capture and maintain public attention so as to counteract the decline of their status. Between 2017 and late 2018, Jing’s face-washing video and her self-disclosure of family and relationship status propelled her into the celebrity spotlight. Also, her television drama The Glory of Tang Dynasty (2017), which aired between January and May 2017, was generally received well among Chinese audiences; it drew ratings from over 110 thousand users and was
rated 6.9 out of 10 (Douban, 2024e). However, Jing’s popularity experienced a sustained decline since late 2018. Apart from Jing’s announcement of her breakup with Zhang (‘[I’m] grateful for the time we spent together. [I] wish [you] all the best for the future.’: 9 June 2019), she did not have attention-grabbing events. Her subsequent screen works also struggled to capture audiences’ attention. The King of Blaze (2018) which aired between November and December 2018 garnered ratings from around 6,000 users on Douban (Douban, 2024f); and Love Journey (2019) garnered ratings from around 12,000 users (Douban, 2024g). Both works received less than one-tenth of the audience ratings compared to The Glory of Tang Dynasty. Throughout the year of 2020, Jing appeared to be less active in the industry, with no screen work released. However, instead of viewing her declining status as an inevitable trajectory for every star, I would suggest that her Hollywood and Hollywood careers have led to ruptures in her persona and negatively impacted her reception in China. They destabilised her celebrity status and stardom in 2017 and 2018, diminishing her longevity as a celebrity.

While Jing’s off-screen image as a girl next door was well received by the Chinese public since early 2017, her Hollywood roles continued to disrupt her celebrity status. Following the release of Kong: Skull Island in March 2017, her meagre role in the film subjected her to intense scrutiny and backlash, prompting critics to label her as the most hated actress in China during this time (see Chapter 5). Her presence in Pacific Rim: Uprising in March 2018 similarly attracted negative reviews on Douban (see Chapter 5). In some ways, as the star endeavoured to consolidate her national stardom in 2017 and 2018, her Hollywood involvement continued to pose a threat to her celebrity. Moreover, her warrior/ action woman persona constructed in Hollywood and Hollywood over the years similarly created ruptures when she developed a persona that resonated with her home audience. For example, in her well-received role in the television drama The Glory of Tang Dynasty (2017), disparate from the

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38 Her breakup generated massive attention online; the hashtag ‘#JingTian Zhang Jike Fenshou#’ (Jing Tian and Zhang Jike Breaking up) drew 1.44 billion views and 532 thousand discussions (Weibo, 2024c).
warrior/ action woman, or the postfeminist girl hero, she played a refined, proper lady nurtured in nobility, who employed her intelligence to support her husband’s ascent to power. The feminine, elegant, traditional Chinese beauty she portrays in this show stands in contrast to the (visual) presentations of her Huallywood and Hollywood roles (see Figure 7.3, where Jing is positioned at the centre on the poster). It was her first role that was embraced by a relatively large scale of the domestic audience, based on the ratings amassed on Douban (see Douban, 2024e). In other words, despite her activity in the Chinese industry for years, Jing needed to build her onscreen persona as well as her audience anew in the domestic market. At the same time, her two Hollywood roles (San in Kong: Skull Island and Shao in Pacific Rim: Uprising) continued to pose a jarring element while she reconstructed her persona in 2017 and 2018.

Figure 7.3 Jing Tian’s costume in The Glory of Tang Dynasty
(Source: the photo gallery of The Glory of Tang Dynasty on Douban [Douban, 2024e])

Furthermore, her later career in China since her return has been unfavourably compared to her careers in Huallywood and Hollywood by the Chinese media, which adversely impacted her image. Her employment in the Chinese film and television industry since 2017, such as her roles, her co-stars, and the overall production quality of the project, was perceived as less desirable compared to her previous engagements.
in the large-scale, transnational Huallywood and Hollywood cinema (e.g. Haowai, 2018; Huabianxingwen, 2018; Qian, 2018; Huihuo, 2019; Mo, 2021). Then, her careers in Huallywood and Hollywood became the ‘evidence’ to comment upon her later career in China, which was perceived as ‘having lost the cinematic resources she once had’, or as they put in Chinese, ‘ziyuan xiahua/ xiajiang’. These online discourses convey a narrative of degradation and decline, indicating that her stardom was not as well as before, which negatively impacted her reception. Thus, rather than following a trajectory of decline like every star, her celebrity is adversely affected by her previous engagements in Huallywood and Hollywood, which accelerated the decline of her status.

7.4 ‘I am Si Teng’: From persona to person

After experiencing a decline in her status for nearly two years, Jing regained her celebrity status in March 2021, following the popular reception of the small-budget net drama Rattan (2021), wherein she starred as the female lead and the sole protagonist. Classified as a fantasy romance, Rattan revolves around a resurrected supernatural creature named Si Teng (played by Jing), who embarks on a quest to discover her true identity and explores the meaning of life and love throughout her journey. It marked the turning point in the revival of Jing’s stardom. Rattan has garnered ratings from over 284 thousand users on Douban (Douban, 2024h). Initially achieving a higher score of 7.8 out of 10 during its airing period (Mou, 2021), the show has now settled to 6.9 (Douban, 2024h). Rattan has amassed a total of 5.76 billion views on the three authorised online streaming platforms Youku, WeTV and iQIYI, and appeared on Weibo’s hot search list 144 times (WeiboDrama [‘Weibo Dianshiju’], 2021). Overall, according to Weibo’s semi-annual hot search statistic report, the drama ranked third among the simultaneously released films and television dramas in the first half of 2021 (Sina Weibo Data Centre, 2021, p. 17), attesting to its popularity in reception. While the dominant media discourse is that the star’s regained celebrity
was attributed to the popularity of Rattan, it tends to understate Jing’s active role in this celebritification process. As this section will demonstrate, Jing’s performative labour associated with her role on Weibo – merging herself with (and into) her character Si Teng – significantly contributes to the reinvigoration of her celebrity.

