

## Cooperation in Competition: Soft Power, Cultural Hegemony, and State Willingness in the Sino-US Co-Production *Meg 2: The Trench*

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### ABSTRACT

The US regards China as a challenger to its dominant global order. China is no longer satisfied with America dominating the world as the single superpower. The US has relied on its global-leading film industry, Hollywood, to promote soft power and accomplish cultural hegemony on the global stage. Compared to the US, China needs more international attraction from the perspective of soft power and its film industry. *Meg 2: The Trench* can be seen as an attempt at cooperation in competition. This study focuses on the recent Sino-US co-production, *Meg 2: The Trench*, released in 2023, in the political context of competition between the two countries. The research objective is to evaluate the Chinese culture, values and foreign policies *Meg 2: The Trench* promotes. The central problem to be addressed in this research is the Chinese soft power promotion of the recently released Sino-US co-production *Meg 2: The Trench*. This research employed Algirdas Julien Greimas's Actantial Model (1983) to critically analyse the portrayal of the characters and narratives in *Meg 2: The Trench* with close textual analysis as the method for this research. We found that Hollywood made concessions regarding its values propaganda. *Meg 2: The Trench* emphasises China's official culture, values and foreign policies, but its essence is individual heroism.

**Keywords:** *Soft power, cultural hegemony Sino-US co-production, Sino-US relations, Meg 2: The Trench, Actantial Model.*

### INTRODUCTION

US political scholar Joseph Nye created the concept of soft power. Nye (1990) explained the concept of soft power that:

This second aspect of power—which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants—might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants. (Nye, 1990, p.166)

According to Nye (2023a), soft power is vital to a nation's overall strength. The US, as a single superpower dominating the global order, is undeniable that Hollywood is the crucial channel to express American soft power to individuals. Nye (2023b, p.19) attributes

Hollywood, Microsoft, and Michael Jordan as significant contributors to American influence and power. Nye (2012, p.153) also highlights the 'three basic recourses' of soft power for a country - culture, political values and foreign policies. America utilises the Hollywood film industry to propagate its culture, values and foreign policies to the world (Barrech & Khan, 2023). According to Barrech and Khan (2023), while America employs Hollywood films to portray its positive image, it also emphasises the portrayal of negative images of its opponents, such as stigmatising the Soviet Union's image on screens in the Cold War period.

Hollywood's strong power has raised concerns and criticisms of individual cultural hegemony. Scholars have explored the concept of cultural hegemony and created the 'theory of "hegemony"' (Bates, 1975, p.351). According to Lears (1985, p.568), there is no precise definition of cultural hegemony in Gramsci's literature. In addition, Lears (1985) believed that it is not feasible to rely on a conceptual explanation to understand the terminology of 'cultural hegemony.' Lears (1985, p.568) claimed that 'the concept of cultural hegemony can only be understood within a variety of historical and intellectual contexts.' In addition, Bates (1975, p.351) pointed out that 'the basic premise of the theory of hegemony is one with which few would disagree: that man is not ruled by force alone but also by ideas.' America's advanced entertainment industry and propaganda mechanisms have primarily helped it achieve cultural hegemony on the global stage (Beal, 2022). Hollywood has been a solid tool to promote American soft power and has been seen as a powerful weapon for US cultural hegemony.

However, in today's political situation, China is no longer satisfied with the current 'one super power' global order dominated by the US (Sharoon et al., 2023, p.507). China wants to challenge the dominant role of the US and reshape the current international order led by America. Thus, Chinese President Xi Jinping and China's Official rendered their verdict: *Profound Changes Unseen in a Century*. Shi (2022, p.2) believed that the idea of 'Profound Changes Unseen in a Century' proposed by Xi Jinping is the '[...]foundation for a scientific analysis of the present international situation and pattern.' According to Shi (2022), the US has led the Western world, and its dominant global order is declining in the fields of culture, economics, and politics, while the rise of Southern countries such as China is challenging US dominance and reshaping the global order as an emerging economy.

