

SAVIOURS AND SLACKERS

Linda Jaivin

THE 2017 FILM *Wolf Warrior 2* 战狼 II, which is set in an unnamed African country, portrays the dramatic rescue of Chinese and African hostages from ruthless American mercenaries by a Chinese special forces operative. The film's tag line is as muscular as its director and action hero star Wu Jing 吴京: 'Whoever offends our China will be put to death' 犯我中华者, 虽远必诛. (A more literal reading would be 'whoever offends our China, no matter how far away, must be punished by death'.) Patriotism sells. Within two weeks of its late-July release, *Wolf Warrior 2*, based on the cult 2006 military novel *Bullet Hole* 弹痕 by Fenwu Yaoji 纷舞妖姬 (the pen name of Dong Qun 董群), became the highest grossing film in Chinese history. Within one month, it had taken in US\$800 million at the box office, becoming the second-highest grossing

film in any single territory worldwide after *Star Wars 7* in the United States.

Not long after the film's release, a rumour arose online that Wu Jing was a foreign-passport holder. On 7 August, the official Weibo account of the Jiangsu Police posted the Chinese passports of both the director and his wife, affirming that the whole family held Chinese citizenship, following this statement with a bouncing 'thumbs up'



Theatrical
release poster
for *Wolf
Warrior 2*
Source:
Wikipedia

emoji. The police reminded people that the ‘malicious spread of rumours and slander’ was a crime.¹ It is uncertain as to whether the police were suggesting that it was slanderous to say someone held foreign citizenship. There can be a thin line between patriotic pride and anti-foreign sentiment. That line was crossed more than once in Chinese popular culture in 2017.

There is not a huge conceptual leap from the patriotic heroism of *Wolf Warrior 2* to the pimp-rolling xenophobic swagger of Chengdu rapper Xie Di 谢帝, aka ‘Fat Shady’. In his expletive-filled music video ‘Stupid Foreigners’ 瓜老外, released in July, Xie Di accuses foreigners in China of being losers who could not make it in their own countries, invites them to polish his (foreign) car and his (foreign) boots, and then beheads with a baseball bat a mannequin on which is written ‘stupid foreigners’.

New York film critic Simon Abrams, writing on rogerebert.com, said of *Wolf Warrior 2*: ‘its characters’ sense of patriotism is built on the back of racist assumptions that would, in a European or American narrative, be rightfully criticized for being part of an ugly “white saviour” power fantasy’. Noel Murray of the *Los Angeles Times* commented: ‘there is something bracing about its

patriotic fervor, which asserts that the Chinese will act in the best interests of the world’s downtrodden, while the rest of the world just exploits them’.

China’s prosperity has sparked a huge resurgence in national pride, and a growing sense of China taking its rightful place in the world. The Party-state’s carefully curated narrative of China’s rise slates all the pain and sorrow that the Chinese people have suffered over the last two centuries home to foreign exploitation, beginning with the Opium Wars of the early nineteenth century. Some fifty-three per cent of the population was born after 1976; most of them would have no idea of the suffering of previous generations at the hands of the Party itself in the decade-long Cultural Revolution, the three-year famine that preceded it, or any of the other movements later swept under the carpet of official history. Many have only known increasingly higher standards of living and ever-greater social and personal opportunity. With limited access to uncensored international discourse around such topics as China’s actions in the South China Sea, they are astonished and outraged by negative perceptions abroad of how China is managing its growing power: *Wolf Warrior*

2 and Fat Shady's lyrics are among the cultural expressions of this.

With its assertive delivery and association with bling, 'pimped rides', and all the rest, hip hop 嘻哈 appeared well suited to conveying a message of prosperity pride. Hip hop was part of China's diverse popular music scene for some years, but went mainstream in the summer of 2017 with the broadcast on the video channel iQiYi of the first episode of the music competition *The Rap of China* 中国有嘻哈 (with the prize being gold chains that spell 'RICH'). By October, *The Rap of China* had racked up billions of views.

Within a mostly anodyne scene that has produced, for example, songs about the local delicacies of the Xi'an region, a number of what you might call patriotic prosperity rappers had emerged. In 2016, the group Tianfu Shibian 天府事变 (also known as CD Rev) produced an English-language 'red rap' 红色嘻哈 called 'This is China' 听好了, 这才是中国. Singer Li Yijie 李毅杰 (who goes by the English name 'Pissy') said he wrote it as a response to Western media 'fabrications' about China and his conviction that the American government hires people in China to brainwash Chinese children into loving the US.² The lyrics boast

about China's national achievements including the space program and mobile phone payment systems. CD Rev's previous songs include 'The Force of Red' 红色力量, which refers to the president of Taiwan as the 'bitch Tsai Ing-wen', and another that addresses foreign correspondents as 'media punk ass white trash fuckers' and 'faggots from the West'. Swearing, misogyny, and homophobia are traits that Pissy's lyrics share with some of the more infamous rap songs from the US; missing is the anti-authoritarian spirit of genre-defining songs such as N.W.A.'s 'Fuck Tha Police'. Pissy's message is more 'don't fuck [with] tha' police'.

