

Confidence in the strong motherland: heroism, patriotism and Chinese policies in the ‘*Wolf Warrior*’ films¹

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Abstract

The *Wolf Warrior* (战狼; Zhàn Láng) film series, directed by and starring Wu Jing in 2015 and 2017, is a Chinese action blockbuster that blends high-octane entertainment with ideological narratives. This article examines how the series represents a cinematic effort to promote Cultural Confidence (文化自信; Wénhuà Zìxìn), which emphasized Chinese heroism, patriotism, and collective strength supported by a strong motherland. By analyzing key scenes and dialogues—particularly those in *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017)—this study highlights how the films align with President Xi Jinping’s vision of a peaceful rise while juxtaposing China’s adherence to international norms against critiques of Western inefficacy and decline. Moving beyond conventional patriotic themes, the analysis explores the films’ dual roles as cultural diplomacy tools and reflections of China’s evolving global identity. The *Wolf Warrior* series encapsulates China’s geopolitical aspirations, particularly through narratives tied to the Belt and Road Initiative, while portraying a confident nation asserting its place in the global order. Ultimately, the series transcends its status as commercial entertainment to become a cinematic representation of China’s soft power and ideological ambitions.

Keywords: Wolf Warrior films; cultural confidence; heroism; patriotism; China’s policies

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Introduction

The *Wolf Warrior* (战狼; Zhàn láng) film series is a Chinese action franchise directed by and starring Wu Jing (also known as Jacky Wu 吴京). The series includes two films: *Wolf Warrior* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017). These films are not only conventional “main-melody” films (主旋律: Zhǔxuánlǜ) or typical state-sponsored films aimed at political-ideology propaganda, which are usually characterized by theme of socialism or patriotism (Chu & Stephen, 2022, pp.3-6). Instead, they are among the most influential film series ever produced in China, especially *Wolf Warrior 2*, which ranks as the second highest-grossing film in Mainland China's box office with a total gross of 5.69 billion Chinese Yuan (EnData Inc., n.d.). Globally, *Wolf Warrior 2* is also ranked 85th on Box Office Mojo's Top Lifetime Grosses list (n.d.-a), with a Worldwide Lifetime Gross of 870,325,439 USD, including 854,248,869 USD from China alone (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-b). The extraordinary commercial success of these films implicitly underscores their favoring with domestic audiences and their role as cultural artifacts of China's evolving global narrative.

We will now examine the films' plots, themes, and main villains to analyze their thematic shifts and broader implications.

Wolf Warrior (2015)

Plot

The film follows the story of Leng Feng (played by Wu Jing), a highly skilled Chinese special forces soldier who becomes entangled in a conflict with foreign mercenaries. Leng Feng's journey involves rescuing hostages and confronting powerful adversaries, including Tom Cat - the main antagonist of the story who is a former American Navy SEAL turned mercenary. The film is set against the backdrop of Chinese borders and a Southeast Asian location.

Themes

The movie explores themes of Chinese individualism, heroism, and patriotism. It sets the stage for the character Leng Feng as a symbol of Chinese military skillfulness and determination.

Main Villain

Tom Cat, played by a British actor, Scott Adkins, is introduced as a skilled and dangerous former American Navy SEAL who becomes a mercenary. The character of Tom Cat symbolizes a foreign threat to China and supports the film's patriotic themes. The choice of an American villain can be seen as a reflection of geopolitical tensions and a critique of foreign interference. Additionally, the conflict between Leng Feng and Tom Cat underscores the clash between Chinese and foreign military prowess. It contributes to the film's portrayal of China as a capable force against external threats.

Wolf Warrior 2 (2017)

Plot

In the sequel, Leng Feng finds himself in a fictionalized African war zone, suffering under a ruthless militia. The film illustrates China's more assertive stance in geopolitics, especially in Africa (Teo, 2019, p.329). Leng Feng in the film is still mainly tasked with rescuing Chinese nationals, but in the process he decided to protect African family members and friends of these Chinese nationals as well.

Themes

Wolf Warrior 2 extends the themes of heroism and patriotism, further highlighting China's growing influence on the global stage. The film not only suggests a decline in Western powers but also underscores China's military strength. Nevertheless, it emphasizes China's peaceful ascent and respects the principles of international law.

Main Villain

Big Daddy (played by American actor, Frank Grillo), again, is an American antagonist and a ruthless warlord operating in an African war zone. His character is portrayed as a symbol of Western mercenaries who are corrupt, oppressive, and exploit the region. Similar to the first film, the choice of an American villain in *Wolf Warrior 2* reflects the film's critique of Western powers.

