The *Wuxia* Films of Zhang Yimou: A Genre in Transit

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In this chapter, I will examine the role of the modern cinematic *xia* warrior as a figure of change – a transitional entity both within the historical continuum of the *wuxia* genre itself, as well as a harbinger of transnationalism within twenty-first century cinema. The successful (and commercially profitable) assimilation of the *wuxia* genre within the cinematic landscape of the global West, I argue, is representative of the growing political dissatisfaction with Euro-American systems of governance. Indeed, the *xia* warrior's characteristically anti-authoritarian stance has found a place within the disillusioned and increasingly dissenting cultural consciousness of the Western world – precisely because the thematic subject matter of these films (the futile attempts of the individual or a group of individuals to overthrow powerful and corrupt governments) is one that resonates with the rise of contemporary neo-conservatism and the growing populism of authoritarian, far-right politics in Western societies (Teo 2009; Lau 2007). I argue that the transnational popularity of the *wuxia* genre within the socio-political West can be attributed to the political dissidence of the *xia* warrior, a figure that, as I outline below, effectively embodies for Western audiences an appealing anti-authoritarianism as well as a resistance to traditional socio-political power structures (Teo 2009; Shih 2007; Mainon and Ursini 2006; Martin 2005; Yeh and Davis 2005; Chan 2004; Klein 2004). In particular, I

will examine three of Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou's popular *wuxia* films that have successfully transitioned from the Asian market to international audiences: *Hero* (2002); *House of Flying Daggers* (2004); and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). I propose to examine these films in light of the ways in which Yimou first utilises the *wuxia* genre as a radically dissident form, as well as the ways in which his later *wuxia* films have, conversely, presented less politically dissident narratives. In doing so, I will argue that the contemporary *wuxia* has been transmuted from its origins as a revolutionary form to an altogether far more conservative political vehicle, as the genre transitions from a national to a transnational (Western) cinematic form.[1]

While focusing on the works of a single director might, at first, appear to present a certain conflict between auteur studies and discussions of the *wuxia* genre as a whole, this chapter will show that Yimou's *wuxia* films represent a larger arc within the development of the genre as a transnational form. While Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) was undoubtedly the first of the *wuxia pian* (Chinese swordplay) films to attain global success, it is Yimou who is largely identified as the harbinger of the *wuxia* form in modern Hollywood. Yimou's films are, of course, representative of a much larger genre, the origins of which (outlined below) are to be found in early *youxia* stories, Chinese literary tales dating back to before the Common Era. However, since the turn of the millennium, Yimou has become largely synonymous with the genre. Yimou's gradual acceptance within mainstream Western cinema has been marked by his increased capitulation to Western cinematic aesthetics: his most recent

film, *The Great Wall* (2017), sees Matt Damon's European mercenary defend the Great Wall of China from being overrun by monsters; while in another, 2011's *The Flowers of War*, Christian Bale finds himself as protectorate of a group of Chinese prostitutes during the second Sino-Japanese war. Both of these offerings embrace the transnational, neo-imperialist assumptions of Hollywood filmmaking that sees predominantly white, Western film stars take on character roles in spite of their cultural and/or racial unsuitability for these parts – the assumption of which, moreover, presents as global (even transnational) certain cultural-historical narratives and/or experiences that Hollywood has appropriated and whitewashed, so to speak. (One example of this practice that has garnered much criticism is the casting of Scarlett Johansson as The Major in *Ghost in the Shell* [2017], Rupert Sanders' adaptation of the Japanese manga of the same name by Masamune Shirow.) My intention is to examine the ways in which Yimou's millennial *wuxia* films can be shown not only to initiate the director's move into Hollywood, but – more importantly – the ways in which the films' transnational aesthetics is reflected in Yimou's gradual transmutation of the genre itself and in the shifting of its ideological parameters.