On the other hand, the US has seen China as a challenger to its dominant position in the world because of its rise (Iskanderova, 2023). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, because of serious ideological issues between China and the US (China and America belong to the socialist and capitalist camps), their bilateral relations have been deteriorating. According to Iskanderova (2023), since the 1960s, Sino-U.S. relations have improved since the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. After the 1970s, Sino-US relations had persistently warmed (Sharoon et al., 2023), especially after implementing China's Reform and Opening-up policy (Iskanderova, 2023). Although there was an extended honeymoon period in Sino-US relations in past decades, Iskanderova (2023) believed that the rise of China's hard power in terms of military and economics had raised concerns in the US who has adopted a unilateralism strategy to deal with emerging powers (Shi, 2022).

Considering this, Shi (2022) indicated that the rise of China and other southern countries has caused concern in the Western world. Shi (2022, pp.4-5) believed that '[...] the contest between China and the US is entering a long-term, all-round, and increasingly fierce game.' China is a growing power worldwide and a challenger to US-led unilateralism in the global order to broaden its international influence; soft power competition with the US is inevitable. However, compared to the US, China still needs to improve its soft power, including its film industry (Nye, 2023a). On the global level, China and the US compete for soft power, and compared to China, the US is more attractive from the perspective of soft power, but China has an inherent advantage as an ancient and civilised country (Barrech & Khan, 2023). The Chinese authorities have recognised the significance of films in promoting soft power. Rawnsley (2021, p.195) pointed out that 'spending circa \$US10 billion per annum on its soft power strategy, the People's Republic of China has a strong capacity for cultural engagement.' The Chinese government invests heavily in soft power promotion every year (Rosen, 2021).

On the other hand, the films' strong ability to promote soft power for a country raised concerns for Chinese authorities that they can threaten Chinese domestic mores. According to Rawnsley (2021, p.194), '[...]cinema can define and reinforce social mores[...],' which raises concerns regarding threats to indigenous values, such as the Hollywood film industry, which has caused challenges to Chinese 'cultural identity' (Rawnsley, 2021, p.195). Hollywood films can propagate Western culture and values in their storytelling to Chinese spectators, which seriously affects Chinese people's identification with their own culture, mores and China's mainstream values that the authorities advocate. Regarding Chinese cinema and its impact on soft power, the Chinese decision-making level seeks to influence domestic spectators through soft power rather than global audiences to maintain the stability of China's politics and society and promote patriotism through films to the young generations (Rosen, 2021).

Hollywood has become a transnational cinema and propagates American soft power. China does not have this power. The dilemma that Chinese films face in their overseas markets include having a successfully high box office gross domestically but unable to attract abroad audiences, while Hollywood films take advantage of the English language to attract different national audiences (Rosen, 2021). Therefore, China needs access and the opportunity to utilise the film industry effectively to promote its soft power on the global stage, as in the US. Regarding Chinese films opening overseas, especially in the North American film market, Rosen (2021) believes that a co-production strategy is most effective for China.

This research investigates Ben Wheatley's *Meg 2: The Trench* (Wheatley, 2023), the sequel of Jon Turteltaub's *The Meg* (2018), as the recently released Sino-US co-production from the perspective of soft power. This research introduces Hollywood's significance in promoting US soft power that can propagate around the world from a dominant position in world cinema, raising concerns about cultural hegemony. Chinese authorities have recognised the significance of the film in promoting soft power. Moreover, we frame the analysis within the current Sino-US relations; that is, the US and its first-world political allies

with regards to the rise of China and the Global South as challenges to the prevailing world order.

This research focuses on soft power in Sino-US co-production in China's official political discourse system to analyse Sino-US co-productions. The purpose of framing this research in a political context is to emphasise our argument: Sino-U.S. co-productions in the current political phenomenon can be viewed as cooperation in competition. The central problem in this research is promoting Chinese soft power in the recently released Sino-US co-production *Meg 2: The Trench* (henceforth, *Meg 2*). The soft power in *Meg 2* is analysed from three perspectives: culture, values, and foreign policies in research, which primarily follows Joseph Nye's (2012, p.153). Meanwhile, according to Peng (2015), the concept of soft power in the Chinese context is not identical to what Joseph Nye proposed. In the Chinese context, soft power focuses on cultural attributes, while Nye's concept of soft power is more concerned with its diplomatic attributes (Peng, 2015).

