



The Geopolitics of “Being Lost” (*Jiong*) in China’s Most Popular Movie Franchise

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ARTICLE



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ABSTRACT

This paper uses geopolitics as a critical lens to analyze how four films in China’s most popular movie franchise—*Lost on Journey* (2010), *Lost in Thailand* (2013), *Lost in Hong Kong* (2015), and *Dying to Survive* (2018)—construct different dimensions of post-socialist spatial and temporal sensibilities. All four films portray a morally flawed businessman amidst a journey that profoundly transforms him in the end. This paper examines how these journeys unfold in an expanding geography—China’s second-tier cities, as well as Thailand, Hong Kong, and India—but fail in seriously engaging geopolitics. In particular, the last three films use China’s geopolitical “others” as a strategic lure, playing up cultural stereotypes and cultural tourism. The depiction of China’s geopolitical others ultimately serves as a vehicle to process China’s rapidly changing realities and reflect upon distinctively Chinese experiences in the 2010s.

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THE FRANCHISE OF “BEING LOST”

Since the late 1990s, the Chinese film industry has undergone profound change. While the production and distribution of movies remain subject to governmental censorship, the industry has transitioned from being state-sponsored to being nearly financially independent. In 2012, China surpassed Japan to become the world’s second-largest cinema market. The robustly growing market, diversified production and distribution modes, and the development of technology have made possible unprecedented box office success in the most recent decade. Movies such as *Lost in Thailand* 泰囧 (*Tai jiong*, 2012), *Wolf Warriors* 戰狼 and *Wolf Warrior II* (*Zhanlang*, 2015 and 2017), *Dying to Survive* 我不是藥神 (*Wo bushi yaoshen*, 2018), and more recently *Wandering Earth* 流浪地球 (*Liulang diqiu*, 2019) and *Ne Zha* 哪吒 (2019) have all scored record sales.¹ While these productions draw on Western market research and borrow Western genre conventions and creative talents, these movies nevertheless mainly target domestic audiences and explore “commercial genres” 商業片 (*shangye pian*)—comedy, action, drama, science fiction, and animated fantasy. These reflect contemporary Chinese audiences’ emotional needs and identity politics. In effect, for those who aspire to bring Chinese movies to the international market, these films are “too localized” and lack “international tastes” (Bettinson 2013, 262). But the alleged locality feature makes these record-breaking movies all the more fascinating in that they offer a distinctive lens on how film as a popular cultural product defines what it means to be Chinese in post-colonial and post-socialist China during the second decade of the twenty-first century.

This article examines the geopolitics of four films: *Lost on Journey* 人在囧途 (*Ren zai jiongtu*, 2010, dir. Raymond Wai-man Yip 葉偉民), *Lost in Thailand* (2012, dir. Xu Zheng 徐曄), *Lost in Hong Kong* 港囧 (*Gang jiong*, 2015, dir. Xu Zheng), and *Dying to Survive* (2018, dir. Wen Muye 文牧野). These constitute the *Lost* series,² one of China’s most commercially successful film franchises to date. Directed by three different directors, all four films are low-budget comedy-dramas featuring the actor Xu Zheng (b. 1972), who plays a morally flawed businessman in the midst of a midlife crisis. In each film, Xu’s character goes through an inadvertently prolonged physical journey that turns out to be spiritually redemptive. In each journey, Xu’s character finds himself stuck with a simple-minded person who will, in the end, transform him. Because the journey itself constitutes the central plot of each film, it is significant that each journey takes place in a distinctive geopolitical entity including the Chinese cities of Shijiazhuang 石家莊 and Changsha 長沙, Thailand, Hong Kong, and India. These places are not only theatrical stages upon which the main character’s journey unfolds but also discursive spaces for the Chinese audiences to

imagine themselves and their geopolitical others in an increasingly interconnected world.