According to Stephen Teo, there is no satisfactory English translation of the term "wuxia" in use . The term itself is derived from a combination of two very distinct yet frequently indistinguishable concepts: "*wu*," denoting martial or militaristic qualities, and "*xia*," the combined concepts of chivalry and gallantry. The closest translation of the hybridised figure of the Chinese *wuxia* is "knight-errant," deriving from the proper word "*youxia*,"

meaning "wandering avenger" (Teo 2009: 3). The *youxia* refers to a martial artist who follows a particular code, the code of *xia*, which applies the concepts of chivalry, altruism, justice, and righteousness to martial engagement. Traditionally, the *xia* warrior fights for justice, righteousness, and the freedom from political oppression of the common well-being. He (indeed the warrior usually is a "he") often travels around the country seeking vengeance or retribution for deeds committed against innocent women and children, or those mistreated by governing bodies. The *xia* offers his own retributive justice for crimes committed against his kin and the wider body of his clan or people. He is conscious and mindful of what it is to be motivated by the desire to kill in revenge, and, as such, he is discerning in this retribution–thus abiding by a chivalrous martial code. Liminal by definition, perennially in transit, it is the figure of the modern *xia* or the "wandering avenger" that I will examine in terms of its underlining political ideology.

The *wuxia* film first came to prominence as a consequence of increased national desire for a Chinese domestic cinema that would unify resources from the various film industries in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong (Zhang 2011: 17). Concurrent to the planned amalgamation of cinematic territory, China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) emphasised the need for a strong national imagery. As Teo notes, the *wuxia* form, which presented images of down-and-out plebeian soldiers who nevertheless embodied the qualities of *yi* (righteousness), *xin* (trust), *gong* (meritorious service), *jie* (tidiness), and *rang* (tolerance), offered a stolid image of China that unified national and cultural pride (2009: 18). Regardless of the personal politics

of their directors, and because of the express need to maintain national dignity, many *wuxia* films of the early twentieth century (such as those produced by the Shaw Brothers) expressed strong patriotic sentiments, which, as Laikwan Pang points out, further augmented a strong sense of Chinese pride in the face of Japan's growing military might and impending invasion in the 1930s (2011: 58). Almost immediately following the end of the Second Sino-Japanese war with Japan (1937-45), China was wracked by civil war. During this period, predominantly urban audiences called not for purely escapist films to forget about the country-wide upheaval, but for films that confronted the devastating effects of war (Pickowicz 2011: 76). Post-war filmmakers did so by creating sensational epics and family melodramas which functioned as microcosmic national analogies, as well as Soviet-style social realist films (Ward 2011: 87). The *wuxia* genre, which abstracted reality through its use of the martial arts techniques such as *Qinggong*–which is, most recognisably, the ability of achieving weightlessness–was criticised heavily by intellectuals for being "divorced from reality" (Teo 2009: 10). The subsequent ban on the perceived anti-establishment *wuxia* genre only served to foreground the role of the avenging *xia* as an a*gent provocateur* of sorts, whose own brand of judicious retribution contrasted with that of the totalitarianism of the communist ruling party of the period. The *wuxia* genre was considered too abstractedly modern, and it sought to do away with the "old customs, cowardly actions, [and] corrupt thinking" of Chinese governments (Teo 2009: 30). Many conservatives of the time feared that the genre might incite an uprising, and were quick to point out that *wuxia* contained too much *wu* (violence) and not enough *xia* (chivalry) (Teo

2009: 40). It was not until the late-twentieth century–when Chinese cinema moved away from its overt politicism to the more subtle politics of capitalist commercialisation–that the *wuxia* genre became a viable medium for the globalised dissemination of Chinese cultural history (Larson 2011: 113).