Nevertheless, in consideration of China's unique focus on the concept of soft power, we extend Nye's criteria of soft power's recourses in this research as follows: 1) In terms of the culture as one of the soft power recourses, this research refers to the traditional and pop-culture, since Peng (2015) pointed out, Nye focuses on the pop-culture and Chinese scholars emphasis on the traditional culture as soft power recourses. 2) In terms of values as one of the soft power recourses, this research is not limited to Nye's political values but involves others, such as cultural values; this is because Peng (2015, p.24) indicated that, 'culture is the soul and frame of soft power in China, the trait of various elements of soft power depend on corresponding cultural values and intellectual thinking.' Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the Chinese culture, values and foreign policies promoted by the *Meg 2*.

#### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The Sino-US coproduction history began in the 1980s. Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* (1987) has been seen as the earliest Sino-US co-production film by Yang and Zhang (2017). According to Yang and Zhang, L. (2017), in the early stages of Sino-US co-productions, Chinese film producers needed equal discourse with the Hollywood film producers; the Chinese side was in a lower position when cooperating with Hollywood cinema, and these films did not propagate the Chinese culture. Nevertheless, since 2012, the landscape of American and Chinese co-productions has changed. Chinese film capital has been more involved in the production and distribution process of Hollywood films (Yang & Zhang, L., 2017). This means China has more power when cooperating with the Hollywood film industry now. Meanwhile, scholars have pointed out the challenges and benefits of China's co-production that can potentially promote the cultural image of China worldwide, but the story's universality is crucial for Chinese film producers (Peng & Keane, 2019). However, while Chinese film companies cooperate with Hollywood productions, they face complex challenges - the cultural conflicts in the Sino-US co-productions have not yet disappeared (Chen, 2018) and China's official strict control of the media industry adversely affects China's soft power promotion (Peng & Keane, 2019).

Furthermore, co-production films face the challenge of pleasing Western and Chinese individuals by generating cultural and emotional resonance in one film. Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall* (2016) failure at the box office. Initially, according to Huang (2020), one of the primary objectives of *The Great Wall* is to reveal China's culture, values, and even national superiority. Zhang (2023b) believed that one of the significant reasons for *The Great Wall*'s box office failure is that the image of the Tao Tie does not resonate culturally among audiences. Huang (2020) examines three past Sino-US co-productions, Ann Hu's *Shadow Magic* (2000), Daniel Lee's *Dragon Blade* (2015), and Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall* (2016), all of which show China's Great Wall in their narratives. Huang (2020) pointed out the differences in the images of the Great Wall among the films. In *Shadow Magic*, the image of the Great Wall shaped a positive national image for China, while the Great Wall portrayed China's profile negatively in the *The Great Wall* and *Dragon Blade* (Huang, 2020).

In addition, a group of scholars, Rosen (2021) and Zhang (2023b), viewed another Sino-US co-production blockbuster, *The Meg* (2018), as a successful example. *The Meg* was released as a Sino-US co-production film which narrates Chinese culture and values. Zhang (2023b) believed Chinese film producers could dominate the story's content by producing *The Meg*, contrary to *The Great Wall*, which shapes Chinese women's role using positive characteristics. According to Zhang (2023b), in *The Meg*, Chinese elements were infused from the character and scene setting to the narrative mode, and these Chinese elements, which still obey the classic Hollywood narrative pattern, constructed the Chinese cultural background. *The Meg* achieved success from the perspective of its box office, and it grossed \$141 million in North America, \$153 million in China and over \$521 million around the world (Rosen, 2021). On the other hand, even though *The Meg* is an example of a successful co-production film at the box office, it does not provide any practical assistance in promoting China's soft power since Rosen (2021) believed the essential nature of *The Meg* can be considered a Hollywood film in the guise of Sino-U.S. co-productions.