The lens of geopolitics allows for a comparative reading of the four films, revealing not only how they feed each other and together crystallize the new norms of film production and consumption in contemporary China, but also how they differ from each other in adopting and highlighting different storytelling conventions and constructing different dimensions of post-socialist spatial and temporal sensibilities.

THE NAMING OF “BEING LOST”

The movie titles in the *Lost* series take the use of *jiong* 囧, a once-obscure Chinese word, to a new level of popularity. Originally meaning “windows” and “brightness,” *jiong* suddenly started functioning as an emoticon (囧) on the internet in 2005 due to its visual resemblance to a sad face (de Seta 2018). Its use quickly expanded to other East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea. The emoticon expresses an array of feelings, such as embarrassment, helplessness, distress, defeat, and shock. The first film in the series, *Lost on Journey*, uses *jiong* as an adjective to describe the journey. The literal translation of the title *Ren zai jiongtu* is “Caught in a distressing journey.” The *jiong* here marks the film as playfully metropolitan; the concept of the journey itself is linked to the speed and mobility promised by modern transportation. It also foreshadows unexpected plot twists that will corner the character and amuse the audience. The *jiong* in the movie title is a conscious choice to engage the vibrant internet culture in the making of traditional media productions such as film and television shows, to make them more attuned to contemporary content.

The second film, *Lost in Thailand*, directed by none other than Xu Zheng himself, clearly attempts to cash in on the success of the first film and further build the brand of *jiong*. The title, literally translatable as “Caught in a Distressing Journey Again: Thailand Distress” (*Ren zai jiongtu zhi tai jiong*), not only establishes itself as a sequel to the first film but also uses *jiong* for a second time to highlight the location of the story. It is therefore not only the journey itself that promises comic relief but also the fact that the story unfolds in Thailand, a popular destination for Chinese tourists, which appeals to the film’s target Chinese audiences. The title of the third film, *Hong Kong Distress* or *Lost in Hong Kong*, replaces Thailand with Hong Kong, yet another popular tourist destination, further consolidating the central role that location plays in this series. Furthermore, as the series develops and the *jiong*-laden journey itself becomes an established convention, the location begins to assume new importance because it underscores the variation among the films. To this extent, *Lost in Thailand* and *Lost in Hong Kong* can also be interpreted as cinematic

tours of historically foreign sites, merging cultural and cinematic experiences to appeal to the largest possible audience. This expanded geopolitical scope in cinematic storytelling happened only recently in contemporary Chinese cinema, reflecting the rising number of Chinese consumers in domestic theaters and global tourism.

Significantly, the title of the fourth film, *Dying to Survive* (the widely known English title) or *I Am Not the God of Medicine* (a literal translation of the original Chinese title), seeks to break away from the *jiong* branding. A self-effacing rebuttal of hasty generalization, this title apparently also hints at an inflated ego, comparing oneself, even if negatively, to a god. In spite of this playful juxtaposition of humbleness and arrogance in the title, the film proper explores a serious social issue: the skyrocketing medical costs in post-socialist China. Critical acclaim for this film so far has largely emphasized its rigorous social critique; however, the three earlier comedies' undeniable mark upon this movie has been overlooked. *Dying to Survive* is both an inventory of and a breakthrough in the *Lost* series. Focusing on how a defeated man finds new purpose in his life through the smuggling of life-saving drugs from India for underprivileged Chinese patients, the film transforms comedy into a powerfully sentimental drama about redemption, everyday heroism, and social activism. The comedic *jiong* in the journey is replaced by an on-the-spot realism concerning a midlife crisis and a moral dilemma. The significance of a foreign location, in this case India, becomes secondary and marginal, as the focus now is on domestically rooted social concerns rather than on comedic relief played out in an expanded tourist space.