The most famous of those directors working in China during this period was Zhang Yimou, whose debut in 1987, *Red Sorghum*, was the first of his many films to deal with Chinese history and the processes of historiography (or the study of written histories and the ways in which history is recorded). Yimou's most internationally acclaimed *wuxia* films all invoke mythical notions of ancient China and deal with the ways in which the construction of China's historical past is transmuted to a reliance on historiography (Teo 2009: 6). Yimou's *wuxia* films have often played fast and loose with historical accuracy while nevertheless maintaining international audiences' interests in long-winded, emotionally charged, and often erotic epics. From its abstracted nationalist politics in China, the *wuxia* genre underwent a transition that repositioned it as a vehicle for modern commercialism that appealed to contemporary Western audiences. Indeed, the cultural transplantation of certain film stars from Asia to North America (such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan) certainly helped to market Chinese *wuxia* films to Western audiences, fostering a burgeoning culture of cinematic transnationalism (Hunt 2009: 142).

However, it was with the release of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that the *wuxia pian* (Chinese swordplay film) first attained transnational popularity in Western cinema, and which paved the way for Yimou's transmigration of the *wuxia* genre. In the

modern era of increasingly rapid globalisation and easy mobility, *Crouching Tiger*'s revival of the genre represented "a shot in the arm to a declining industry" (Chan 2011: 152). The film's screenwriter, James Schamus, has claimed that *Crouching Tiger* is about "a crisis of cultural transmission" (Teo 2009: 176)–about the ways in which cultural ideologies are transmitted and transition across time, from one historical epoch to another, and between different political systems of governance. Teo is just one of many scholars to have criticised *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* for its orientalist essentialism of Chinese history as "seeking to be universally accepted while at the same time locating itself within the historicist confines of the nation-state" (2009: 172). Indeed, orientalism is an implicit part of *Crouching Tiger*'s success in the West. The *wuxia* films of Lee and Yimou have augmented culturally essentialist visions of China as a timeless abstraction of very real political, historical, and social conditions, positing a more generally recognisable image of China that panders to Western cinematic conventions (such as the film's many shots of barren, desolate Chinese landscapes; the decidedly orientalised costuming and production design; and the characters' archaic and anachronistic speech patterns and syntax). Christina Klein believes that the film evinces a "selective accommodation" to and a "creative entanglement" with American musical pictures (2004: 32). Indeed, the many highly stylised and choreographed martial arts sequences are structurally analogous to the musical numbers in those films. While Whitney Crothers Dilley makes much of the "Chinese-American"-isms of the diasporic cast and crew (2007: 134), Kenneth Chan pointedly remarks that *Crouching Tiger* is often "considered a Hollywood product" (2011:

150). For example, the insertion of the unrequited love-romance plot between Chow Yun Fat and Michelle Yeoh's characters (which is neither a part of the *wuxia* tradition, in general, nor Wang Du Lu's original novel on which Lee's film is loosely based) is one such motif that adds an element of Hollywood pathos, and is a sign of the genre's "Hollywoodization." American producer/screenwriter James Schamus's guiding hand is another. Indeed, the *wuxia* genre's constant shifting between (and acknowledgement of) its Chinese cultural roots and its trans-nationalist position in world cinema suggest that its international success hangs in large part on the intermediary role that the genre has occupied in cross-cultural relations. Zhang Yimou's *wuxia* films followed Ang Lee's new historical lead–reconstructing Chinese-ness often from the point of view of the politically displaced *xia* figure, who seems to embody for Yimou more than just the qualities of chivalrous retribution.

In *Hero*, Yimou's first post-millennial *wuxia* to attain critical and commercial global acclaim, a nameless assassin (Jet Li) arrives at the palace of the Emperor of Qin during a period of great war, claiming to have assassinated three of the Emperor's greatest foes. On the assassin's arrival, the Emperor is told that a "great hero from Qin has single-handedly wiped out the enemy," and that "Heaven has sent a great warrior to vanquish the assassins." Interestingly, it seems the Nameless *wuxia* assassin is structured initially as an agent of the Emperor. (This is very much in contravention to the historical precedent of the *xia* warrior, who is, as I have mentioned, traditionally an anti-establishment avenger.) For eliminating his three greatest foes, the Emperor permits Nameless to advance within ten paces of the royal