The relationship between Jing/ the star and Rattan/ the product, in today’s consumer culture, is of interest. From an economic perspective, the star is normally recognised as a form of capital to sell the product, ranging from their own screen work to their services in brand endorsement. In this star-product equation, the promotion of a film product relies less on the acting labour of a star but more on the popular appeal of his/her name to act as the ‘giant publicity machine’ to maximise the marketing effect, making that film a branded product associated with a certain star identity (Bekker, 2005, p. 76). In a way, the star as the ‘human capital’ in this film product is ‘the most significant pre-sold property’ (Wyatt, 1994, p. 31). By extension, for other types of products s/he endorse, the star assumes the role of a ‘branding mechanism’ that ensures a ‘fluent translation across media formats and systems of delivery’ (Turner, 2014, p. 36). Based on this premise, the star occupies the central position, while the (film) product simply borrows his/her name, image, meaning and celebrity. However, this perspective tends to overlook the volatile and unstable nature inherent to star status. Consequently, the scenario in which the star precedes the product can also reverse, particularly for those stars who no longer occupy the pinnacle of their fame. As Hackley and Hackley (2015) point out, the meaning-transfer model in celebrity endorsement tends to prioritise the celebrity, where their fame is presupposed to be logically and ontologically prior to the effect of their endorsement (p. 464). This assumption, however, tends to downplay the reverse benefits flowing from the brand (product) to the celebrity, or the reciprocity of effects in the relationship between the celebrity and the product (Hackley and Hackley, 2015, p. 464). In other words, stars, by necessity, rely on products to materialise the intangibility inherent in their name, image, and meaning, and celebrity. As such, the relationship between the star and the product is symbiotic, wherein the star also benefits from the product (or being
adversely impacted by it). Jing’s online presentation of self in relation to her net drama product *Rattan* offers such a case where she promoted herself by aligning with her character Si Teng to achieve celebrity status, rather than vice versa.

I focus on the specific ways in which Jing leveraged the popularity of her character Si Teng in Chinese reception to rejuvenate her stardom and regain her celebrity. I examine her performative labour on Weibo, where she constructed a narrative of ‘I am Si Teng’, merging herself with (and into) the character. I will conduct a discursive examination of Jing’s posts in relation to her promotion of the character Si Teng over the course of *Rattan*’s airing (between 7 March 2021 and 5 April 2021). In doing so, I will demonstrate how Jing, through a selective and tactical use of Si Teng’s image in her online presentation of self, contrived to achieve the discursive construct of ‘I am Si Teng’. The statement ‘I am Si Teng’ first appeared in Jing’s repost of the weibo from the drama’s official marketing account (NetDramaRattan ['Wangju Siteng']). In this repost, she wrote, ‘Standing between heaven and earth, unfettered and free; I am Si Teng #Drama SiTeng#’ (25 September 2019). Since the drama’s release, this statement emerged as a robust discourse that intricately intertwines Jing and her character together. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate how Jing infused the statement ‘I am Si Teng’ with three intersected layers of meaning, including a) an (achieved) image resemblance between the star and the character, b) a performative linkage between the actor and the character from a Stanislavskian acting aesthetic; and c) an affective resonance between the star’s living, authentic selfhood and the character’s narrative in the fictional world.

Generally, Jing’s promotional posts semantically mirrored the assertion of identity in the statement ‘I am Si Teng’. The star assimilated herself with the character, adopting a first-person perspective when addressing Si in her posts as if she were the character herself. Upon the drama’s release, Jing wrote a pun; ‘I’m budding [...]’ (Weibo, 7 March 2021), associating her character’s identity and status as a plant that prepares to bloom with the fact that *Rattan* would stream the next day. On the day *Rattan* debuted on
the streaming platforms, she posted another weibo, linking Women’s Day to Si Teng as a female character and herself; ‘#Goddess Day# (nüshen jie) Si Teng’s first Women’s Day – happy Women’s Day to me~’ (Weibo, 8 March 2021). Also, during the show’s airing, she shared a video clip, writing ‘I, Si Teng, will keep Qin Fang [the male lead] safe today […]’ (Weibo, 14 March 2021). At first glance, it makes sense considering the narrative significance of her character and her leading role in the drama. The drama’s Chinese title Si Teng (in which ‘Teng’ means rattan) and its English translation Rattan not only denote the identity of Si as a climbing plant, rattan-transformed supernatural creature but also directly refer to the name of the protagonist. Simultaneously, through her use of first-person address to the character, Jing also underscored her unparalleled, primary significance for the drama. Since Jing played the character and assumed the protagonist role, it appeared to be a sound marketing strategy for the show.