We can see that the main narrative of both films involves the power struggle between Leng Feng—the symbol of Chinese heroism, and the white American mercenaries. The portrayal of the main antagonist inevitably implies the film's geopolitical messaging between China and the United States. However, according to details of plots and themes, Leng Feng's task in *Wolf Warrior* (2015) is only to fight against foreign threats that offend within Chinese borders, while *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) his mission is expanded to an overseas country. From *Wolf Warrior* (2015) to its sequel, the films' plots are shifted from self-defense operation to more assertive protection of Chinese interests and allies overseas. This evolution from a defensive posture to an assertive global role implies China's rising confidence in the nation's strength and its ambition to project power beyond its borders.

The *Wolf Warrior* films are notable for their high production values, intense action scenes, and their representation of China as a powerful and assertive country. They have been commercially successful and have contributed to the popularity of Chinese action cinema, especially domestically, which emphasize their role in promoting a sense of national pride and unity in China. The *Wolf Warrior* series, including themes of heroism, patriotism and especially in *Wolf Warrior 2*—China's Confidence, is a reflection of China's evolving role in global affairs. The next section will describe the shift in Chinese foreign policy from Deng Xiaoping's 'Hide and Bide' or 'Low profile' approach (韬光养晦; Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì) in 1989 to Xi Jinping's 'Cultural Confidence' (文化自信; Wénhuà zìxìn) in 2016, and explore the portrayal of heroism and patriotism in the films to better understand China's rise and policies.

Setting the Stage: From 'Hide and Bide' to 'Cultural Confidence'

Evolving from Deng Xiaoping's "Hide and Bide" strategy in 1989 to Xi Jinping's emphasis on "Cultural Confidence" in 2016, China's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation. This shift reflects changes in China's global ambitions, national identity, and approach to foreign relations. As this article aims to convey, the *Wolf Warrior* films can be seen as compelling evidence of the ambitions and policies pursued under President Xi Jinping's leadership, particularly his vision of a confident and assertive China on the global stage.

Deng Xiaoping's "Hide and Bide"

In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Incident and during the early stages of China's economic reforms, also known as "Reform and Opening up" (改革开放; Gǎigé Kāifàng), Deng Xiaoping introduced the "Hide and Bide" strategy. This approach prioritized economic growth and domestic stability while maintaining a low profile in international affairs. The core principles of this strategy included avoiding confrontation with other major powers and building internal strength, with a particular focus on economic reform and modernization (Pang, 2020, pp.1-4). The "Hide its capabilities and Bide its time" strategy was a pragmatic

approach during a period when China was still consolidating its economic foundation and global influence after the Century of Humiliation—a term that refers to the period between the mid-19th century and the early 20th century when China faced military defeats, unequal treaties, and foreign occupation (Pella, 2024, p.10).

However, as China's economic and political power grew, this low-profile stance became increasingly incompatible with its rising ambitions to assert leadership in global governance, expand economic influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³, and actively shape international norms and institutions.

Xi Jinping's "Cultural Confidence"

In contrast to Deng's cautious approach, Xi Jinping's leadership marks a more assertive and confident phase in China's foreign policy. The introduction of the "Four Matters of Confidence" (四个自信; Sì gè Zìxìn) in 2016 reflects this shift. Building upon the "Three Confidences" (三个自信; Sān gè Zìxìn) proposed by former President Hu Jintao in 2012, Xi added a fourth dimension—"Confidence in the Culture." (China.org.cn, n.d.).

These four confidences represent key ideological pillars for the Chinese people and the Communist Party of China (CPC), including: **Confidence in the path** (道路自信; Dàolù zìxìn): Belief in China's unique developmental model. **Confidence in the theory** (理论自信; Lǐlùn zìxìn): Trust in socialism with Chinese characteristics as the guiding theory. **Confidence in the system** (制度自信; Zhìdù zìxìn): Faith in the CPC-led political and governance systems. **Confidence in the culture** (文化自信; Wénhuà zìxìn): Pride in Chinese culture and its contributions to global civilization.

Since 2021, Xi Jinping has mentioned several times in his speeches about the importance of "Historical Confidence" (历史自信; Lìshǐ zìxìn) (Qiushi Journal, 2022). This emphasizes the importance of China's historical achievements and cultural heritage as sources of national pride and resilience. Together, these ideologies reflect China's evolving identity and its determination to reclaim a central role in global affairs.