throne to drink with him. What transpires, however, is that Nameless is in fact a *xia* warrior who wishes to assassinate the Emperor, and who has convinced the Emperor's foes to submit their weapons to him as proof of their supposed deaths. With this proof, Nameless seeks to get close enough to the Emperor in order to enact a "deadly manoeuvre" which will kill the Emperor and bring an end to his bloody campaign to unite the warring lands of China. In doing so, Nameless also wishes to satiate his desire for revenge against the Qin government, whose army, we are told, murdered his people and destroyed his village. As it transpires, he is the traditional avenging knight-errant who has mastered the *xia* code of martial artistry, and who has spent his time in training for this specific purpose.

Most significant in *Hero* is the relationship between fact and Nameless's verbal reconstruction of his supposed defeat of the Emperor's enemies. Yimou's film interrogates the validity of a single, authorised historical narrative by foregrounding the historicity of accepted "fact." In order to gain the Emperor's trust, Nameless recounts to him the supposed deaths of the three great assassins, which is shown within the film's diegesis as a series of flashback episodes. Nameless begins with the account of his battle with Long Sky (Donnie Yen) and describes his attempt to apprehend the assassin at a chess parlour. After a few warm-up moves, Nameless and Sky are shown to pause as the "combat unfolded within the depths of [their] minds." At first, both warriors appear to be running through their battle tactics in their own minds, as each imagines the various moves and countermoves the other will make. What transpires, however, is that Nameless and Sky are not, in fact, imagining victory over their

opponent; rather, they are recalling the series of planned moves that they have previously rehearsed in order that Nameless might administer a non-fatal wound to Sky–thus making it appear as though he has killed him. Sky willingly submits to this, as his supposed death means that Nameless is able to get close to the Emperor to assassinate him. Thus, while the battle appears at first to be a simple, historicised account of Nameless's defeat of Sky (recounted by Nameless for the Emperor), it transpires that Nameless's narrative itself is an historiographised,[2] imaginary account–an imagined history that is designed to misdirect both the Emperor and the film's audience. What appears to be a straightforward account of a series of events is thus shown by Yimou to be nothing more than imagined or narrativised history.

Yimou elects to populate the chess parlour with a crowd of musicians who not only provide musical accompaniment to the battle between Nameless and Sky, but whose presence also underlines the seeming validity of Nameless's account. Their presence subtly implies an alternate point of view to the scene, thereby reinforcing for the viewer the seeming authenticity of Nameless's story (i.e., the idea that others have born witness to these events). Yimou also employs a black and white filter (in contrast to the rest of the film's Technicolor), a structuring device that allows the viewer to retrospectively discern between historical fact and Nameless's imagined history. In other words, the use of this filter allows the film's audience to distinguish between the various states of action that actually occur within the historical diegesis of the film, and those supposed actions that are re-imagined by Nameless or that have never happened at all. Historical fact (what has actually happened within the film's diegesis) is seen in retrospect

to be historiographical meta-fiction. *Hero* becomes an allegory of truth and an allegory of the processes by which so-called “official history” is recorded as a matter of (in this case) verbal construction (Teo 2009: 187). Yimou’s film underlines the ways in which so-called truth is historiographised, and the ways in which acts of fictional narration are historicised and reified as fact. The Nameless *xia* knight problematizes the notion of state authority and challenges the autocratic purity of the nation state by conflating ostensible fact with imagined fiction, thereby emphasising the ways in which historical “fact” can be viewed as a series of constructed historiographised fictions. At first, Nameless seems to represent the interests of the Emperor. It is only as the film’s narrative progresses that the audience understands him to be a shadowy revolutionary figure, a countercultural insurgent who successfully breeds paranoia amongst the ruling elite. Indeed, Nameless represents a threat from within the Emperor’s own kingdom, a counter-cultural force that masquerades as an agent of the Emperor, but who manipulates narrative and the act of storytelling in order to bring about political change by literally changing historical fact within the diegesis.