However, comparing to the way Jing referred to the previous roles she played, this was the first time she employed first-person address. In her previous posts, Jing usually separated herself from the character, often narrating from a third-person perspective when introducing her role. For example, this approach was evident in her promotion of The Glory of Tang Dynasty (2017) (‘[…] come and watch Shen Zhenzhu (her character’s name)’: 29 January 2017), Fist and Faith (2017) (‘Miss Liu will begin the class shortly’: 6 July 2017), Pacific Rim: Uprising (2018) (‘Hello, Shao Liwen’: 16 January 2017), The King of Blaze (‘[…] She is Fengjian, Qianmei, and also Tongfeng […]’: 26 November 2018), and Love Journey, ‘#Love Journey# Li Xinyue is ready […]’: 12 April 2019). As such, Jing’s first-person address of Si Teng reflects an intention to approximate to the character. In addition to this, considering that she began employing first-person address in her initial post related to the show in 2019, which was a year and a half before its official release and subsequent popularity in reception, it creates a heightened sense of her identification with the character, indicating her personal predilection for the role.
Except for adopting first-person address to echo the statement ‘I am Si Teng’, Jing further blurred her star identity and the character at a visual level through mixing the fiction and the reality. On the one hand, Jing bridged Si’s experience in the diegetic world with the real world through sharing ‘Si’s ID photo’. In the original scene, Si visits the police station to apply for an ID card. According to Chinese regulations, the applicant’s entire face, including the ears, must be fully visible, and no makeup or accessories are permitted in the ID photo. However, Si’s makeup and hairstyle fail to adhere to these specifications. For comedic effect, the officer makes a series of requests, beginning with the removal of her earrings and hair barrette, and eventually instructing her to pin her hair behind her ears. This gradual process leads to Si’s growing irritation until the photo is eventually taken. Following the episode’s streaming, Jing shared the ID photo Si took within the story world on Weibo and wrote, ‘#JingTian Shai SiTeng Yicunzhao# (‘Jing Tian shares Si Teng’s ID photo’) Si Teng’s ID photo; guess what’s on her mind [doge emoji]’ (Weibo, 9 March 2021). The picture features a headshot against a white background, depicting Jing/Si’s clear face with faint traces of sullenness. Given that the photo does not appear in the drama, the act of extending that storyline to the real world and posting the character’s photo on her personal account blurs the line between fiction and reality, blending the character with the star.

On the other hand, she merged her real-life photograph with the character’s identity. Considering Si’s identity is a rattan-transformed supernatural creature, on China’s Arbour Day Jing posted two selfies and wrote, ‘Si Teng, happy Arbour Day [tree emoji]’ (Weibo, 12 March 2021). In these two pictures, Jing appears to be make-up free, clad in fluffy pyjamas with a hood resembling drooping ears. It resonates strongly with her own off-screen image as a girl next door, in which her pyjamas and seemingly makeup-free face reconnect to her authenticated ordinariness in her face-washing video. However, it does not relate to Si’s appearance (see Figure 7.4, Jing’s costume in the drama’s first episode). In the drama, Si is primarily presented as enchantedly beautiful, radiating an elegant aura. Then, in this post, Jing merged her off-screen self with Si’s
fictional world, where she would celebrate the Arbour Day as a plant. Both posts, from the fictional world to the reality and vice versa, firmly tie the star to the character, serving to achieve the effect of ‘I am Si Teng’.

Figure 7.4 Jing Tian’s costume in *Rattan*
(Source: the photo gallery of *Rattan* on Douban [Douban, 2024h])

Blurring the boundary between Jing/ the star and Si/ the character can be potentially risky. As Joshua Gamson (1994) notes, the producer’s interest in closely aligning the star’s image with the character to bolster the marketability is often met with resistance from the star themselves (pp. 81-82). Their reluctance is rooted in the apprehension that such alignment could potentially damage their name in the event of the work’s failure, or if otherwise, this could turn into a ‘type’ which limits their future career options (Gamson, 1994, pp. 81-82). Furthermore, for stars, the maintenance of a coherent brand identity is crucial for differentiating themselves from other stars and sustaining their market appeal (McDonald, 2013, p. 48). Hence, maintaining a certain distance from the characters they portray is a sensible strategy for stars to sustain their star power in the market. It can be argued that Jing’s introduction of her previous roles from a third-person perspective adhered to this practice of maintaining such distance. As such, Jing’s practices of blurring the boundary between herself and the role can be
considered a precarious career move. However, it is worth noting that Jing’s star status (and consequently her economic value) was in decline in 2019 when she took on the role. According to the drama’s producer Yan Dandan, the casting decision for Jing was made at a time when her ‘market value’ was on the decline (quoted in Zhuang, 2021). In this sense, Jing’s effort to create a resemblance with her character can be considered her adaptive strategy aimed at capitalising on the popularity of her character in Chinese reception.