The transition from "Hide and Bide" to "Cultural Confidence" is vividly reflected in the *Wolf Warrior* film series. The films' narratives mirror this ideological shift, especially China's assertiveness and growing influence on the world stage. While Deng's strategy prioritized discretion and self-restraint, the *Wolf Warrior* films portray a China that is unafraid to project its strength and protect its interests overseas. This evolution aligns with Xi Jinping's vision of a strong and confident China, grounded in cultural pride and historical achievement.

The *Wolf Warrior* films, blending patriotic storytelling with geopolitical messaging, exemplify how cultural confidence can be leveraged as a form of soft power. The next sections will focus on key scenes that highlight heroism and patriotism, and will explore how these films promote "Cultural Confidence" while aligning with broader policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Peaceful Rise narrative.

Individual Heroism?

Many reviewers observed that one of the main themes in *Wolf Warrior* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) is individualism. This section, deliberately punctuated with a question mark, questions the conventional notion for the theme of individual heroism. While Leng Feng's talent allows him to overcome numerous antagonists throughout *Wolf Warrior* (2015)

³ The BRI, launched in 2013, is a global development strategy initiated by China to enhance regional connectivity and economic integration through infrastructure investment and partnerships across Asia, Africa, and beyond.

and its sequel *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), a question remains: Can individual heroism truly solve the complex problems presented in the climactic scenes of both films?

Contrary to the Western individual heroism, where one person can defeat an entire army, Chinese individual heroism—embodied by Leng Feng—cannot resolve problems without the support of a strong motherland, as shown in the final scene of both films (Chen et al., 2021, p.210).



Figure 1: (Wu, 2015)



Figure 2: (Wu, 2015)

In *Wolf Warrior* (2015), although Leng Feng does not fear the mercenaries in front of him, he cannot resolve this problem by himself. Until Chinese armies join in time, he has more confidence in defeating the enemy. (Figure 1 and 2)

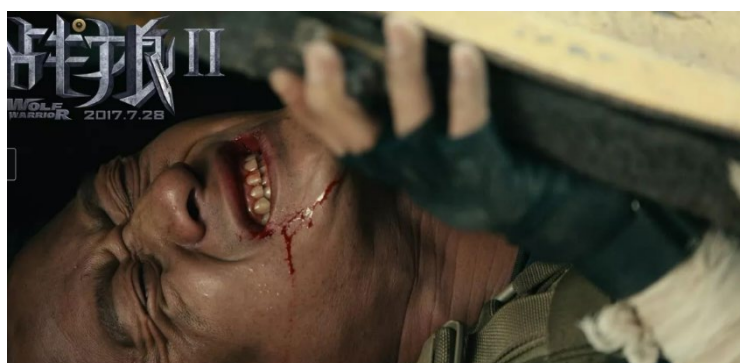


Figure 3: (Sangzhi Huayao International Cinema, 2017)



Figure 4: (Wu, 2017)

In *Wolf Warrior 2*, Leng Feng and his friends are hopelessly unable to fight against the rebels with many tanks. Chinese and African workers are terrified. However, when the strong Chinese navy comes to help, although quite late because of waiting for permission from the United Nations (UN), they feel confident and able to turn the situation from bad to good. (Figure 3 and 4)

These films challenge the idea of an individual hero solving everything alone. They highlight how working together and having strong support from the homeland is crucial. The clear takeaway is that Leng Feng's heroism truly shines when he is part of a united effort. These narratives underscore a unique Chinese style of heroism and the importance of national strength. Moreover, they emphasize that China's strength comes from unity and this strength brings confidence to be Chinese.

Flag-Waving: Patriotism and Confidence in China



Figure 5: (Douban, 2017)

“犯我中华者，虽远必诛” (Fàn wǒ zhōnghuá zhě, suī yuǎn bì zhū), translated as "Those who offend China will be punished no matter how far away they are," originates from the phrase “明犯強漢者，雖遠必誅” (Míng fàn qiáng hàn zhě, suī yuǎn bì zhū; "Those who offend the great Han will be punished no matter how far away they are"). This excerpt, found in volume 70 of *the Book of Han* 《汉书》, written during the Eastern Han Period (25–220 AD), was originally used to demonstrate the strength of the Han Dynasty over foreign

barbarians. The slogan was later revived to promote the poster for *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), symbolizing China's confidence and power on the international stage (Figure 5).

Additionally, various scenes in the film series, particularly in *Wolf Warrior 2*, vividly portray themes of patriotism and Cultural Confidence in China.



