

Virtuality, Nationalism, and Globalization in Zhang's Hero

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**Ping Zhu,**

**"Virtuality, Nationalism, and Globalization in Zhang's *Hero*"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Virtuality, Nationalism, and Globalization in Zhang's *Hero*" Ping Zhu examines how Yimou Zhang's martial arts film dislodges the historical tale from its spatiotemporal context by creating virtual images, characters, narratives, and ideologies, and presents the virtual idea of *tianxia* (天下) (all under heaven) as an active mode of participation in the virtual global. Amidst the surge of virtuality in its cinematic space, with *Hero* Zhang aims to eclipse the national by a higher order: a homogenizing and harmonizing order that originates in traditional Chinese culture and that is compatible with the post-9/11 world order. However, Zhu argues that in the film the homogenizing global force is ruptured by local culture, history, and politics and creates more disjuncture and difference at the level of the local.

**Ping ZHU**

### **Virtuality, Nationalism, and Globalization in Zhang's *Hero***

Since the mid-1990s, globalization has brought the Chinese film industry new challenges and new opportunities. The sweeping force of globalization, spearheaded by economic capital and cultural capital, initiated a fundamental restructuring of the imaginations of both the local and the global. Faced with the impact of Hollywood blockbusters, Chinese filmmakers were tasked with the double mission to modernize the filming technology and film narrative, on the one hand, and adhere to a unique Chinese identity, on the other. On 14 December 2002, Yimou Zhang's *wuxia* (martial arts) film *Hero* held its premiere screening in the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square. It was the first time in Chinese film history that a commercial film ever enjoyed such national prestige. In the following months, despite all the controversy it provoked, *Hero* broke the domestic box office record by harvesting 2500 million RMB. In 2004, *Hero's* box office record in the United States exceeded 53 million, second to *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon* among all Chinese-language films.

For many, *Hero* is the first Chinese commercial blockbuster, as well as the first institutionalized fifth generation filmmaker's feature. As the best graduate in visual representation in the class of 1982 at the Beijing Film Academy, Zhang mesmerized international audiences with the passions, sumptuous color scheme, and erotic female bodies in his early films. While some film critics frown at the Orientalizing tendency in the dazzling visual style of Zhang's early films, more applaud those films for affirming individual desires and values while remaining a certain distance from the socio-political institutions of the postsocialist China. However, it seems that Zhang altered his political standpoint when he made *Hero*: the film is criticized as a paean to the despotic monarch who overlooks individual life. But the Chinese government was confident that the film would improve China's world image. 2002 was a special year for both China and the world: just a few months earlier, in November 2001, China was accepted into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and in the same year the whole nation was in euphoria as Beijing won the bid of the 2008 Summer Olympics. However, shortly afterwards, Chinese people were shocked when they heard about the terrorist attacks from the other side of the globe, on 11 September. The screening of *Hero* was a no less significant event as it registered China's desire to reposition itself in a new world order during a historical time fraught with fissures, tensions, and potentials.

Fredrick Jameson asserts that all third-world texts are necessarily allegorical in that they exhibit an obsession, or precisely, dissatisfaction, with the status quo of the nation (65). By the same token, as Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar observe, "the national informs almost every aspect of the Chinese cinematic image and narrative repertoire" (2). However, when *Hero* appropriates the founding story of the first dynasty of imperial China, it does not merely turn it into a national allegory of modern China. In the film the national is eclipsed by a higher order: a homogenizing and harmonizing order originating from traditional Chinese culture that blurs the boundary between the national and the global. In its prestigious status of national cinema, *Hero* in fact exceeds the confines of the national by producing virtual images, narratives, and ideologies in a transnational landscape. Thus I posit that the film is an allegory of modern China's growing ambition to participate in the global order with a new outlook and a significant impact. In my study I focus on the way *Hero* employs virtual narratives and images to put forth a new world order at a delicate time in both Chinese and world history. Here, virtuality "in its broad sweep of space and time, its multi-lingual aspect and its repeated changes of meaning and context" (Binsbergen 876) is a critical concept since it both connects and complicates the national and the transnational on the one hand and illuminates the innovation and ambition of Zhang's film on the other.