LOST ON JOURNEY AND THE NEW YEAR COMEDY

Lost on Journey (2010), the first entry in the *Lost* series, was a record-breaking, low-budget comedy portraying the on-the-road ordeals of businessman Li Chenggong 李成功 (literally "Li Success") in the three days before the 2008 Chinese New Year. During the annual "New Year Rush" 春運 (*chunyun*), when Chinese people make billions of trips between home and work, Li attempts to travel from Shijiazhuang, where he runs a toy company and is having an affair with a much younger woman, to his home in Changsha, 1,228.8 kilometers away. There, his dedicated wife, adorable daughter, and elderly mother await his return. The trip turns out to be a disaster, with each modern means of transportation failing to take him home: his flight is canceled due to a snowstorm, train tracks are blocked, a long-distance bus faces road closure and then an accident, another bus trip is aborted on account of a broken bridge, he has to get off of a ferry to chase a "criminal," his drowsy co-driver causes an

accident while driving a minivan, and he ultimately has to board a truck full of chickens to arrive in his hometown, Changsha. Throughout this journey, Li finds himself stuck with a stubborn and credulous milking technician called Niu Geng 牛耿 (literally "Ox Stubborn"), who is taking the trip in order to collect a debt for his employer so that he can get paid for his work. The debt also functions on an allegorical level: Li states that Niu is his "creditor" (*zhaizhu* 債主) at the end of the film, not only highlighting all the trouble that Niu has caused him during the journey but also recognizing how Niu's positive outlook has helped him gain a new appreciation of human kindness. Li eventually breaks up with his mistress, which also makes his homecoming about the restoration of family and morality, but he also anonymously sets Niu on the path of social success.

The success of *Lost on Journey* was built upon the momentum of the New Year Comedy 賀歲片 (*hesui pian*), a culturally specific, niche genre of Chinese popular film that originated in Hong Kong cinema as early as the 1930s and was adapted by "brand-name director" (*dapai daoyan* 大牌導演) Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛 (b. 1958) in mainland China in the 1990s (Law 2010). Feng's 1997 film *The Dream Factory* 甲方乙方 (*Jiafang yifang*) was the first example of this genre in mainland China, and Feng went on to make films that further established the genre, including *Be There or Be Square* 不見不散 (*Bujian bu san*, 1998), *Big Shot's Funeral* 大腕 (*Dawan*, 2001), *Cell Phone* 手機 (*Shouji*, 2003), and *A World without Thieves* 天下無賊 (*Tianxia wuzei*, 2004). Shuyu Kong (2009) has argued that the rise of the New Year Comedy signals that media corporations have replaced state-funded studios in dominating the production of movies targeting domestic markets. These films, seasonally released around the New Year, refuse to be dead serious and instead feature light-hearted comedy set in urban environments, punctuated by humorous dialogue and melodramatic pathos, simultaneously fraught with post-modern self-mockery. The New Year Comedy holistically shapes *Lost on Journey*. This film was co-produced by a private domestic enterprise and a state-owned shareholding company, and it was also partly funded by selling sponsorship of the film in advance (the film prominently features the logos of Eastern Air many times). This is a business model that Feng built through his New Year Comedy films. *Lost on Journey* also resembles Feng's comedies in its theme, characterizations, and style. The theme of homecoming during a Chinese New Year in *Lost on Journey* is a meta-reference to the New Year Comedy genre. Similar to Feng's films, *Lost on Journey* deliberately engages numerous timely and indigenous public concerns as of 2008: a rise in extramarital affairs, the mistreatment of migrant workers, the scandal of dairy products containing melamine, the dire situation of Chinese orphans, the decline in trust among Chinese people, the prevalence of fake train tickets, and the

widening gap between urban and rural China. The movie also unapologetically references popular culture in the same manner as Feng's films do: Niu Geng's lines in the film readily remind Chinese audiences of dialect-laden comedic skits 小品 (*xiaopin*) featured in CCTV's popular annual New Year Gala, and Li Chenggong's nickname, Gray Wolf 灰太狼, is directly taken from the widely popular Chinese animation *Pleasant Goat the Big Big Wolf* 喜羊羊與灰太狼 (*Xiyangyang yu Huitailang*). Moreover, Li's characterization is reminiscent of the middle-aged men in Feng's films: they are simultaneously shrewd and naive, cynical and honest. The use of the road trope also mirrors Feng's *A World without Thieves*, as the latter takes place on a train and prominently features the debut of Wang Baoqiang 王寶強, who also plays Niu Geng in *Lost on Journey*.