We argue that in Sino-US co-productions, the setting of the characters' images determines whether the film succeeds. This character setting signifies the Chinese and American soft power competition at the national level. Moreover, corporations with Chinese film companies have developed better strategies for foreign films to avoid restrictions on imported films (Yan & Yu, 2021). American film companies understand the importance of co-producing films with China because the huge Chinese film market can benefit them financially, and through co-productions, they can export American ideologies over a long period of time. Thus, Hollywood can benefit from the Chinese film market. The vast Chinese domestic film market has attracted the interest of global film producers (Peng & Keane, 2019). In the early stages of Sino-US co-production, America dominated production; however, in recent examples, China seems to have challenged the inherent American hero image. Therefore, examining whether Chinese roles have enough power to export China's ideologies in Sino-US co-production is significant.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted qualitatively, using close textual analysis as the research method. The textual analysis as a research method is introduced by Smith (2017) as follows:

Textual analysis is a method of study utilized by researchers to examine messages as they appear through a variety of mediums. The data generated for textual analysis can come from documents, films, newspapers, paintings, web pages, and so forth. These forms of data serve as the “texts” under study and are used to assess the meanings, values, and messages being sent through ... (p.1)

*The Meg* has been considered a successful example of Sino-US co-production, and many studies suggest that *The Meg* tells good Chinese stories (Zhang, 2023b). *Meg 2* is the latest Sino-US-produced blockbuster released as a sequel to *The Meg*. It cast a stereotypical Chinese actor, Wu Jing, who previously portrayed the protagonist in several Chinese blockbusters, such as Wu Jing’s *Wolf Warrior* series (2015 & 2017) and Chen Kaige, Tsui Hark and Dante Lam’s *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) and its sequel Tsui Hark’s *The Battle Lake of Changjin II* (2022) in the leading role. These Sino-US co-production samples are shown in Table 1, along with the film information, courtesy of the IMDb.

Table 1: Research Samples

| Title/Director     | Production  | Genre                                       | Year |
|--------------------|---|---|------|
| Meg 2/Ben Wheatley | Appelles Entertainment, Maeday Productions, China Media Capital, Flagship Entertainment Group, etc. | Action; Adventure; Horror; Sci-Fi; Thriller | 2023 |

With these research objectives in mind, this qualitative study used a close textual method. It purposively selected the latest Sino-US co-production, *Meg 2*, as a research sample. This research employs Algirdas Julien Greimas’ Actantial Model as the theoretical framework. This model is shown below:

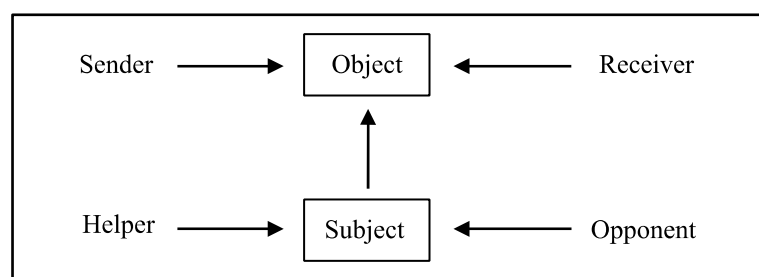


Figure 1: The Actantial Model from Greimas (1983)

Moreover, the six actants and three axes in the Actantial Model are explained by Hébert (2020):

The axis of desire: (1) subject/ (2) object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. [...] The axis of power: (3) helper/ (4) opponent. The helper assists in achieving the desired junction between the subject and object; the opponent hinders the same [...]. The axis of transmission (the axis of knowledge, for Greimas): (5) sender/ (6) receiver. The sender is the element requesting the establishment of the junction between subject and the object [...]. The receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken (pp. 80-81)

The purpose of employing Greimas' (1983) Actantial Model in this research is that it is a practical approach for analysing the relationships between characters and the narrative structure (Hu et al., 2024), which can provide significant support for the Sino-US co-productions analysis. Because we can identify which character is portrayed as a saviour (or troubleshooter), which can effectively assist us in inferring which side (China or the US) dominates their collaboration. Subsequently, under the conceptual framework of Nye's soft power, as we introduced before, we collect research data from three perspectives in the research sample: culture, values, and foreign policies. Furthermore, these research data are settled into China's official political discourse system to evaluate China's soft power promotion by *Meg 2*.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