The notion of virtuality underlies the history of representational technologies. The advent of digital technology and visual culture has fundamentally reshaped people's perception of the world by creating "a new spatio-temporal continuum which continues to radically alter our sense of reality" (Yoshimoto 111). Film as a representational media is the ultimate embodiment of virtuality. Zhang's *Hero* represents the spatiotemporal continuum of virtuality. The structure of the film resembles Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950): it consists of three versions of "virtual" tales, revolving around the central plot of the pending assassination. Those three tales are narrated alternatively by the assassin

and the King in a form of dialectic exchange. Nameless (Jet Li), a lowly county sheriff, was granted a meeting with the King (Daoming Chen) as a reward for slaying of three top assassins at large: Sky (Donnie Yen), Broken Sword (Tony Leung), and Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung). Nameless told a story to the King on how he came between and slew the three assassins. Yet the discerning King discovered that Nameless was the real assassin in disguise who slew fictitiously the three assassins in order to approach the King himself. Finally, Nameless confessed to the King that he had already given up the assassination following the advice of Broken Sword.

The story of *Hero* is appropriated from the well-known historical tale on Ke Jing's (荆轲) assassination of the King of Qin (秦王) near the end of the Warring States period (403-221 BC). The earliest written account of this historical tale can be traced back to Xiang Liu's 战国策 (Stratagems of the Warring States) and Qian Sima's 史记 (The Grand Scribe's Records) in the Han Dynasty. Both versions recorded the assassination in a matter-of-fact tone representing the assassin as a righteous hero and the King of Qin as a ruthless despot. In traditional Chinese culture, the assassin was viewed as an earliest example of 侠 (chivalrous knight), a hero who "infracts the forbidden with violence" of the oppressors, while the King of Qin was a byword for autocracy and brutality. The only time that representations of the King of Qin and his assassin were twisted was during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Since Chairman Mao approved of the King of Qin and even compared himself to the latter on several occasions, he stirred up a trend to reconstruct the King of Qin in a positive light as a politician who adamantly opposed the restoration of slave owners. The assassin Ke, by contrast, was portrayed as an unworthy clown working for slave owners. An illustrated story book published during the Cultural Revolution, for instance, used the title 秦王斩荆轲 (The King of Qin Executes Ke Jing) in lieu of the conventional 荆轲刺秦王 (Ke Jing's Assassination of the King of Qin) to reverse the time-honored stereotypes of those two historical figures. But this short aberration of King's and the assassin's personas quickly came to an end as soon as the Cultural Revolution ended. During the 1990s, two fifth generation Chinese directors adapted the same historical tale onto the silver screen: Xiaowen Zhou (1954-) made 秦颂 (The Emperor's Shadow) in 1996 and Kaige Chen (1952-) directed 荆轲刺秦王 (The Emperor and the Assassin) in 1999. With both films the aim was to represent the complicated relationships between power, violence, and individual psychology through which a reflection on the violence in modern Chinese history was beckoned. Both adaptations remain loyal to the earliest historical account when the directors incorporated the tale of the assassination into the narrative of the films.

Zhang's *Hero*, however, virtualizes the historical tale: it represents the assassination as an abstract idea rather than real action. Here, the failure of the assassin is represented as a deliberate choice of history making. After scrutinizing the violence brought about by the King of Qin's ambition and the prospect of a unified China for the greater good of "all under heaven," Nameless gave up the assassination and died willingly a martyr, a hero. If one can find the original history in the ancient Han historians' texts and if propaganda during the Cultural Revolution and the pathos in Zhou's and Chen's films demonstrate the interpretive power of reflective history, Zhang's *Hero* exemplifies the working of the philosophy of history: the virtual idea of *tianxia* (天下) (all under heaven) serves as the *a priori* philosophical thought foreclosing any violent action that is considered irrational in the same philosophical system that creates the notion of *tianxia*. History thus becomes the "the winner wins" tautology. Therefore, compared with the open-ended narrative of *Rashomon*, *Hero* still seeks to complete a certain narrative closure within the framework of the film: the third version of story told by Nameless is supposed to be actualized truth. But this narrative closure is both dependent on and ends up with virtual reality. The three versions of the tale colored in red, blue, and white respectively, represent how the individual is subsumed by the national and how the national is in turn subsumed by a more encompassing notion of *tianxia*. This dialectic progression is presented through repetition, alteration, formulaic characterization, and minimal dialogues creating a simulacrum of computer game at the center of the film's narrative. The meeting between the King of Qin and the would-be assassin "is one of words" (Berry and Farquhar 163) except for the final symbolic act of assassination in which Nameless touched the back of the King with the pommel of the sword. Since the majority of the film consists of imaginations and flashbacks, actions and movements become mere extensions of the speaker's mind. In the second and third versions of the story, Nameless, Sky, and Broken Sword even