Lost on Journey differs significantly from Feng's New Year Comedy in its geographical choices. Rather than using first-tier cities 一線城市 (*yixian chengshi*)—such as Beijing 北京 and Los Angeles—for its backdrop, *Lost on Journey* employs a series of smaller cities, towns, and villages following Li's travel between two second-tier cities 二線城市 (*erxian chengshi*) in China, Shijiazhuang and Changsha. This choice reflects how *Lost on Journey* intends to make the New Year Comedy more relatable to common Chinese people's experiences and attract bigger audiences from China's modestly developed cities and towns. Feng's films, mostly based on Beijing writer Wang Shuo's 王朔 (b. 1958) fiction, portray urban elite subcultures, and his later films include foreign scenes and characters. In contrast, *Lost on Journey* portrays individuals who are deeply rooted in China's post-socialist realities. These include wandering vendors on trains, chivalrous villagers who despise Li's money, and an exhausted young woman who struggles to support her orphan students. By focusing on the daily challenges of these people's lives, *Lost on Journey* pushed the New Year Comedy genre to adopt more relatable characters and deal with social issues in a more realistic fashion. This lower-class rewriting gives a decisive shape to the social realism in *Dying to Survive*.

The deflation of Li's ego and privilege constitutes an important part of *Lost on Journey*'s comedy and further shine light on the film's geographical choices. With his economic success, Li feels entitled to special treatment and willfully disregards rules, but the journey lays bare the delusory nature of his sense of superiority. Toward the end of the film, five minutes before the New Year, Li is trapped on an unknown hillside near Changsha, eating instant noodles with Niu. He reflects how poor a job he has done as an employer, son, father, husband and lover. "You make me realize how pathetic 狼狽 (*langbei*) my life is!" he confesses to Niu. At the beginning of the film, Li expects a first-class flight, but by the end, he arrives in Changsha in a truck filled with chickens, with chicken feathers everywhere. The chicken feathers 雞毛

(*jimao*) allude to Chinese writer Liu Zhenyun's 劉震云 (b. 1958) well-known New Realism 新寫實主義 story *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* 一地雞毛 (2014; *Yidi jimao*), which compares the unbearably uninspiring life of a middle-aged man to chicken feathers. This analogy itself immediately makes Li's character recognizable and forgivable. Li is obviously experiencing a crisis of middle age: he is living in a brutally competitive world and has to support his family by taking on an out-of-town job; through this process, he gradually loses emotional touch with his family. At one point in his journey home, he attempts to flirt with three young women but is quickly reminded of his age when these women call him "uncle." Li's biggest anxiety is to be left behind by the surreally developing economy, and by the unavoidable loss of his youth (which may explain his affair with a much younger woman). Both aspects of his anxiety are highly relatable to the film's contemporary audiences.

LOST IN THAILAND, THE ROAD FILM, AND CULTURAL TOURISM

Lost in Thailand earned more than \$160 million within the first three weeks of its release at the end of 2012, and it remains one of China's highest-grossing domestic films to date. In this film, Xu Zheng and Wang Baoqiang continue playing the roles of the odd duo on the road as modeled in *Lost on Journey*. Xu is an energy company executive who desperately needs to secure a patent for a miracle fuel he has invented. He needs to find his boss at a temple in Chiangmai before his rival, an estranged friend and colleague named Gao, does so. On the other hand, Wang, Xu's fellow passenger, is a chef who makes onion crepes 蔥油餅 (*congyoubing*) and is visiting Thailand to obtain blessings for his ill mother. Wearing a mass-produced, stereotypical tourist's hat and armed with a to-do list (a sort of Thai variation on *Eat Pray Love*), Wang is determined to make the most of his time in Thailand. As a result of some highly scripted coincidences—for which some critics have faulted the film—Xu finds himself trapped with Wang while trying to evade Gao, creating outrageously hilarious scenes from the Bangkok airport to a high-end hotel and from Thailand's exotic markets to its splendid temples.