In much the same way that Nameless represented a counter-cultural threat from within the Qin government in *Hero*, Yimou’s 2004 film, *House of Flying Daggers*, takes the notion of the hidden revolutionary threat to the ruling elite to a much greater level. From the beginning of the film, we are told that the once mighty Tang Dynasty is in decline: the government is weakened and the underground alliance of the “Flying Daggers” has revolted against the imperial capital by forcibly returning wealth from the rich to the poor. Two local policemen,

Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro) and Leo (Andy Lau), plan to track down this underground alliance by following one of their suspected members, a blind show-dancer called Mei (Zhang Ziyi), believing her to be the daughter of the former leader of the Flying Daggers, who was murdered by their government. Jin dons the guise of a *xia* knight called Master Wind, who, he claims, "wander[s] around all alone," and who "come[s] and go[es] without a trace" like a "playful wind." He has mastered the weaponry skills of the *xia* and is adept with an axe and bow. He rescues Mei (in fact, he lets her go on purpose), in the hopes that she will lead him and his men to the hiding place of the Flying Daggers. During the course of this deception, Jin is forced to do battle with his own compatriots, and he must kill them in order to make his seeming defection from the Tang government legitimate to Mei.

However, virtually no-one is who they seem in this film: Mei is, in fact, not blind, but an effective undercover agent for the Flying Daggers, while Leo is a double-agent who is placed within the government to keep the Flying Daggers informed. Yimou's film initially positions itself as sympathetic to the Tang government's attempts to drive the Flying Daggers out, and it makes much of the unseen yet encroaching might of the Tang Dynasty army. Yet, through the film's gradual exposure of the characters' deceptions, the viewers' alliances are inevitably shifted from the invisible ruling class to the earthy appeal of the Flying Daggers. "The Flying Daggers are always moving," Mei states. The film makes clear that the appeal of the Flying Daggers is attributed largely to the transient lives they lead, and to their very ability to move outside of the political structures that seek to oppress them. The Flying Daggers represent a

counter-cultural movement who resist traditional power structures (albeit through violent means). Jin's performance as an avenging *xia*-spirit, who apparently rescues Mei as an affront to the Tang government, is counterpointed by the revelation that Mei is a highly skilled *nüxia* warrior (female *xia*) herself. However, in spite of the counter-cultural ideologies that Yimou courts in his use of the *wuxia* genre, *House of Flying Daggers* is ultimately a cautionary tale against political uprising, and one which significantly reinforces political and social illiberalism. This is very much in-keeping with those Chinese filmmakers of the 1930s whose *wuxia* films reflected not the common desires of the proletariat for social and political change, but upheld the conservative politics of the ruling elite.

The shift in Yimou's political tone across his various *wuxia* films (from the revolutionary message of *Hero* to the purported anti-establishmentarianism of *House of Flying Daggers*) is most clearly seen in his 2006 film, *Curse of the Golden Flower*. Though not strictly a *wuxia* film in the neo-traditional mould, this film is significant both for understanding of the appeal the *wuxia* genre has within western cinema, as well as for examining the apotheosis of the genre–or its transition from one form of politics to another. Set in 928AD, *Curse of the Golden Flower* recounts the attempts of a Tang Dynasty Empress to overthrow her domineering, tyrannical husband. Unbeknownst to the Empress, her husband has been poisoning her slowly, hoping to eventually drive her insane–but also, more pointedly, to numb her and to prevent any attempts she might make at political insurgency. Unbeknownst to the Emperor, the Empress is having an affair with her stepson and is also plotting to reinstate her