engage in a form of virtual fighting with their minds. As Shelly Kraicer notes, the fighting is "hardly a combat: more like an ecstasy of swordplay, a soaring of the spirit, and dazzle of free flight" (9). The virtual narrative postpones, attenuates, or cancels actual actions. Although Zhang's film is fraught with visual spectacles, actual actions are reduced to the minimum, which consequently debilitates the characters, and eventually "absence, silence, space, and peace begin to predominate" (Kraicer 9).

In addition to the virtual narrative, fighting scenes, and images, Zhang's filmic adaptation dislodges the historical tale further from its spatiotemporal context with the virtual characters. The King of Qin is the only character in the film who bears the vestige of a real historical figure: all other characters are fictional warriors without historical prototypes. The virtualization of characters not only produces uncertainties on each character, but also frees the film from its local and historical confinement. As Yiwu Zhang suggests, "The past third-world 'national allegory' has lost its meaning in a new era when China is being rapidly globalized and marketized. What Zhang Yimou presents to us is the imaginations of a new world that transcends the particular context of China" (12).

The *a priori* philosophical idea of *Hero* can be found in its opening subtitles: "People give up their lives for many reasons, for friendship, for love, for an ideal. And people kill for the same reasons ... Before China was one great country, it was divided into seven warring states. In the kingdom of Qin was a ruthless ruler. He had a vision — to unite the land to put an end, once and for all, to war. It was an idea soaked in the blood of his enemies. In any war there are heroes on both sides" (it is noteworthy that *Hero*'s US DVD version uses "the land" or "our land" to translate *tianxia* throughout the film): *tianxia* "involves the invasion of neighboring states in the interests of unrivaled imperial rule" (Berry and Farquhar 165). This imperialist intention of the King of Qin is revealed when he claimed that his interests extended far beyond conquering the six kingdoms. "Land," by contrast, is an ambiguous term and contains less of an aggressive meaning. When Broken Sword writes the two characters of *tianxia* to deter Nameless from assassinating the King of Qin, they are translated as "our land" in the English subtitles and at the end of the film this usage resumes: "This was more than two thousand years ago. But even now when the Chinese speak of their country, they call it 'our land'." The emotion-soaked "our land" invites a nationalist identification and it is based on this *a priori* idea of *tianxia* that Broken Sword comes to terms with the King of Qin's violence and gives up his plan to avenge his fallen kingdom.

The concept of *tianxia* came into being in China more than two thousand years ago and was expounded on and enriched in later dynasties. According to Ren Xiao the concept of *tianxia* has at least four meanings: 1) it refers to the extensive geographical region in people's perception, 2) it denotes the political regime and sometimes refers to the nation, 3) it goes beyond the confines of geographical and political markers but focuses on the cultural identity, and 4) it determines the validity of a regime based on the popular will of the people (111-12). After combing the four meanings of *tianxia*, Xiao points out that the prominent feature of the *tianxia* concept is its virtuality: "the Chinese always keep with them an ideal beyond reality" (112). Indeed, all four meanings of *tianxia* can be found in *Hero*. The geographical *tianxia* is represented in the aestheticized Chinese landscapes in the film: as the characters fight on the boundless yellow desert above the green serene lake or in the red poplar grove, an idealized "land" of China is reproduced on the screen. These scenes found in *wuxia* genre films form a stark contrast to the scenes of the massive, uniform, and formidable Qin troops in the film, which, in turn, are associated with the political *tianxia*. In *Hero*, the military power of Qin that couples with the political *tianxia* is displayed through the shots of the forbidding palace of Qin and the invincible Qin army. However, it seems that Zhang intended to downplay the violent nature of the military force by linking the second meaning of *tianxia* with the third, the cultural one. He said in one documentary that the scenes of the uniform Qin troops are more about "propriety" than violence (see Gan). Because the notion of propriety is key to Confucianism, it binds the military power that conquers *tianxia* with the cultural confidence deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. As Xiao observes: "Long before the term 'soft power' was coined, using China's cultural attractiveness in dealing with foreigners had already been advocated and practiced in traditional China" (112). The cultural *tianxia* sprang from early Chinese people's confidence in their cultural supremacy over the surrounding regions. Even during the Qing dynasty when the Manchus ruled China, scholars like Yanwu Gu (1613-1682) still maintained that the loss of the regime was different from the loss of