Nevertheless, there are certain elements in the character that contrast with Jing’s girl-next-door image. In the drama, Si is characterised by her sharp tongue and dominant personality, often demonstrated through her biting language and condescending mannerisms. These characteristics not only contrast but also pose a threat to the amicable and non-threatening girl-next-door image Jing has established and perpetuated since 2017. In response to the conflict between the character and her image, Jing posted a set of memes and captioned ‘Si Teng you need to cool it off! You are ripping off all those bamboo shoots on the mountain~’ (10 March 2021). The captions in these memes are some of Si’s snarky remarks, but the caption she wrote for these memes conveys an attempt to appease their dramatic effect and furthermore to reconcile the incoherence between her sweetness and Si’s condescension. First, rather than directly commenting upon those memes, she quoted the popular Internet phrase ‘ripping off the bamboo shoots’ – a Chinese Internet buzzword suggesting someone’s language and/or behaviours being mean – to criticise Si’s actions in the drama in a playful way. The use of the tilde mark at the end, in the context, further mitigated criticism, enhancing the sense of pleasure and ease, which aligns with her soft, easy-going persona. Second, by addressing Si as ‘you’ instead of ‘I’, she separated herself, only temporarily (as she resumed using ‘I’ in her later weibos), from the character. As well as contributing to maintain her distance to this contradicting image – asserting ‘I am not Si’ in this context, the employment of second-person address highlights her affinity with this fictional character through creating a quasi-conversational scenario. In this post, Jing manages to neutralise Si’s unsympathetic
language and behaviours in the drama without completely alienating herself from the character. In the meantime, she reaffirms her offscreen easy-going and interesting personality. In doing so, Jing connects to Si without sacrificing her established girl-next-door-ness.

The manipulation of image resemblance is helpful, but perhaps the more convincing construct of ‘I am Si Teng’ rests on the star’s impersonation of the character as an actor. Following the show’s debut on the streaming platforms on 8 March 2021 (with 6 episodes released for paid members), the hashtag ‘#JingTian Hao Shihe SiTeng#’ (‘Jing Tian fits Si Teng so well’) appeared on Weibo’s hot search list the next day, which attracted 220 million views and 87 thousand discussions on Weibo (WeiboDrama, 2021). However, in an interview, Jing disclosed that when approached, despite her fascination with the character, she harboured concerns about her ability to convincingly impersonate Si, as they possess disparate personalities (quoted in Zhang and Guo, 2021). It implies that audiences’ perception of her ‘fit’ with the character contains more than just image manipulation, but also the star’s craftsmanship (i.e. the concealment of her girl-next-door-ness to portray an opposite personality) and personal investment in the character (i.e. hard work and dedication to her profession) as an actor. Both forms of construction can be observed in her posts. Over the course of Rattan’s airing, Jing posted five video clips extracted from the original drama (15 March 2021; 21 March 2021; 23 March 2021; 28 March 2021; 30 March 2021). These clips, apart from serving the marketing purpose of the drama, highlighted her performances across various scenarios. These include a flashback scene depicting Si’s past, in which she experienced physical abuse and fell in love, a scene featuring her reactions towards Qin’s confession of love, a scene showcasing her striding with rage, and two action scenes featuring her performances under water and on a wire respectively. These scenes serve as samples of her performing with a range of emotions as well as her adapting to different filming conditions, showing the different ways she portrayed the character. In addition, she reposted a behind-the-scenes video from JingTianStudio regarding her undergoing a silicone moulding process (‘it feels like
being cast the *Tengsha* (Si’s unique rattan poison’): 22 March 2021), in which she largely remained motionless for 6 hours, with her face, neck and shoulders fully covered in the cast. After the cast was removed, she recalled her experience as ‘difficult to breathe or swallow’ yet still ‘feeling good’. Her professionalism was reflected in her patience, polite manners and, importantly, her devotion to work – as she endured long hours of discomfort in order to present the character to audiences.

The presentation of her performances in *Rattan* and the backstage revelation of her hard work in these posts serve as crucial discursive materials to enhance the sense of ‘fit’ between Jing and Si from the perspective of the star’s acting labour. Different from the posts that highlighted a static image of being (that ‘I am Si Teng’), these posts showcased the process and outcome of becoming (‘I am Si Teng’). Here, Jing’s approach shifted the focus from the somewhat frivolous, persona-led resemblance to the serious, craft-based impersonation. These performances Jing shared imply that her resemblance with Si is not just manipulations of image, but also at a critical level where her acting plays an important role in shaping audiences’ perception of ‘fit’. The presentation of herself as an actor further contributed to rationalising the incoherence between the character and the star, stabilising the discursive construct of ‘I am Si Teng’ from a skill-based layer.