Lost in Thailand differs from *Lost on Journey* in its self-reflexivity about the road film genre. In both films, Xu's trip is continually halted by adversities, but *Lost in Thailand* puts a greater emphasis on the "meaningless" nature of the trip. Xu abandons his upset wife to pursue his career ambitions by visiting Thailand; he is impatient and cannot wait to reach his goal. By contrast, Wang "lingers to absorb every new experience" (Lee 2013, 5). The film manages to create both slapstick comedy and adds "philosophical depth to the comical clash of mindsets between Wang and Xu" (5). At the end of the

film, to Gao's surprise, Xu gives up on the contract in order to save their friendship and their families. He kneels piously with Wang to plant a Health Tree for Wang's mother and tearfully apologizes to his wife on the phone. Xu's original goal abruptly becomes a "vanishing point" (Morris 2003, 31), a defining characteristic of the road film genre, when his recognition of the futility of his original quest discloses the artificiality of the road-focused movie itself. In other words, Xu takes the journey to Thailand to evade his troubled marriage and his guilt over his neglect of his daughter, but the journey takes him back to where he started and gives him renewed appreciation for what he already has: his family that has not given up on him, his friendships with Gao and Wang, and his ability to see value in things other than money.

It is intriguing that it takes a trip to Thailand for Xu to sort out his business, marital, and friendship problems in China. The journey is productive only because he sees through the futility of his original quest for money and voluntarily forfeits that quest. Xu's journey and its undoing is actually a call for a pause on, if not a counter-narrative to, China's mainstream discourses that tend to define success as monetary and materialistic. What is the price when a father/husband/friend like Xu single-mindedly pursues wealth? Is wealth the only way to define success, measure happiness, or index social progress? Despite their both being successful executives, Xu does not have time to take his daughter to the aquarium and Gao cannot be with his wife when she is giving birth to their baby. How much fulfillment they can have in life is at the mercy of a capitalist market. Xu's original goal is revealed to be futile, irrelevant, and meaningless—this casts a note of doubt over China's drastic transformations, which are often portrayed as historical progress. That the journey is circular rather than linear essentially challenges the master narrative about historical progress that supports the legitimacy of the post-socialist government.

It is important to ask how Thailand fits into the discursive self-reflexivity of China's modernity. Unsurprisingly, *Lost in Thailand* presents Thailand as a culturally exotic place. Wang's to-do list provides a lens into the stereotypical ways in which Thailand culture is appropriated in the Chinese popular imagination. Wang wishes to ride an elephant, enjoy a Thai massage, combat a Muay Thai master, watch a show featuring Thai transvestites, and plant a Health Tree. The film ends during the celebration of Thailand's famous Songkran festival, with water symbolizing the purifying force that could be loosely connected to the transformation of both Xu and Gao. The birth of Gao's baby could also be interpreted as a symbol of a new beginning. However, it is obvious that the film unapologetically reduces the rich and complex Thai culture to rituals and festivals that fit a tourist's perspective. Its "tasteless jokes directed at transvestites" can make a Western audience

"cringe" (Lee 2013, 5), but the show that provides the setting for these jokes is precisely the sort of cultural experience a Chinese tourist would expect when visiting Thailand. In fact, the film does not hesitate to mock its own proliferation of a superficial cultural imagination. Also on Wang's list is the Taj Mahal, which Wang had thought was in Thailand but is actually located in India. Therefore, *Lost in Thailand* is paradoxically driven by two forces in its discursive formation: On one hand, it reflects the longing for critical reflection and a spiritual antidote to materialistic greed. The movie conveniently uses Thailand, a Buddhist country, as such a critical reference. On the other hand, the stereotypical consumption of Thailand's culture is also integral to the movie's narrative, reflecting the rise of Chinese tourists in Southeast Asian countries. Evidently, *Lost in Thailand* helped promote Chinese tourism in Thailand, to the extent that some university campuses, temples, and city areas in Chiangmai, Thailand, started enacting scenes from the movie to attract Chinese tourists. It also made national and international headlines that after Xu's film, Chinese tourists dominated the Songkran festivals and almost made them into Chinese festivals.