first-born as the head of state. The traditional *xia* knight-errant does not actually appear in *Curse of the Golden Flower*–save, perhaps, in the guise of the *nüxia*-figure of the Emperor's former lover, a female assassin dressed in black and skilled in martial arts, who seeks vengeance on the Emperor by aiding the Empress. However, the political message Yimou espouses in this film (which has been embodied in the personae of the knight-errant figures in his previous *wuxia*) is brought nicely to a conclusive, if unsubtle, head. Yimou does away with the wandering *xia* and the heroic codes of chivalry, as the political message that he has hinted at throughout the career of his *wuxia* in the West–the questioning of imperial law, the incitement to insurgency and revolution, and the use of the *xia*-figure as a force of socio-political change–is quashed firmly through the Emperor's continually-repeated edict: "what I do not give, you should not take by force." This edict serves as a constant reminder within the film of the futility of political revolution, and it serves to underline the *xia* figure's role as a revolutionary *ideal* – or, a political cypher designed merely to incite anti-establishment sentiment. In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, the audience is left with the understanding that the revolutionary ideals and neo-political spirit embodied in the *xia* are ultimately transient, and that the *xia* plays a role that is ultimately conservative in origin: the *xia* provides the cultural illusion that change is not only imaginable but achievable; he provides the illusion that political revolution is, indeed, at all possible. Yimou's audience need only look to one particular exchange between the Empress and her son as evidence of the director's reversion to social and political conservatism:

Empress: Many things can be changed.

Prince Jai: In fact, nothing can be changed.

Empress: Still, I would like to try.

Here, Yimou spells out clearly the political intent of his *wuxia* films: not to incite change, but to hint at the possible dangers such change would bring–which is a particularly conservative line for this director to take. We see this in the film's treatment of the Empress. She is weakened by the poison that her husband has administered to her, reduced to walking in circles through the repetitive and distracting Technicolor of the royal palace. Her power, and the power of the *xia* to incite political change, is ultimately quashed by the incumbent Emperor. Yimou's films seem to reinforce neo-imperialist rule, but, rather, it is the *possibility* of political change that his *wuxia* films play with that accounts for their wide appeal and recent impact in the West. Yimou's films showcase opposition to autocratic rule on a grandly epic scale, and the counter-cultural discourse that lies at the heart of the *wuxia* genre speaks to the West's failing political systems of governance and the gradual resurgence of the alt-right movement in the post-millennial period. The very idea of the *xia* knight, who fights political injustice, serves as a counterforce to the seemingly inescapable systematic rule of governing bodies, encapsulating the revolutionary sentiment of contemporary Western political instability.

Thus, the *wuxia* genre has been transmuted from its early origins as a force of political change, a dissident form descrying the imperialist practices of oppressive governments, to a

transnational cinematic form augmenting geo-political and geo-imaginary relations between China and the West. Under Yimou's direction, the genre has purported to incite change by positioning the transitional figure of the *xia* as an active entity in social change. However, Yimou's spirit as a formerly-revolutionary filmmaker has been tempered–perhaps by his increasing acceptance as a transnational figure in Western cinema. Under Yimou, it could be said that the *wuxia* genre has transitioned from a politically dissident form to one that is altogether more conservative (and certainly orientalist) than its earlier incarnations. That North American and European audiences, in particular,[3] have embraced Yimou's films suggests that Western culture recognises the importance of continuing to imagine and try for political change–like the Empress in *Curse of the Golden Flowers*–whilst simultaneously acknowledging the fundamental neo-conservatism of the alt-right. Ultimately, Yimou's *wuxia* films continue to reflect on and speak to the political unrest of cultures that wish to know what other forms of political governance might exist outside of those traditional static systems of power relations.

Notes

[1] My use of the term "transnationalism," here, draws on Mette Hjort's understanding of the transnational "aura" that seems to pervade contemporary world cinema; that is, the confluence

of "production or distribution practices, sources of funding, casting decisions, thematic concerns, or the complex identities of various film professionals" that contribute towards a homogenising or internationalising filmic effect (2010: 12-13). Hjort argues for a "plurality" of cinematic transnationalism, and posits a typology of various different examples of cinematic transnationalism, offering a brief assessment of each. For the purposes of this chapter, I am loosely concerned with the practices and aesthetics of what Hjort classifies as "globalizing transnationalism," which "makes transnational appeal oriented asymptotically towards global appeal the mechanism for recuperating the high costs of supposedly unavoidable international co-productions," and which promises "spectacular production values secured through transnational capital" and many "genre- and star-based vehicles" (2010: 21-22). Such techniques present cinema audiences with what Charles Acland has called "points of commonality across national boundaries" (2003: 11), thereby somewhat unifying cinematic territories and, certainly, presenting as universal certain cinematic cultures.