The third layer of ‘I am Si Teng’ was constructed through the affective connection between star’s postfeminist selfhood (see relevant discussion on postfeminism in Chapter 5) and the character’s lived experience in the story world. Previously, Jing’s efforts were purposefully directed towards creating an effect on audiences – namely, readjusting her image (approximating and distancing Si) to make it more palatable for consumption, or showcasing her impersonation to make the role more convincing for audiences’ viewing experience – rather than establishing a real sense of bond/fit between the character and the self. Her final post established this connection. As was mentioned, Jing’s declaration of ‘I am Si Teng’ predated before the drama’s release by a year and a half, which implicates her personal predilection for the role. Upon *Rattan’s*
finale, Jing’s heartfelt confession of her private, true feeling in relation to playing Si ultimately reaffirmed her predilection for this character as a person. Jing posted three screenshots of a lengthy memo written on her phone on 28 March 2021, accompanied by a caption featuring three heart emojis. In the memo, she quoted the author Wei Yu’s description of Si Teng – ‘She never relies on anyone to pull her out from the misery and distress she endures in life. [...] she never succumbs to or whines about the injustice and torment; she never kneels or shows weakness in the face of suffering and abuse. Even when wearing the most ragged clothes, she never leaves behind her demeanour; even when beaten to the ground, she never loses her elegance. You [sic] all want to see me cry, but I [sic] will just laugh as brightly. [...]’ – and continued her own contemplation,

I believe Si Teng was not born with such resilience. It was forged by her heartbroken life experiences and further developed into a shell for self-protection... the Si Teng in the book saved herself; the Si Teng in the dramatic world saved me at a time when everything was grey in my life... I love her, and I feel for her... I don’t know if every girl, at some point in her life, has gone through moments of despair like this, [...] but I do want to say that the only person who can throw you a lifebelt and save you is you. The ability to love yourself and to save yourself, is the greatest power that lies in every girl (Weibo, 5 April 2021).

It appears that this post conveys her true, innermost feelings about the character and how she empowered herself – through playing Si Teng – to walk out of those gloomy days all on her own, but it also, as a finishing remark, runs parallels with three interrelated textualities/realities – her career trajectory, the industrial positioning of Rattan, and her private life. By drawing comparisons with, and establishing connection to, Si Teng’s characteristics and lived experience in the fictional world, Jing transplanted these qualities of Si onto herself and authenticated them through her own experience as a real, living person, which completed her discursive construct of ‘I am Si Teng’.
First, she appeared to juxtapose the lived experience of Si in the fictional world with her own narrative, where her career trajectory and private life in 2019 were similarly beset by challenges. In contrast to her previous engagement in large-budget transnational film projects and collaborations with Hollywood A-listers, she participated in a small-budget, net drama seemingly without adequate support from its production company Youku and worked with a lesser-known actor Zhang Binbin. In the same year, her relationship with Zhang concluded. In a variety show, Jing also recalled an unbearably painful event that occurred in her life in 2019, which led to her reluctance to work for nearly two years [sic] prior to shooting *Rattan* (quoted in *Ace VS Ace*, 16 April 2021). Si’s ‘heartbroken life experiences’ mirror these textualities/realities in Jing’s personal narrative, indicating that she was stuck in a bleak state where ‘everything was grey in [her] life’ and she was enduring ‘moments of despair’. Second, she seemed to compare Si’s resilience and strength with *Rattan*’s eventual success and her regained celebrity, incorporating them into her personal narrative of self-empowerment. Jing not only admired the character (‘I love her, and I feel for her’), but also meaningfully became the reification of her. Instead of ‘whining, succumbing to and kneeling’ before the reality (the declining of her career and celebrity, as well as the emotional distress in her personal life), she continued her acting career and

39 *Rattan* is a small-budget net drama produced by Youku, one of the major online streaming platforms in China. The drama was reported to be positioned as a level A production within Youku’s grading system (Youku has a grading system – from S, A, B, to C – that determines the overall investment from production, distribution and marketing for a net/television drama, with S being at the top of the hierarchy and having the optimal configuration of all resources). The production of *Rattan* faced budget constraints for the cast and crew, filming and publicity campaigns (Zhang, 2021). While the actual budget was not disclosed, the director’s efforts to economise – such as playing a role himself in the show, completing filming ahead of schedule to avoid exceeding the budget, eliminating what he deemed unnecessary expenditures, and occasionally exploiting the shooting crew as inexpensive labour to play extras – have been noted and interpreted as evidence of *Rattan*’s limited financial support (Zhang, 2021; Ru, Sohu, 2021). The casting choice also alluded to this austerity; as I mentioned earlier, the producer Yan Dandan revealed that both actors, Jing Tian and Zhang Binbin (the male lead), were selected at a point when they had less market appeal (quoted in Zhuang, 2021). For distribution, there were rumours that prior to *Rattan*’s release, Youku opted to forgo its exclusive distribution rights and shared the show with other two major platforms WeTV and iQIYI as a means of mitigating the risk of loss (Meng, NetEase, 2021). It also suggests the company’s lack of confidence in the show (Meng, NetEase, 2021). While the marketing budget remained undisclosed, the number of reposts of Jing’s promotional weibo on *Rattan*’s debut reflects some truth. In stark contrast to her promotional posts of *The Glory of Tang Dynasty* (665 thousand reposts) and *The King of Blaze* (over 1 million reposts), the one promoting *Rattan* (‘I’m budding...’: 7 March 2021) only amassed 43 thousand reposts. Since the number of reposts often determines the visibility and the potential for a topic to trend on Weibo, *Rattan* evidently fell short of capturing significant attention. The overall lack of significance in both the production and marketing of *Rattan* indicates that Jing was at the low point of her acting career.
devoted to it as she always did. Then, she relied on herself — her capacity to ‘love and save [her]self’ — to navigate through these adverse situations and ultimately re-establish her stardom. Jing’s narrative harks back to the postfeminist ethos of female empowerment and individual agency (see Chapter 5). By paralleling Si’s resilience and strength and the success of Rattan with her career achievement at this moment, her onscreen persona as a strong, independent woman was also authenticated in an off-screen context through her personal narrative of self-reinvention. This post solidifies the star’s narrative of rebirth. Through the juxtaposition of herself as a person in the real world with the uncompromising, resilient Si Teng in the fictional world, the star achieved perhaps the most ‘authentic’ discursive construct of ‘I am Si Teng’.