LOST IN HONG KONG AND CULTURAL NOSTALGIA

If the narrative of *Lost in Thailand* is built on the exoticism of Thailand, that of *Lost in Hong Kong* assumes its audience's familiarity with Hong Kong, particularly Hong Kong's popular cultural products, such as movies and Cantonese pop songs. Directed by Xu Zheng, the movie continues tropes from the road trip film and films about midlife crises, but it also heavily references Hong Kong pop culture to the point that the main story appears fragmented and secondary. The beginning of the film is set in the early 1990s, when Xu Lai 徐來 was an aspiring art student in college. This short segment is followed by a temporal jump to the 2010s, with Xu now a middle-aged man working for his wife's family business. He strongly feels a lack in his life: he and his wife have been unable to produce a child, and his masculinity is further challenged by the fact that the family business is all about making brassieres and panties for women. Taking advantage of a family retreat in Hong Kong, Xu wishes to rekindle an old flame from his college days, but his compulsive brother-in-law makes the short trip from his hotel to her hotel distressing. At the end of the film, Xu realizes that his true love has actually always been his wife, and both husband and wife express their love for each other after going through the sort of life-threatening situation that one can only find in a movie from Hong Kong.

Lost in Hong Kong is so saturated with cinematic discourses that the whole movie can be read as a parody of Hong Kong cinema. Xu and his college sweetheart,

Yang Yi 楊伊, fell in love while painting murals of Hong Kong movies in the early 1990s. These murals include Hong Kong New Wave films such as *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* 甜蜜蜜 (*Tian mi mi*, 1996), *Rouge* 胭脂扣 (*Yanzhi kou*), and *Days of Being Wild* 阿飛正傳 (*Afei zhengzhuàn*). *Lost in Hong Kong* also outrageously appropriates many of Wong Kar-wai's 王家衛 (b. 1958) trademark metaphors and lines—such as “one-minute friends” 一分鐘朋友 (*yi fenzhong pengyou*), “expired pineapple” 過期的鳳梨 (*guoqi de fengli*), and “Room 2046”—to show Xu's regret over having lost his college sweetheart. Many of its scenes also allude to works by Stephen Chow 周星馳 (b. 1962), John Woo 吳宇森 (b. 1946), and Jackie Chan 成龍 (b. 1954). As if all this were not enough, Xu also stumbles into “a movie within a movie” when trying to evade his brother-in-law: Xu accidentally runs onto Hong Kong director Wong Jing's 王晶 (b. 1955) film set and is mistaken for an extra. This segment playfully shows how Wong fails to shoot his hallmark scenes of violence. Most significantly, Xu's brother-in-law aspires to be a documentary filmmaker and decides to use his camera to comprehensively capture Xu's life. Xu, now the reluctant protagonist (and later antagonist) of his brother-in-law's work, is distressingly separated from his first love under the threatening gaze of this camera. Moreover, the camera happens to capture a crime scene while interviewing Xu, making Xu a permanent part of the sort of plot twist for which Hong Kong movies are known. At the end of the film, the brother-in-law receives a Hong Kong Film Award, making him a spokesperson for Hong Kong cinema.