*Meg 2*, released in 2023, is the latest release among Sino-US co-productions. The Chinese actor Wu Jing played one of the leading roles in this film. Wu Jing, regarded as a Chinese martial artist (Jia, 2021), is portrayed as a Chinese scientist in this co-production with Hollywood action star Jason Statham. *Wolf Warrior 2* was considered a representative blockbuster that describes the Chinese military serving overseas and their nationalistic narratives, and it created a stereotypical national image for China, and its diplomacy was characterised as that of a wolf warrior (Yang, 2023). Likewise, *The Battle of Lake Changjin* series tells the story of the Korean War, where Wu portrays a soldier in the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) fighting against the US army. Therefore, the protagonist, Wu Jing, of the Sino-U.S. co-production film *Meg 2* has been seen as a stereotypical Chinese film actor espousing nationalism before.

Furthermore, the characters in *Meg 2* were purposely selected and are introduced in this paragraph: 1) Jason Statham portrays Jonas Tylor, a deep-sea diver and stepfather of Meiyang who has excellent fighting skills; 2) Wu Jing portrays Zhang Jiuming, a talented Chinese scientist and Meiyang's uncle who designs advanced equipment, such as exoskeleton armour, in the film; 3) Meiyang is a courageous, intelligent girl in the film whose mother, Zhang Suyin, is a Chinese marine biologist who has passed away; 4) Mac and 5) DJ are portrayed as an operation manager and an engineer 6) Jess was one of the staff of the institution but she betrays her colleagues; 7) Montes is portrayed as a villain in the film who has a mercenary team and is engaged in illegal marine mining and tries to kill Jonas Tylor because Jonas put

him in jail; 8) Driscoll is a billionaire who funds Zhang Jiuming’s research and his institution, and is the villain in this story; she betrays Jiuming and the others and cooperates with Montes in illegal business.

*Meg 2* tells the story of the Chinese marine scientist Zhang Jiuming and a deep-sea diver and environmental crime fighter, Jonas Tylor, with the help of DJ, Mac, and others, who collaborate to combat an illegal organisation exploiting marine mineral resources. In addition to fighting the criminals, this film demonstrates Jonas and Zhang joining forces to confront the creatures living in the depths of the trench, threatening the security of tourists, including the meg, the giant octopus, and snappers. Jonas and Jiuming take individual heroism to the extreme: under the strategy of parallel narratives, Jiuming, along with DJ and Mac, eliminate the marine monsters and the mercenary team, primarily owing to Jiuming’s intelligence and gentle behaviour; Jonas uses a fishing gun to kill the meg and his opponent, Montes.

We employed Greimas’ Action Model to examine *Meg 2*’s story, combining the model’s analysis from Hébert (2020) with the characters’ relationships as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: The characters’ portrayal based on the Actantial Model

| Subject       | Object   | Helper   | Opponent                         | Sender         | Receiver                        |
|---------------|--|----------|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Zhang Jiuming | Protecting Tourists                            | DJ       | Jess, Montes, and Driscoll       | Zhang, Jiuming | Tourists                        |
| Jonas Tylor   | Protecting the Ocean Environment and Resources | Mac etc. | The Meg, Snappers, Giant Octopus | Jonas Tylor    | Ocean Environment and Resources |

Zhang Jiuming and Jonas Tylor are considered subjects, and protecting the safety of tourists, the ocean environment, and resources is their objective. DJ and Mac help Jiuming and Jonas achieve their goals. Therefore, they are considered helpers; Jess, Montes, and Driscoll destroy the marine environment by illegally mining marine resources for money. In addition, Montes wants revenge on Jonas. Therefore, Jess, Montes, and Driscoll are considered opponents. The Megs, Snappers, and Giant Octopus were objective threats to tourists’ safety, and the primary purpose of Jonas, Jiuming, and their group going to Fun Island was to warn tourists of the dangers of these deep-sea creatures. Therefore, they are categorised as opponents. Jiuming and Jonas take action to protect the tourists and ocean resources; consequently, they are also considered the sender. Finally, the tourists are saved, ocean resources are protected, and both benefit; thus, they are regarded as the receivers. According to the Greimas’ (1983) Actantial Model, this can be expressed as follows:



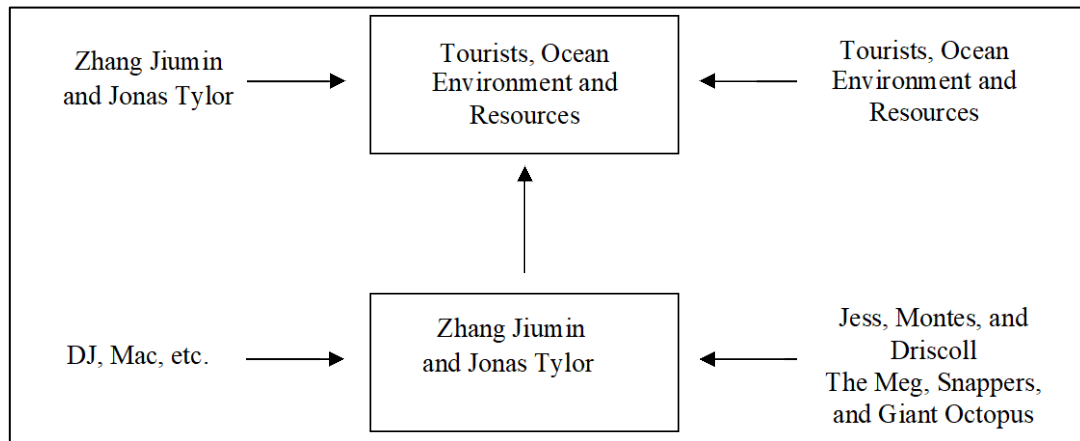


Figure 2: The characters' portrayal based on the Actantial Model by Greimas (1983)

By analysing the characters using Greimas' theory, we found that *Meg 2* emphasises the focus on characterising the individual heroism of the protagonist. Based on Greimas' model, the helpers are weak; when Jonas and Jiuming are stranded in the trench, the helpers cannot offer help. The opponents can become more vigorous. Although the villain, represented by Montes, create difficulties for the protagonists, this does not cause any substantial harm to Jiuming and Jonas. Particularly in the head-to-head confrontation between Jonas and Montes, the difference in strength between the two can be observed. Compared to Montes and his team, the ocean monsters seem even more terrifying, but the protagonists eventually understand them. Weak helpers and opponents signify strong heroes. Indeed, *Meg 2* selects a dual protagonist narrative with individual heroism as its core: Jiuming, a Chinese hero, cooperates with the white hero, Jonas, and they solve all the problems in Sino-US co-production.

#### *Values Promotion*

This film promotes collectivist values through its storytelling. For example, in the scene of the 10th anniversary of the Oceanic Institute, while Jonas complains that he could not understand why he has to appear at this occasion, Meiying tells him it is because he is a team player. Considering the background, for the stability of the whole, the individual's interests have often been secondary to the overall interests, making collectivism one of Chinese society's ethical rules (Yan & Li, 2021). Collectivism is the most common propaganda objective in Chinese cinema. This idea has been proven in numerous Chinese films by scholars who have done research before. For example, the values of collectivism have been propagated by the Chinese sci-fi blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* (Zhang, 2020), the military action film *Wolf Warrior 2* (Hussain et al., 2023) and the Chinese mainstream film *My People, My Country*, which aimed to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (Yan, 2022). Hence, as Hu and Guan (2021) indicated, values prioritising collective interests over individual interests are widespread in Chinese mainstream films.