Jing’s Weibo presentation of her role Si Teng in Rattan presents a case that challenges the perceived star-product relationship, wherein the product relies on the star’s name, image, meaning and celebrity. In a situation where Jing’s celebrity is on the decline, it is the star who capitalises on the popularity of her role in Rattan to regain her stardom in the domestic market. From manipulations of persona and image, performance to revelation of selfhood, Jing merges herself with (and into) the character and constructs the discourse of ‘I am Si Teng’. In this process, Jing effectively employs Weibo and directs the audiences’ affinity for the character Si Teng towards herself as a star.

Conclusion

This chapter explored Jing’s self-presentation on Weibo and highlighted how the platform serves as a pathway for the star to exercise her agency to manage her star image and practise celebrity. As I have demonstrated, Weibo functions as an effective tool for Jing to counteract the negative reception stemmed from her Hollywood careers in the Chinese public and it also contributes to her attainment and maintenance of celebrity status when she shifted her career focus back to China. More broadly, in exploring social media’s association with traditional stardom in a Chinese
context, this chapter seeks to draw attention to the disproportionate scholarly focus on microcelebrities in China. Through investigating into Jing’s celebrity practices on Weibo, it addresses the often-understated media labour of stars, while also highlighting that although traditional stars are manufactured within the structured star system, they are not unconditionally supported by the industry. As a form of commodities, traditional stars must continually assess the market and maintain their celebrity.

While Jing exerted her agency to manage her image and persona and (re)attain celebrity status through Weibo, the perceived rise (2017-late 2018), fall (late 2018-2020) and rerise (2021) of Jing’s celebrity status unquestionably points to the fickleness of her fame since her return to the Chinese entertainment industries. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the waning of her celebrity status between late 2018 and 2020 was adversely impacted by her careers in Huuallywood and Hollywood. One might question, then, whether pursuing transnational stardom was really beneficial for a Chinese star in the wake of the changing Sino-Hollywood relations in the 2010s. In the next chapter, I will consolidate my findings of the analytical chapters covering Jing’s career between 2011 and 2021 and discuss how the idea of transnational Chinese stardom was reshaped by the changing dynamics between China and Hollywood in the 2010s.
Chapter 8 Conclusion: Caught between success and failure: On (not) being a transnational Chinese star

Despite the increased attention paid to transnational Chinese stars in scholarship in the past two decades, the focus on mainland Chinese female stars who sought transnational stardom in Hollywood has remained insufficient. This skew of academic attention is in part due to the general limited number of mainland Chinese female stars who were perceived to have achieved a certain level of transnational fame in Hollywood necessary for sustained critical attention. It is also owing to the genre-led stardom that Hollywood has pursued most fervently since Bruce Lee and the subsequent legacy of Hong Kong action cinema, which narrowed the possibility for alternative Chinese stardoms (see Feng, 2017, p. 1). However, that there has been a limited number of mainland Chinese female stars achieving transnational stardom in Hollywood is a statement which recognises stardom from a perspective of consumption where the defining state of stardom is linked more to one’s cultural significance for audiences (see Thomas, 2012, p. 10) than on their participation in structures of production. As such, academic work has tended to sidestep those Chinese stars who have failed to attain transnational stardom in Hollywood in the eyes of audiences. To some degree, this also results in an under-consideration of the significant value they hold as objects of study, as their career (although often seen as failures or without note) and star images (although often seen as repeating or reinforcing cultural stereotypes) nevertheless reveal important findings about the industry that produced them and the forces and dynamics within the industry that shaped their ‘failures’.

Chinese female star Jing Tian is such a figure. As an object of study, she eludes scholarly attention due to the various narratives of failure that persist around her stardom in the Chinese public, as defined through the cultural perceptions surrounding her which suggest that at best, she is unnoteworthy and ignored and at worst, she has been
overwhelmed by perceived notoriety. These narratives of failure centre around an overarching discourse which refers to her as ‘the star who can’t be made famous’ (‘peng bu hong’). In essence, whether she was liked or disliked in reception reflects the contradictory ways of how contemporary fame is positively and negatively received and judged. The narrative of peng bu hong highlights the kind of fame that is centrally defined by notoriety (i.e. failing to be liked by audiences). Through this lens, she failed to become a national star despite having played the female lead in large-budget film productions that characterise the contemporary landscape of Huallywood. She then failed to become a transnational star through her work in Hollywood, despite having played the female lead in the highly anticipated Sino-Hollywood production The Great Wall – a rare opportunity for her contemporaries to even imagine at the time. In addition to this, she failed to deliver a ‘good’ performance in The Great Wall, despite having several years of acting experience. She failed to become a (trans)national star, despite a lineup of transnational stars including Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Donnie Yen, as well as the Hollywood A-lister Matt Damon being ‘brought in’ to elevate her status. Narratives such as these have portrayed Jing as a failed star undeserving of popular acclaim in the Chinese public, which has consequently led to her stardom escaping scholarly scrutiny.