[2] By "historicise" I take to mean the manner in which Nameless's recollection of his various conquests are historicised; or, the ways in which they are treated by the film as historical events that have happened within the narrative's diegesis. In other words, *Hero* frames as real for the audience Nameless's battles with the various assassins–which transpire, at the end of the film, to have been staged defeats (in order to allow Nameless to advance through the Emperor's throne room). By "historiographised" I take to mean the methods by which history is recorded and recollected–in this instance, Nameless's oral narration for the Emperor. *Hero* ultimately

prompts its audience to examine (or, perhaps more pointedly, to re-examine) the means by which story (i.e. Nameless's invented narrative) becomes historical fact within the film's diegesis (i.e. the way in which Nameless's invented narrative becomes sanctioned truth by the Emperor), thereby undermining the veracity of recorded or established history-as-text).

[3]According to Box Office Mojo, *Hero* has made an overseas gross of $123.7 million; *House of Flying Daggers*, $81.8 million; and *Curse of the Golden Flower*, $72 million – most of which has come from the North American and European markets. Between them, these three films represent Yimou's highest grossing films to date. (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?id=zhangyimou.htm.) (At the time of writing, total gross takings for *The Great Wall* [2017] have not been calculated.)

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[1] My use of the term "transnationalism," here, draws on Mette Hjort's understanding of the transnational "aura" that seems to pervade contemporary world cinema; that is, the confluence of "production or distribution practices, sources of funding, casting decisions, thematic concerns, or the complex identities of various film professionals" that contribute towards a homogenising or internationalising filmic effect (2010: 12-13). Hjort argues for a "plurality" of cinematic transnationalism, and posits a typology of various different examples of cinematic transnationalism, offering a brief assessment of each. For the purposes of this chapter, I am loosely concerned with the practices and aesthetics of what Hjort classifies as "globalizing transnationalism," which "makes transnational appeal oriented asymptotically towards global appeal the mechanism for recuperating the high costs of supposedly unavoidable international co-productions," and which promises "spectacular production values secured through transnational capital" and many "genre- and star-based vehicles" (2010: 21-22). Such techniques present cinema audiences with what Charles Acland has called "points of

commonality across national boundaries" (2003: 11), thereby somewhat unifying cinematic territories and, certainly, presenting as universal certain cinematic cultures.

[2] By "historicise" I take to mean the manner in which Nameless's recollection of his various conquests are historicised; or, the ways in which they are treated by the film as historical events that have happened within the narrative's diegesis. In other words, *Hero* frames as real for the audience Nameless's battles with the various assassins–which transpire, at the end of the film, to have been staged defeats (in order to allow Nameless to advance through the Emperor's throne room). By "historiographised" I take to mean the methods by which history is recorded and recollected–in this instance, Nameless's oral narration for the Emperor. *Hero* ultimately prompts its audience to examine (or, perhaps more pointedly, to re-examine) the means by which story (i.e. Nameless's invented narrative) becomes historical fact within the film's diegesis (i.e. the way in which Nameless's invented narrative becomes sanctioned truth by the Emperor), thereby undermining the veracity of recorded or established history-as-text).

[3] According to Box Office Mojo, *Hero* has made an overseas gross of $123.7 million; *House of Flying Daggers*, $81.8 million; and *Curse of the Golden Flower*, $72 million – most of which has come from the North American and European markets. Between them, these three films represent Yimou's highest grossing films to date. (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?id=zhangyimou.htm.) (At the time of writing, total gross takings for *The Great Wall* [2017] have not been calculated.)