Figure 6: (Wu, 2017)

First, an African rebel warns his American ally, Big Daddy, saying, “Don’t kill Chinese. Their government is the only permanent member of the United Nations Security Council – member presence here!” This statement reflects confidence in China's powerful international standing (Figure 6). Several scenes in the film further emphasize that, in times of trouble or chaos, the Chinese characters find reassurance in their identity, knowing that ‘being Chinese’ ensures their safety, backed by a strong motherland.



Figure 7: (Wu, 2017)

For example, in one scene, an Overseas Chinese store owner in Africa firstly claims, “I’m not Chinese anymore.” However, when confronted with the rebellion, he instinctively turns to the Chinese embassy for safety and declares, “We are Chinese!” (Figure 7). This shift from self-denial to pride underscores the film’s message: China’s cultural and political rise enables its citizens, even abroad, to feel secure and proud of their heritage.



Figure 8: (Wu, 2017)

In the third scene, when Leng Feng and his group needed to pass through an area engulfed in a fierce clash, they simply shouted "We are Chinese," which allowed them to walk through safely. (Figure 8)



Figure 9: (Wu, 2017)

In the fourth scene, flag-waving, Leng Feng's team have to pass through a chaotic area controlled by African rebels. Initially, they prepare their guns to fight, but Leng Feng changes his mind and decides to wave the Chinese flag instead. As soon as the Chinese flag is displayed, they remain safe, and the African rebels shout, "Don't shoot the Chinese people." (Figure 9)

Leng Feng waving a Chinese flag is one of the most iconic scenes in *Wolf Warrior 2*. This moment expresses the notion of "Cultural Confidence." By displaying the flag, the film asserts that China's identity and global presence are recognized and respected even in volatile regions.



Figure 10: (Wu, 2017)

In the final scene of *Wolf Warrior 2*, a patriotic quote from the Chinese passport is displayed: "Citizens of the People's Republic of China: When you encounter danger overseas, don't give up! Remember, there is a strong motherland behind you!" (Figure 10). Berry (2018, p.41) suggests that this patriotic message is not coincidental. He traced back to the historical context of Yemen's turmoil in 2015. At that time, the Chinese government had the ability to assist its citizens, and also some African, in times of crisis.

"My favorite was the scene of the passport at the very end of the film when the passport says that no matter where I am, a powerful country is behind me. This made me feel very safe, very emotional." (Talmacs, 2020, p.1236). This sentiment was expressed by a

Chinese university student after watching *Wolf Warrior 2*. We can see the Cultural confidence in this film, and also the confidence made by this film series.

China Daily (2023) interviewed Chinese students about their confidence in China. The article noted that patriotism and confidence among these youths have increased due to the nation's enhanced international standing, comprehensive strength, economic progress, and advancements in education. It also asserted that being patriotic does not mean inward-looking or narrow-minded. “[Although] they are proud to be Chinese, traditional Chinese culture has also taught them to be modest and keep a low profile, so they will continue to be open to the world and make friends with all countries.”

The next section will explore the film's geopolitical dimension and its alignment with China's foreign policy.

Mirroring the Geopolitical Dimensions and China’s Peaceful (Yet Powerful) Rise

The *Wolf Warrior* film series reflects China's regionalization strategies, particularly those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The films set their narratives in fictional locations resembling regions in Southeast Asia (*Wolf Warrior 1*) and Africa (*Wolf Warrior 2*), areas where many countries are participants in the BRI. These settings also represent the Rise of China in both economic and military power in assertive geopolitical dimensions (Teo, 2019, p.327).

In *Wolf Warrior 2*, Leng Feng and other Chinese characters live and invest in Africa. Also, the two characters in this film, Doctor Chen and Zhou Yifan, obviously illustrate the Chinese aid and investment in Africa (Yang, 2023, p.1060).



Figure 11: Doctor Chen (Wu, 2017)



Figure 12: Saint Francis China Hospital (Wu, 2017)

Doctor Chen, a Chinese doctor working at the Saint Francis China—a facility funded by Chinese aid—represents as the symbol of medical aids from China to the Global South countries (Figure 11 and 12). The hospital reflects the film’s ambition to show China’s goodwill efforts and enhance its global image through medical aid.



Figure 13: Zhou Yifan (IMDb, n.d.)