*tianxia*, believing that Chinese culture would persist nonetheless (Gu 765). In *Hero*, Nameless tries to persuade the King of Qin to couple his military power with a homogenizing cultural power by saying that "the brush and the sword are fundamentally connected." Yet this cultural meaning of *tianxia* remains an abstract idea in the film standing in sharp contrast to the real violence of the King of Qin and thus it is not surprising that some scholars find "*Hero's* marriage of chivalry (the art of the sword) with the notion of a unified China (*tianxia*) forged through war logically 'absurd'" (Berry and Farquhar 167).

Therefore, based on the first three meanings of *tianxia*, the King of Qin would be viewed as a ruthless ruler. In order to install him as a hero, Zhang had to evoke the fourth meaning of *tianxia*: the moral one. Moral *tianxia* evaluates the validity of a regime on whether or not it satisfies ordinary people's needs and desires and thus in *Hero* the moral *tianxia* is projected onto the future: it evaluates the King of Qin on whether or not he would satisfy people's needs and desires. Broken Sword and later Nameless believe that after the King of Qin unified the six kingdoms, peace could be restored to the world. The King of Qin thus was exalted as a hero for his vision to unite the land and put an end to war. This visionary moral *tianxia* further adds up to the virtuality of imagination of the film's narrative. Borrowing Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined nation, the King of Qin was creating *tianxia* where it did not exist previously. And thus I posit that this virtual aura of *tianxia* beckons a transcultural and transnational reading of *Hero*. According to Xiao, the concept of *tianxia* is all-inclusive especially on the ideal/virtual level: "*Tianxia* is both an idea and an ideal. As an idea, it is a framework that incorporates geographical, political and cultural elements. As an ideal it aims at eventually heading for *tianxia yijia* (literally, "one family under the sun") which is an all-inclusive (*wuwai*) order. Within this framework, no difference is made between the internal and external, but rather there is simply a process of extending the same principles and ideas from inner to outer realm as a continuum, which ends up with a whole that combines the near and the distant; namely, a *tianxia* order" (112). This all-inclusive *tianxia* is reminiscent of another more contemporary notion, the global. Both *tianxia* and the concept of the global imply an all-inclusive mapping and ordering of the world. The notion and practice of the global depends on the production and distribution of images, discourses, and signs, which makes it a virtual conceptualization that "signifies nothing other than itself ... where its images and signs no longer 'represent' an independent reality, but actually shape and transform the inter-subjective experience of its virtual subjects" (Kalyan 545).

The screenplay of *Hero* was created by Zhang and two other writers, Feng Li and Bin Wang and the shooting began in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, in August 2001, a month before the September 11 New York terrorist attacks. In the documentary film *缘起* (The Origin), Zhang recalls his feelings after hearing about the September 11 terrorist attacks: "Today's world is fraught with dangers of wars, especially because that September 11 took place when we were shooting the film, we could feel the enmity among men — they want to annihilate each other, you don't know when it will be over ... I wanted to convey such realistic messages through an ancient-costume martial arts film" (Gan; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Zhang admits that "*tianxia* and peace we talked about belongs to the global" (Gan). Obviously, the September 11 attacks had given Zhang a thrust to use *Hero* to propose a new world order to the current "dysfunctional" one and this new world order is *tianxia*, a "Chinese cultural order" that represents "a higher level of unity and coherence" (Berry and Farquhar 5).