Although at the start of 2018, the Party-state decided to ban rap and hip-hop from television. Yet, the Communist Youth League had helped produce 'This is China', and Pissy widely vaunted his Party connections and support. Stating that it is important for young people (he is twenty-three) to 'step into this system', he told Reuters that the members of his group 'frequently dined with officials to exchange ideas'.³ Domestic critics of 'red rap' dismiss them as typical '50-cent-ers' 五毛党 — that is, hacks paid by the Party to spout the Party line — and the Hong Kong and Taiwan media have expressed dis-



A Ge You sofa meme

Source: Baidu

taste for the form as well. This does not bother the red rappers, however. One article on the Chinese-language website xihachina.com responded to such critics using the English phrase: ‘Whatever’.⁴ Despite the ban, at time of publication xihachina.com was still going and so was hip hop.

‘Whatever’ could be the slogan for another, entirely opposite genre of cultural, or rather subcultural production that rose to prominence in 2017 as well: ‘sang culture’ 丧文化. The character *sang* when pronounced in the first tone means funeral or mourning. When pronounced in the fourth tone, as it is here, it signifies to lose or have lost, as in ‘lose virtue’ 丧德, meaning degenerate; ‘lose ambition’ 丧志 or ‘lose *qi*’ 丧气, to have bad luck and become discouraged. *Sang* culture icons include the Netflix animated comedy *Bojack Horseman* (now banned in China) and *Catcher in the Rye*. One of the most typical expressions of *sang* culture is

through the creation of memes, including from the 1990s Chinese sitcom *I Love my Family* 我爱我家, in which comedian-actor Ge You 葛优 plays an archetypal loser, spending much of his time sprawling dishevelled and listless on a friend’s sofa.

Sang culture appeals on the basis of humour. But as many commentators have noted, it also expresses the futility felt by many young people in the face of barriers to social mobility and shared prosperity such as the prohibitive cost of housing as well as corruption and nepotism. Working hard, as urged by the *People’s Daily* in its response to *sang* culture, does not solve everything. Clearly onto its more subversive implications, the Party organ has labelled *sang* culture ‘ideological opium’ and linked it to crime and suicide.⁵ But *sang* culture is also an antidote to the frenetic pace of a rampantly materialistic society that provides scant opportunity for leisure or idleness. Another exemplar of *sang* culture is a conversation in the 2016 Japanese film *Setoutsumi* セトウツミ, in which a schoolboy laments the notion that young people should always be ‘running and sweating’; he asks a question that has become a popular meme: ‘why can’t I just waste time by the river?’

DO'S AND DON'TS, by Linda Jaivin

China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) had a busy 2017. The following are among the year's major directives:

- China's 2,500-odd television stations must no longer broadcast shows 'focussed on entertainment' or 'with foreign elements' during primetime.
- Online video content must follow a new set of 'general rules' 通则 issued in September. These include a ban on depictions of homosexuality, which they lump together with incest and sexual



Still from SAPPRT's video shorts

Source: YouTube

- assault under 'abnormal sexual behaviour' — despite homosexuality having been decriminalised in 1997 and struck off China's official list of 'mental disorders' in 2001. At the end of September, the online forum Tianya 天涯 announced the closure of its sub-discussion board 'Accompanying You Along the Road' 一路同行, which for eighteen years had been a meeting place and publishing hub for personal stories and fiction for China's LGBTQ population — due to 'external factors outside our control'.
- Mid-year, in the interest of ensuring that online video 'adheres to the correct political direction, and works hard to disseminate contemporary Chinese values', SAPPRT targeted 155 online programs as problematic; by September, 125 were permanently offline. Among them: Phoenix TV's online video services and the popular talk show *Behind the Headlines* 锵锵三人行, which for nearly twenty years had hosted lively — perhaps too lively — discussions on a range of topics.
- Even the title of the talk show *Behind the Headlines* entered the growing lexicon of banned words. These now include the use of 'boss' 老板 for Party leaders; the word 'citizens' 公民 to describe the people 民众 of Taiwan; and the use of 'foreign visit' 出访 to describe Party leaders' trips to Hong Kong and Macau (such trips are 'inspections' 视察).⁶
- Celebrity culture took a hit as well. The press is no longer to speak of celebrities in terms such as 'emperor of the big screen' 影帝, 'superstar' 巨星, and 'goddess' 女神. They are all now simply to be known as 'famous actors' 著名演员. The authorities shut down a number of entertainment-focussed sites and banned online promotion of ultra-luxe lifestyles.
- Go to the cinema and before the main feature you will now sit through one of four video shorts produced by SAPPRT and featuring famous actors including Jackie Chan, Li Bingbing, Angelababy, and Donnie Yen. These promote the twelve 'socialist core values', including prosperity and the 'China Dream' as well as the building of a 'moderately prosperous society'.

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