Meanwhile, the values of Confucianism have been propagated by *Meg 2*, emphasised by the father-son relations between Jonas, Jiuming and Meiyong. The Confucian agenda regulates responsibilities and duties in father-son relations under a patriarchal society. Children should be filial to their parents, and parents should fulfil their obligation to care for their children (Berry, 2020). In the narratives of *Meg 2*, Meiyong's identification is set as Jonas's stepdaughter and Jiuming's niece. Meiyong's mother and grandfather's deaths in the story of this film's prequel, *The Meg*. In this film, Jonas and Jiuming are kinsfolks of Meiyong who inherit the father-son relationship and their responsibility to care for Meiyong. The fact is that Chinese authorities are willing to view films with Confucian elements, which occupy a dominant position in Chinese cinema (Zhang, 2023a).

Moreover, under the Confucianism agenda, this film demonstrates the harmonious relations between human beings and nature. Jiuming, in his speech at the 10th anniversary of the Oceanic Institute of this film, points out the significance of protecting the ocean for China and mankind. This co-production ocean genre emphasises the marine ecological protection theme to promote Chinese authorities' advocacy of the harmony between man and nature, proven by Chinese President Xi's (2021) initiative at the Leaders' Summit of Climate.

We need to act with a sense of responsibility and unity, and work together to foster a community of life for man and nature. [...] We should protect Nature and preserve the environment like we protect our eyes, and endeavour to foster a new relationship where man and nature can both prosper and live in harmony. (para.2-3)

Therefore, *Meg 2*, as a Sino-US co-production, focuses on oceanic environmental protection, reflecting President Xi's (2021) idea to 'work together to foster a community of life for man and nature'. It also reflects a common and interesting topic in China and the US environmental protection. Therefore, the enemy in this Sino-US corporate film was set as an illegal ocean mining group that could identify an appropriate topic to avoid antagonistic and sensitive issues between China and the US, e.g. values, ideologies or their opinions gaps.

### *Cultural Representations*

In terms of the culture representative of this film, Chinese traditional culture is promoted through its narratives from numerous perspectives, e.g. China's calligraphy, ancient Chinese literary work, and the Chinese style censor. Meanwhile, Zhang Jiuming mentions that his name, 'Jiuming', is taken from ancient Chinese literature, Song Lian's poem, by his father, Zhang Minway, a marine scientist whose name refers to the ocean or the trench. These traditional Chinese cultural symbols signify that China has an abundant civilisation and philosophical history and that Chinese culture is communicated through this film. Meanwhile, in this film, Chinese pop culture has also been promoted, e.g. in the scene of *Meg 2*, a Chinese

man proposes marriage to his girlfriend on a yacht at sea, Chinese singer David Tao's pop-music *Ai Hen Jian Dan* is employed as the music of the diegetic sound.

#### *Foreign Policies Propagandisation*

Wagner (2023) utilised Khan's (2020) concept of 'technology fetishism' to describe the Mana One, an underwater laboratory in the film *The Meg*. According to Khan (2020, p.22), 'technology fetishism' refers to the kind of blind worship and belief in technology, '[...] the idea that whatever problems we face are merely one technological innovation away from being solved'. Meanwhile, Wagner (2023, p.821) believed Mana One as a 'hi-tech Chinese-built underwater laboratory' promotes China's hard power. Like its prequel, *Meg 2* continues to exhibit advanced Chinese technologies in navigation and marine research facilities, such as the exoskeleton suit shown by the Chinese scientist Zhang Jiuming at the Oceanic Institute. Moreover, in this film, Jiuming indicated his objective of creating the institution because of the Chinese people's spirit of exploring the unknown. Jiuming's dialogues show China's ambition for human civilisation to explore the world further.

The fact is, the purpose of *The Meg 2*'s portrayal of China's advanced high technologies is not only based on their superstition of the technology and promoting China's hard power, but it is propagandistic of foreign policies based on China's official political discourses. Similarly, as indicated by Jiuming's dialogue in the film, China's ambition to explore the unknown reflects this point. This is to say, this Sino-US co-production film imagines and demonstrates China's capability of developing advanced technologies, and it can be at the forefront of science and technology, paving the way for humanity to explore unknown areas. *Meg 2* propagates a belief that the advanced technology and the ambition to explore the unknown no longer uniquely belong to the US, promoting President Xi and China's official judgement of 'Profound Changes Unseen in a Century' and the support of multilateralism in international relations by Chinese authorities. According to the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China (2021, para.23), President Xi made his speech at the World Economic Forum of the Davos Agenda 2021 titled, 'Let Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's War Forward', called for cooperation among nations under multilateralism, 'Let us all join hands and let multilateralism light our way toward a community with a shared future for mankind.'