The way in which *Lost in Hong Kong* encodes many references to Hong Kong films of the 1980s and 1990s gives it a highly nostalgic feeling. To Xu, the past is “an unfinished kiss” with Yang. It unsettles his present and makes the present unsatisfactory. However, after he finally has a chance to meet Yang in the present, he realizes—more strongly than ever—that the past should be sealed and bade farewell to. The beauty of the past relies on its non-trans-contextualization—that is, the past is beautiful precisely because it cannot be reclaimed or re-experienced. When Xu cries on a Hong Kong tourist bus that “I was actually young,” he is already admitting that his efforts to rewrite the present through reconnecting with his past have failed.

Lost in Hong Kong uses more than twenty old songs on its soundtrack. While the visuals and audio from the past provide an avenue for the past to be recalled and sealed, it is significant that the film juxtaposes two types of experiences of Hong Kong: The first type is that of the early 1990s, when Hong Kong was experienced by mainland Chinese audiences through the spread of its popular culture beyond the geopolitical divide between the two regions. This divide is highlighted through Yang and Xu's breakup after Yang's admittance to an art school in Hong Kong, with Xu having no choice but to remain on the mainland. The second type of experience has to

do with the present, when Xu's whole family travels to Hong Kong and his wife even buys real estate there to support Xu's dream as an artist. Both types of experience are subject to contingency: in the past, Hong Kong was physically unattainable but culturally embraced; in the present, Hong Kong becomes physically available but Xu must seal away its memory along with his own past.

DYING TO SURVIVE AND THE RETURN OF REALISM (AND ITS LIMITATIONS)

Dying to Survive was China's most popular movie in 2018. Based on a real-life story, the film tells the story of an aphrodisiac peddler with financial woes named Cheng Yong 程勇, who smuggles unapproved generic drugs from India for cancer patients in China. Cheng's initial motivation is to make money, but as he witnesses the suffering of many cancer patients (including a yellow-haired young man who loosely resembles Xu's mismatched companions from the earlier *Lost* films), Cheng embraces this dangerous business as his calling, gets himself imprisoned, and eventually serves as the engine for policy change in China. In one of the most emotionally powerful moments of the film, as Cheng is handcuffed and taken away in a police car, the crowds of patients whom he has helped silently pay their respects to him by removing their gauze masks. This tear-jerking moment symbolically marks Cheng's transformation from a middle-aged nobody to a hero of the people.

Existing studies of *Dying to Survive* have highlighted its active engagement with social issues; however, we must recognize how the earlier films in the *Lost* series contributed to the making of this record-breaking film. Not only does the film involve a journey that transforms Cheng, but this journey also includes a geopolitical entity unconventional as a setting for this sort of film. At the plot level, India is the source of the life-saving generic drugs that Cheng smuggles. At the thematic level, India performs a similar function in this film as Thailand does in *Lost in Thailand*, serving as a poignant reference to China's problems. Corporate greed has made generic drugs, which are legal in India, unavailable to desperate Chinese patients. Moreover, the movie's portrayal of India is also unapologetically aligned with the Chinese popular imagination. When audiences see Cheng in India briefly, the ambience is mystical and secretive. At one point, Cheng encounters a festival dedicated to the God of Medicine (hence the literal meaning of the film's Chinese title, “I am not the god of medicine”), which may be interpreted as marking Cheng's transformation from money-hungry peddler to martyr for the common good. This type of transformation is a prominent connection shared among all four films in the series. Although *Dying to Survive* does not feature a finale that focuses on family reconciliation, that Cheng's brother-in-law picks him up

from prison at the end of the movie echoes the theme of familial acceptance that first three movies end on.

Dying to Survive departs from the earlier movies in the series in its downplaying its Indian setting to instead confront China's social realities. The theme of the journey is also accordingly subdued by domestic, on-site, documentary-like scenes that depict the suffering of Chinese patients. *Dying to Survive* dedicates significant plot time to building a group of flawed yet memorable characters, including a frugal father who desperately wants to live to see his child grow up, a quasi-sex worker who would do anything to save her daughter, a priest who follows his conscience and willingly takes the "sinful" path of selling illegal drugs, and an old woman who pleads for Cheng in front of the police. Cheng's most loyal follower, the yellow-haired young patient (reminiscent of the yellow-haired Wang in *Lost in Thailand*), constantly challenges Cheng and eventually sacrifices his life to protect Cheng from a police attack. Bearing witness to these patients' suffering, instead of undertaking a drama-laden journey, serves as the most important inspiration for Cheng's transformation.