Arjun Appadurai has directed people's attention to the more interactive global cultural situation: "The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (296). Appadurai has thus proposed a framework of five "imagined worlds" as opposed to Anderson's "imagined communities" to explore the complex transnational construction of the virtual global. Appadurai constricts five dimensions of the virtual global: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, mediascaples, finanscaples, and ideoscaples. These "imagined worlds" develop their own dynamics to eventually blur the boundary between reality and virtuality. It is interesting to examine *Hero's* active mode of participation in the new global cultural economy based on the five dimensions, especially when one does it in a (loose) comparative framework between the different imaginary landscapes of the global and the different meanings of *tianxia*. Ethnoscape is created as people move or fantasize of moving

from one geographical location to the other. The cast of *Hero* is no less than a microscopic ethnoscape: the leading actor Jet Li was born in China, worked in Hong Kong and the US, and became a citizen of Singapore in 2006. Donnie Yen, who played Sky in the film, moved from Guangdong, China to Hong Kong when he was two years old, and immigrated to the US when he was eleven. Together with the two actors from Mainland China (Daoming Chen and Ziyi Zhang) and the two actors from Hong Kong (Tony Leung Chiu Wai and Maggie Cheung Man Yuk), the cast is an exhibition of "the woof of human motion" (Appadurai 297). This "woof of human motion" is also embedded in the narrative of *Hero* as the warriors and the Qin troops move around the four directions of *tianxia* with the Kingdom of Qin as the center. Even in the traditional conceptualization, the notion of *tianxia* is not incompatible with the notion of ethnoscape. In regards to the geographical marker — although the narrower usage of *tianxia* just referred to China within the four seas — the broader one was used to encompass all places under the sun (Xiao 111). Under the ancient tributary system, the "foreign" ethnic could also be accepted into the *tianxia* order since the ideal *tianxia* was all-inclusive.

The making of *Hero* marks a new era in the history of Chinese cinema: all mainland film studios were nationalized by 1958 and it was not until 1996 that film studios on the provincial level were allowed to make films independently. The control was further loosened in 2002 when privately invested studios were able to make films with a "Permit for Film Production" issued by the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. In December 2001 the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television and the Ministry of Culture signed a document entitled "The Detailed Directive on Reforming the Film Distribution System." Following the Hollywood model, the directive proposes a "Theater Chains System" that aims to streamline the investment, production, and distribution of Chinese films. These two measures made the year 2002 a significant one in Chinese cinema history. Against this backdrop, *Hero* can be regarded as the first Chinese commercial blockbuster that ushered Mainland Chinese films to the global market. The major producers of *Hero* were Beijing New Picture Film Ltd. and Hong Kong Elite Group Enterprises Inc. and its total production cost was the record-breaking 240 million RMB (around 30 million US dollars). This generous investment not only resulted in *Hero's* top-notch crew that included Christopher Doyle (director of photography), Tony Ching Siu-Tung (action director), Emi Wada (costume designer), and Tan Dun (music composer and conductor), but also in the massive out-sourcing of the film's post-production project (three Australian companies — Animal Logic, Soundfirm, and Cinevex/Atlab — undertook *Hero's* digital visual effects, sound, and color post-productions). The international outlook of *Hero's* crew and post-production team stands as an instance of Appadurai's "technoscape." With its global investment and global production team, *Hero* aimed at the international film market where an instance of "finanscape" can be found. During an interview with *New York Times* in 2004, Zhang said that he "kept Western audiences in mind while making the film because he knew he would not be able to recoup the production costs through Chinese ticket sales alone" (Zhang qtd. in Smith <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/02/movies/02zhan.html>>). In the United States, Miramax Films bought out *Hero's* distribution rights with \$21 million. An interesting episode during the distribution process of the film in the U.S. is noteworthy: Miramax had been hesitating to release *Hero* on the excuse of marketing budget, but it was also being pressed by officials to release the film as soon as possible. Eventually, it was Disney, who was building a theme park in Hong Kong, that agreed to cover the cost of marketing for *Hero* (see Holson <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/10/business/disney-in-talks-on-independence-for-a-weinstein.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>).