A shared future for mankind is another political concept in its political discourse system, also propagated by *The Meg 2*. According to Greimas's (1983) Actantial Model of *The Meg 2*, Zhang Jiuming and Jonas Tylor cooperate to protect the neutral and combat the illegal marine mining group, while Montes, Jess, and Driscoll represent humanity's damages to the neutral resources. In terms of China's political will, 'A Shared Future for Mankind', China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (2023), China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, pointed out,

[...]building a community with a shared future for mankind is the core tenet of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy. [...] President Xi Jinping has stressed many times that humanity live in the same global village and travel in the same boat.

Facing various global challenges coming our way, countries should rise above their differences in history, culture, geography and system, and work together to protect the Earth, the only inhabitable planet for us all, and make it a better place. (para.1)

Thus, 'A Shared Future for Mankind' occupies a significant position in China's political-diplomatic will, and this Sino-US production film has promoted.

#### *Who On Earth Calls the Shots, the US or China?*

In evaluating *Meg 2*, we found that, first, the topic of *Meg 2* is protecting the marine environment, which ingeniously avoids potential ideological conflicts between the US and China, as the topic is a common interest with both sides. In addition, by reviewing past literature on Sino-US co-production, we found that through Hollywood-dominated Sino-US co-productions before, Hollywood shaped Chinese culture in its own way. But *Meg 2* destroys the cultural hegemony of Hollywood in Sino-US co-productions and significantly promotes Chinese culture, values and foreign policies; thus, it can be regarded as this co-production film attempts to promote China's soft power, including China's official political will to the global spectators relying on Hollywood powerful international influence. In *Meg 2*, China has an optimistic protagonist, Zhang Jiuming, who cooperates with the white hero, Jonas Tylor and has an opportunity to portray the saviour in its narratives. However, it relies on individual heroism to promote story development, as reflected by the two protagonists, Jiuming and Jonas.

A value gap still exists in *Meg 2* because it is rooted in the relations between the US and China. The differences between Chinese and Western films include visual language, narratives of the story, and character image shaping, resulting from differences in culture, history, social context, and values (Qiu, 2023). While the Chinese film industry cooperates with Hollywood, China's purpose is to leverage Hollywood's reputation to promote the Chinese film industry globally, and the connotation is to promote China's soft power by utilising the film industry's influence. Thus, in *Meg 2*, China did not lose in the soft power competition with the US. At a minimum, it shaped a Chinese hero as its leading role, announced China's political will, and promoted Chinese soft power and this has created a new paradigm for Sino-US co-production.

#### CONCLUSION

This article evaluates the Sino-US co-production *Meg 2* in the context of current global political phenomena and the judgment proposed by Chinese officials of 'Profound Changes Unseen in a Century'. In complex international relations, China and the US are the major powers of the East and West, respectively, competing on all fronts, including soft power. China now represents the global South and has been regarded as a challenger to the current international order dominated by the US and film is the instrument for promoting national soft power. Based on these backgrounds, Sino-US co-productions are receiving increasing

critical attention and can be seen as soft power competition and regarded as cooperation attempts in the context of Sino-US competition.

Ultimately, China has different ideologies from the US, and *Meg 2* relies on more than just a fascinating heterogeneous Eastern culture to attract global audiences. Practically speaking, this illustrates China's officially promoted values, foreign policies, and culture. Therefore, Sino-US co-production can be regarded as soft power competition within a binary system between China and America. The soft power competition remains the central issue faced by the Sino-US co-production but this may change as the global cinema industry reconfigures itself. However, in film academics, it remains a significant function to focus on the current international context. Future studies may take the perspective of audience perceptions to analyse this topic from a qualitative or quantitative point of view.

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