Ironically, while audaciously confronting domestic issues with a loose reference to another geopolitical entity, *Dying to Survive* also must contend with China's film censorship, which leaves clear marks of negotiation on its powerful portrayal of public concerns. At the end of the film, through superimposed text and brief shots of Cheng's release from prison three years later, audiences are reassured that the Chinese government has reformed its policies in order to make these drugs available and affordable to cancer patients. In other words, the last shots of the movie, clearly added after production, serve to frame the human suffering and tragic heroism witnessed by the film's audience as being in the past tense. The emotional and moral conflicts triggered by the film's realism are resolved and contained. The legitimacy of the government, which had been suspended if not fully challenged throughout the movie, is ultimately restored in the end. In this last, positive light, the government is ultimately upheld as responsive and efficient, capable of self-correction when needed.

CONCLUSION

Mapping out the discursive similarities and differences of the four films in the *Lost* series through the lens of geopolitics helps us understand both the most recent developments in Chinese cinema and the emotional fabrics—the *jiang*, the comedy, and the self-reflexivity—of postmodern Chinese society. Each of the four films deals with a distinctively contemporary Chinese concern, ranging from *Lost on Journey's* lower-class rewriting of the New Year Comedy genre to *Lost in Thailand's* skeptical

critique of China's material consumption, and from *Lost in Hong Kong's* nostalgic homage and playful parody of Hong Kong pop culture to *Dying to Survive's* (re)turn to realism as a mode of social engagement and activism. In particular, the last three films make use of different foreign locales in Asia and generic tropes of tourism, exoticism, or otherness to stage a range of critical, sometimes ironic, and sometimes morally or politically charged attitudes toward contemporary mainland Chinese life. It is fascinating that despite these films' nuanced reflections on domestic social issues, the films do not avoid (but often play up) the very stereotypes that circulate among Chinese viewers about Thailand, Hong Kong, and India. The incorporation of an expanded geography, which is a relatively recent phenomenon in Chinese cinema, does not seriously or deeply engage geopolitics. Rather, the otherness of these geopolitical entities is pressed into service for domestic concerns in this series. Seen in this light, *Dying to Survive* is a distinctive yet integral part of the series in that it almost withdraws the gaze toward others and forces viewers to predominantly dwell on the domestic, making visible an internal thread that connects all four films. The geopolitical others depicted in these films are therefore used as a strategic lure. Instead of promoting a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of China's significant geopolitical others, these films uncritically adopt a China-centered touristic perspective that reinforces stereotypes, while also simultaneously belying the conservative nature of films that intend to appeal and sell to audiences. In addition, depiction of China's geopolitical others also serves as a vehicle for processing and coming to terms with China's rapidly changing realities. The expanded geography therefore expands the stage on which the Chinese experience is written, but that experience remains distinctively Chinese, as are the concerns and the intended audiences of these four films.

NOTES

- 1 *Wolf Warrior II*, with its \$854 million box office income, is China's highest-grossing film to date. *Dying to Survive* has earned \$451 million to date. *Wandering Earth* has earned \$690 million since its release in 2019.
- 2 These four films were directed by three different directors. The second and the third, both directed by Xu Zheng, were clearly intended to build a franchise. The fourth film differs from the first three significantly, but as I will argue in this paper, reading it together with the other three sheds light on all four films. Therefore, I propose to look at all four as a series in order to highlight the organic process that has shaped the narratives of all four films. Right after this paper was finished, Xu Zheng released the fifth film in the series, *Lost in Russia* 囧妈 (*jiang ma*), in 2020.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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