Chinese directors' ambition to conquer Hollywood gained impetus after Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* won the Best Foreign Language Film at the 73rd Academy Awards in 2000. Following Lee's success, Zhang tried to use the spectacles of both the geographical and the cultural *tianxia* to attract foreign audience. But the film is not only the crystallization of a Chinese director's Hollywood ambition: it also embodies China's desire to insert its own positive influence in the global mediascape where "the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information" throughout the world and "image of the world created by these media" (Appadurai 298-99). According to Yimou Zhang, *Hero* represents a masculine Oriental spirit as opposed to the feminine one in Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (see Gan). In Berry's and Farquhar's comparison of the two films, the latter "borrows a mythic sense of the Chinese national to originate a new form of transnational and

diasporic identity," while *Hero* uses the same Chinese spectacles to "promote a vision of the territorial and expanding Chinese nation-state back in the midst of time" (11). The Chinese vision suggests that Zhang had laid aside the Orientalizing/feminizing style in his earlier films or "the third-world complex" that informed his early cinematic style: "*Hero* aims to offer an interpretation of the global *tianxia*. This universality that transcends China is unprecedented in Chinese films. Zhang no longer focused on the pursuit of the third-world national allegory; on the contrary, he endeavored to give an overall formulation of *tianxia* — the new world" (Zhang, Yiwu 12). This shift in the director's focus astonished some Western critics who were familiar with Zhang's early films which "showcased his country's struggle against poverty, war and political misrule to the outside world" (Barboza <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/08/sports/olympics/08guru.html?pagewanted=all>>).

The above ideological notion connects *Hero* to the notion of "ideoscape" which is "composed of elements of the Enlightenment world-view, which consists of a concatenation of ideas, terms and images, including 'freedom,' 'welfare,' 'sovereignty,' 'representation' and the master-term 'democracy'" (Appadurai 299). Ever since the late nineteenth century, China has occupied a peripheral position on the global ideoscape as traditional Chinese culture was eclipsed by Western concepts and practices such as individualism, feminism, and liberalism. The policies of reform launched in 1978 further exposed China to the world's neoliberal discourses. The relation of China and the West — in terms of the production and distribution of ideological discourses — is far from "a utopian exchange between communities, but a dialogue deeply embedded in the asymmetries of power" (Shohat and Stam 164). With *Hero*, however, Zhang made an attempt to change the status quo. Probably the view of a tumultuous post-9/11 world and a relatively peaceful and rapidly developing China had given Zhang enough confidence to promote the Chinese notion of *tianxia*, particularly in its moral meaning as "a new world philosophy for the new world institution" (Zhao 3).

Some Chinese viewers noticed the connection between the story of the film and the post-9/11 world as soon as they watched the film. One viewer, for example, noted that the immense and penetrating volley of arrows fired by the Qin troops and the Great Wall that Qin planned on building in *Hero* are reminiscent of the Ground-based Missile Defense System in the US (see Zhang, Yiwu 13). The *a priori* philosophic idea of peace and moral *tianxia* in *Hero* could strike a cord with the post-9/11 world discourse on anti-terrorism at least for those of a more liberal provenance. Although Zhang's ideal of *tianxia* seems to be a brutal distortion of the codes of Chinese martial arts and his portrayal of the King of Qin as a hero an offense to Chinese people's emotion, I argue that it is perfectly grafted on the post-9/11 world order: "Zhang Yimou's *Hero* is a metaphor of the order of a new century's culture and society. Here, *tianxia* or empire no longer relies on violence, it also possesses a high-end grand ideology associated with 'justice' and 'peace'; it is precisely through this ideology that the great historical legitimacy of global capitalism is created" (Zhang, Yiwu 15).