However, as my research has made clear, these narratives centralise the perception of audiences by which star status should be attained and then judged, and they rely on a highly individualised perspective that posits the failures directly on a star alone. Such a stance precludes critical engagement with the industries which produced her various star images. It also overlooks the cultural, social, economic, and ideological roots that engendered these perceptions. Throughout this research I have argued against this individualistic perspective and acknowledged the need to position her image, persona, and labour in wider cultural and industrial contexts. I have contended that a variety of exogenous factors have shaped her career pathway through the transnational jungle. While doing so, I have demonstrated that she is an invaluable case which epitomises the production and reception of transnational Chinese female stardom at a cultural
moment where China and Hollywood embraced what Song Hwee Lim refers to as competitive and concessional transnationalisms (2010, pp. 2-4) in the 2010s.

For China, the ideas of competitive and concessional transnationalism are encapsulated in its Huallywood cinema and collaborations with Hollywood. Similarly, for Hollywood, these two ideas are embedded in its pursuit of the Chinese market and collaborations with China. As I have examined, Jing is caught in the competing and cooperating dynamics in and between the two industrial structures in the 2010s. As a transnational cinema, Huallywood embodies China’s strategic use of cinema as a tool for exerting soft power influence on the international stage. As such, it not only reflects the nation’s increasing capacity to mobilise transnational cinematic resources (Fleming and Indelicato, 2019, p. 141), but also responds actively to the nation’s call for Chinese culture going out (Li, 2016; Yang, 2016). Yet, given Hollywood’s global hegemony, Huallywood needs to make concessional moves while seeking to penetrate the international and particularly the US market. These competitive and concessional considerations are reflected on Jing’s filmic persona of a warrior/action woman in Huallywood. It is a persona carefully constructed to attract Western audiences. It adheres to Western perceptions of Chinese female warriors, evoking similarities to Mulan in American popular culture and wuxia heroines, while also responding to the niche appeal of Hong Kong action cinema among Western audiences. While it appears to be a viable transnational image, the structural disadvantage of Chinese films in the US market posed a challenge to Jing’s mainstream visibility. She was constrained by the wider market conditions and unable to establish herself as a transnational star. Her employment in Huallywood suggests the imbalanced transnational dynamics between China and Hollywood, where Chinese films are at a disadvantage.

At the same time, the prosperous Chinese film market elicited increased interest from a profit-driven industry such as Hollywood, and thus emerged as a crucial determinant that reshaped the Sino-Hollywood dynamics in the 2010s. By dint of its market, the Chinese film industry can potentially navigate its structural disadvantage in the US
market through collaborations with Hollywood. Likewise, Hollywood is enabled to access the Chinese market through cooperating with China. Jing’s career in Hollywood reflected the changing dynamics between the two industries. Furthermore, she is caught between the structures of two film industries, as her career in Hollywood is centrally defined by her association with the three blockbusters (co-)produced by Legendary, a Hollywood studio acquired by the Chinese conglomerate Wanda in 2016 (see Frater, 2016). Jing’s industrial positionality shaped her filmic persona as a warrior woman and a career woman, as well as her employment conditions as a transnational actor in Hollywood. Her roles are constructed to serve the interests of two industries: China’s ‘strategic narratives’ that seek to disseminate a positive image on the international stage through Hollywood (Homewood, 2021, pp. 96-97) and Hollywood’s fervent pursuit of access to the Chinese market. The Chinese warrior woman in The Great Wall (2016) is reconstituted based on postfeminist girl heroes in mainstream Hollywood and decorated with Chinese virtues. The career woman in Pacific Rim: Uprising (2018) rehashes the representation of the career-obsessed woman in postfeminist chick flicks, while also embodying the strength and impact of China. The career woman (a biologist in a research team) in Kong: Skull Island (2017) is a perfunctory role in nature, yet it remains a positive image of the ‘Chinese’ and reflects Hollywood’s attempt to engage with the Chinese audience.

Importantly, since these roles are tailored to take effect on the Chinese film market alone, Hollywood has repurposed the idea of transnational stardom by imbuing it with a strong sense of the national. Consequently, rather than a strategic interest in developing sustainable paths of transnational stardom as a commercial enterprise, Hollywood used her in a disposable way that solely served the industry’s commercial agenda for the Chinese market. Furthermore, the shifting narrative significance of Jing’s roles in Legendary tantalisingly reveals an ongoing industrial experiment through which Hollywood seeks to balance the Chinese market, the domestic market, and the international markets. In the three blockbusters, Jing played a major role in The Great Wall, a meagre role in Kong: Skull Island and then to a moderate supporting role in
Pacific Rim: Uprising. In this process of modulating the narrative significance of her roles, Jing can be seen primarily as a tool that helps to determine the extent to which the Hollywood film industry responds to its biggest overseas market that is China, while still maintaining its appeal to a home audience and a global audience. As such, although Jing worked in the Hollywood film industry, she was constrained by Hollywood’s lack of interest in employing transnational stardom as a profit-making means in the 2010s, and therefore unable to establish herself as a transnational star.