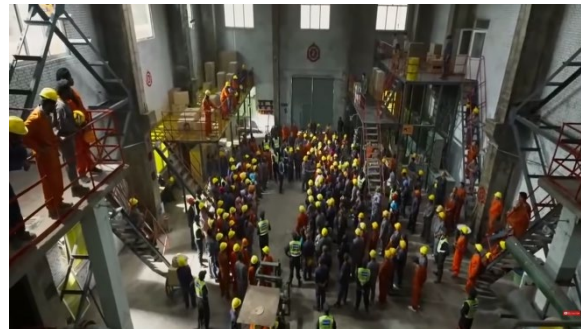


Figure 14: workers of a Chinese factory in Africa (Wu, 2017)

Zhou Yifan, a young Chinese entrepreneur and owner of a Chinese factory in Africa, represents Chinese economic investment in this region. His character demonstrates how Chinese investments provide opportunities for overseas Chinese while creating jobs and stimulating local economies. The film portrays the dual benefits of China's economic initiatives for both Chinese nationals and host countries. This, in turn, can be seen as 'propaganda' promoting the advantages of participating in the BRI. (Figure 13 and 14)

Paradoxically, despite the harsh slogan on the promotional poster, the film includes moments suggesting China's "Peaceful Rise"—a concept associated with China's ambition to grow economically and politically without provoking conflict. For instance, the marshal's dialogue emphasizes respect for international law and diplomacy. However, this narrative of peace is complicated by the films' reliance on military power and action-oriented storytelling.

The films also echo China as an emerging power that practices mutual respect and tolerance towards the inefficient Western-led international organization. This portrayal reflects China's adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014).



Figure 15: The marshal (Wu, 2017)



Figure 16: (Wu, 2017)

The marshal symbolizes China's peaceful yet powerful rise. Although he commands a powerful Chinese navy, he remains committed to respecting international law, even in critical situations, particularly in a climax scene where the Chinese navy waits for UN permission before taking action. Despite the anxiety among the soldiers over the protagonists and civilians at risk, they exercise restraint (Figure 16). The marshal's words underscore this mutual respect: "If the UN doesn't allow it, my army won't be able to enter the border either." (Figure 15). This respect for international norms demonstrates China's diplomatic commitment, even in critical situations. However, it is interesting that the heavy reliance on military might throughout the films, including battles against Western mercenaries, complicate the narrative of peace.



Figure 17: (Wu, 2017)



Figure 18: (Wu, 2017)

There are also some satirical elements in *Wolf Warrior 2* to critique the perceived inefficiency of Western-led organizations and the apparent decline of Western influence. For instance, after the United Nations sends helicopters to evacuate workers from a factory, but a few minutes later, UN helicopters are quickly shot down and destroyed (Figure 17). Compare to the passport scene (Figure 10), which assures Chinese overseas of the strong support from their motherland, these scenes and Leng Feng's dialogues with Rachel show differences in governmental responsibility and efficacy, especially in times of crisis.

Leng Feng remarks, "I saw the stars and stripes flag on one of the ships leaving the continent this morning," and pointedly asks, "When you are in danger overseas, where is your country?" (Figure 18), reinforces this critique. While these moments illustrate a strong sense of patriotism and cultural confidence, they also reflect the propagandistic tone of the films, which contrasts sharply with their claim of a peaceful rise.

Conclusion

The *Wolf Warrior* film series, led by Wu Jing's portrayal of Leng Feng, intertwines action-packed sequences with themes of heroism, patriotism, and China's geopolitical aspirations. These films not only serve as a multifaceted cinematic narrative but also aim to promote cultural confidence of a nation rising to prominence on both domestic and international stages.

Through Leng Feng's journey, the films challenge Western individualist hero tropes and emphasize the collective strength and unity that underpin China's modern identity. This perspective aligns with Xi Jinping's ideological framework of Cultural Confidence that China is the nation both resilient and capable on the world stage.

Beyond entertainment, the films operate as instruments of Chinese cultural diplomacy and elaboration of China's ambitions to assert its presence in global affairs—from a hidden nation to a confident major power. The *Wolf Warrior* films also showcase a dual narrative: China as a rising power committed to peaceful development and adherence to international norms, and as a nation ready to challenge Western dominance through strength and resilience.

Lastly, the *Wolf Warrior* series exemplifies how popular media can contribute to national pride and policy ambitions. It provides a vivid portrayal of China's evolving global identity, blending cultural confidence, diplomatic strategy, and a redefinition of heroism. These films are not merely commercial blockbusters but cultural artifacts that encapsulate China's aspirations and its pursuit of a prominent role in shaping the future global order. Therefore, films are not only a medium for entertainment but also literary evidence to understand the implicit dynamics behind the scenes.

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