While the screening of *Hero* throughout China can be regarded as a symbolic national gathering, the film is more than a national event. *Hero* is a global event, or, at least, it embodies China's anxious desire to participate in the new global cultural economy. It also signals the transformation of the global in which "hegemonic tendencies ... are simultaneously 'indigenized' within a complex, disjunctive global cultural economy" (Shohat and Stam 149). In this way, *Hero* claims China's share in the imagination of the virtual global. Despite its commercial triumph, *Hero* remains a controversial film. In China, the critical voices of Zhang and his *Hero* were severe. First of all, Zhang's modification of the historical legend appeared unacceptable in some critics' eyes. Shixian Huang, for example, says that Zhang "broke a taboo" of the *wuxia* genre: in order to exalt the King of Qin as hero, Zhang "dismissed the audience's expectation" to identify with the traditionally established hero, the assassin (21). Evoking classical representations, Huang emphasizes that "It is impossible for a King to reach a historical compromise or conspiracy" (21). Many view Zhang's film as a blatant propaganda of authoritative and totalitarian power by pandering the Chinese government (see, e.g., Pan 51). In contrast to those critical voices, the Chinese Communist Party's attitude towards *Hero* was surprisingly supportive as Chinese officials praised the film as "a new starting point to China's new century" (Barboza <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/08/sports/olympics/08guru.html?pagewanted=all>>). They even lobbied Hollywood executives to give *Hero* an Oscar. Furthermore, Zhang was entrusted by the party to preside over the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening and closing ceremonies. These



maneuvers make people wonder if the Party has been using Zhang's film on the King of Qin to promote official nationalism as the "naturalization with retention of dynastic power" in order to stretch the skin of the nation "over the gigantic body of the empire" (Anderson 88).

Amidst the differences between the non-governmental and governmental opinions on *Hero*, the notion of the national that has been seemingly eclipsed by *tianxia* has reemerged. Although virtuality promises "freedom," *tianxia* fails to deliver the film to the side of the virtual global because different parties of audience in China persistently read *Hero* as a national myth. Anderson suggests that after a nation-state came into being, it must create a founding myth (a grand narrative) for itself based on memories: myth is "set in homogeneous, empty time. Hence their frame is historical and their setting is sociological" (204). Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the legendary assassination of the King of Qin has been appropriated and used by different parties and at different periods as the founding myth of the communist China. Mao lauded the King of Qin as the first emperor and unifier of China and sanctioned his brutality and dictatorship as a form of historical necessity. Popular versions of the story, by contrast, keep portraying the King of Qin as a ruthless despot by highlighting the violence in the founding history of China and the resistance of the oppressed people. The failure of the assassination represented as a historical contingency suggests the impossibility to impose a unitary narrative onto heterogeneous history. The pathos of the failed assassin is inscribed on the national myth indicating a potential return of the repressed. In *Hero*, however, historical heterogeneity is overwritten by a homogenizing and *a priori* notion of *tianxia* as the King and the assassin reached a consensus on history-making and both became heroes. The different versions of the founding myth not only reveal the "differences and conflicts between China's self-identifications," as Xudong Zhang suggests, but also the indelible tension between the ordinary people and the central government which attests to "the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (Bhabha 1).

Although Zhang denies any political readings of *Hero* and defines his film as a pure product of the "trend of globalization," in "an era of consumption and entertainment" (Barboza <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/08/sports/olympics/08guru.html?pagewanted=all>>), the specter of nationalism still rears its ugly head in the film through the image of the virtual hero. At the end of the film, Nameless is executed by a volley of arrows and buried ceremoniously as a hero. Zhang gives a fifteen-second long close-up on the body-shaped silhouette that Nameless left on the arrow-laden gate of the Qin palace. The human-shaped void forms a visual cenotaph of the nameless hero, who, with his "profoundly self-sacrificing love" (Anderson 141), conjoins the group of Unknown Soldiers as the "arresting emblems of nationalism" (Anderson 9). However, the void also calls the nationalist motif into question: even if the violence of history has been brought into oblivion in this new version of the nation-state's founding myth, the void left by the disappearance of an individual life marks the radical heterogeneity of history that cannot be fully symbolized.

As Appadurai suggests, "the globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization" (307). The homogenizing or hegemonic force of globalization is counterbalanced and ruptured by local disjuncture and difference and is finally "absorbed into local political and cultural economies, only to be repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues" (Anderson 307). *Hero* reminds us to notice the "increasing level of cultural complexity" (Featherstone 46) and how the processes of globalization and localization are inextricably entangled. Using *Hero* as a case study, I conclude that globalization also produces and intensifies the disjuncture and difference at the level of the local, national, and regional. Neither the notion of *tianxia* or globalization can guarantee a homogenizing higher order in China: on the contrary, it works "as a larger arena connecting differences, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specifications impact upon each other in various types of relationship ranging from synergy to contest" (Berry and Farquhar 5).

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