As a (transnational) worker in Huallywood and Hollywood, Jing is caught in the competing and cooperating dynamics in and between the two industrial structures. As a result, she was expected to play a particular ‘Chinese woman’ (one that relates to warrior and action woman [stereo]type, and/or emulates postfeminist girl heroes), embody a specific ‘Chinese femininity’ (one that associates with empowered, feisty, and/or emasculating femininities), and perform in a particular way (one that relies on stunt work, action choreography, and/or merging performing styles) in both cinemas that target potentially a global audience. Consequently, such representations to varying degrees distanced her from a national audience. Therefore, the dominant cultural perceptions that have defined Jing (the so-called narratives of individual failure) in China are in fact negative response to a series of negotiations taking place during the process of (transnational) film production which are nevertheless beyond the star’s own control.

The strained relations between China and the US since mid-2017 impacted the cinematic environment in both nations and signalled the decoupling of the Chinese film industry and Hollywood. As Wendy Su observed, the years 2017 and 2018 were characterised by diplomatic tensions between the two nations, during which the Chinese government tightened its control over Wanda’s overseas investment in 2017, followed by the Trump administration’s initiation of a trade war with China in 2018 (2019, p. 134). The US addressed concerns regarding China’s infiltration of American media since Wanda’s acquisition, and it became increasingly wary when the Chinese
government assigned the film division to the Party’s Ministry of Propaganda, which reinforced the film’s function as a party organ in 2018 (Zhu, 2022, pp. 243-244). The political tensions between China and the US inevitably cast a shadow over the relationship between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood, and consequently impact the transnational flow of Chinese acting labour to Hollywood. Given that stars have agency to navigate and negotiate within the industry, at this juncture, Jing’s redirection of her career focus back to the Chinese film and television industry in 2017 can be considered a strategic response to her employment condition in Hollywood and the changing dynamics between the Chinese film industry and Hollywood. Due to Hollywood’s lack of interest in investing further in her as a crossover star and the poor reception of her Hollywood career in China, Jing was situated in a predicament where she faced challenges in advancing her career and establishing herself as a star in Hollywood and simultaneously lacked popular acclaim in her homeland and its media environments. Considering the uncertain prospects regarding Sino-Hollywood relations at the time, Jing’s retreat to the Chinese film and television industry can be seen as a precautionary measure, but also a necessary step, given her limited alternatives.

The Sino-Hollywood (de)coupling not only affected Jing’s persona and career movement, but also continued to impact the reception of her star image in China following her retreat from Hollywood. Given that Jing’s negative reception in the Chinese public between 2011 and 2016 was closely associated with her presence in Hollywood and Hollywood, to establish celebrity status in China, she necessarily needed to sever ties with the transnational star persona and rebrand herself with a relatable star image to a home audience. While she succeeded in attaining celebrity status in China through a girl-next-door image that associates with normative femininities, her careers in Hollywood and Hollywood and the ‘transnational’ label persisted as reference points that adversely impacted her later career in China (2017-2021). The image of a ‘transnational star’ built in Hollywood and Hollywood not only elicited her negative reception in the domestic environment, but also created ruptures
and splits in her career and star image, both of which have played a part in the fickleness of her celebrity in her later career.

Ultimately, the label ‘transnational’ that had been firmly attached to Jing’s stardom through Huallywood and Hollywood is not a tangible status, but rather an illusory concept (inadvertently) created by the two competing and cooperating industries in the 2010s. By looking at a star who is conventionally deemed ‘unexceptional’ at a particular cultural moment like this, this research has demonstrated Jing’s value of rethinking the idea of transnational Chinese stardom in the wake of the changing Sino-Hollywood relations the 2010s. The idea of transnational Chinese stardom, which conventionally associates with Hollywood’s dominance, assimilation, and exploitation of Chinese acting talent (see Yu, 2012b, p. 2), has been challenged and complicated by the discursive power of the Chinese film industry and the commercial appeal of the Chinese market. As my examination of Jing’s career between 2011 and 2021 suggests, the employment of transnational stars/workers does not just reveal issues within the Hollywood film industry in relation to ‘racialisation, cultural and historical stereotyping, whitening, inclusion, and appropriation’ (Bandhauer and Royer, 2015, p. 6), but also sheds light on how these practices can be modified or sugar-coated through the way Hollywood makes exceptions to engage with the Chinese film industry and market. In some way, the Sino-Hollywood dynamics in the 2010s has decentralised the status of Hollywood as the authority over the idea of transnational stars. At the same time, the ‘transnational’ in the concept is also complicated whilst Hollywood deploys these concessional practices in the Chinese market. With Hollywood’s lack of interest in assimilating Chinese stars into its own industrial structure, the sense of ‘trans-’ is largely marginalised, if not entirely erased, in the idea of transnational Chinese stardom in the 2010s. As my research has demonstrated, while Jing may appear as a ‘small’ star without the perceived status of a transnational star as an object of study, she is an invaluable case that unveils the changing Sino-Hollywood relations and their impact on (re)shaping the understanding of transnational Chinese female stardom in the 2010s.
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