



## Research Article

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# China Whispers: The Symbolic, Economic, and Political Presence of China in Contemporary American Science Fiction Film

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**Abstract:** China has long been present in Western science fiction, but largely through notions of Orientalism and depictions as the 'Yellow Peril'. However, with China's new ascendancy and modernization over the last 15 years, along with its investment and collaboration with Hollywood in particular, contemporary film in general, and contemporary science fiction in particular, has embraced this new China in ways hitherto unseen before. This essay examines three contemporary western/American science fiction films which each represent and construct China in slightly different ways, and in ways which reveal the West, and Hollywood's reappraisal of the relationship with China and its emerging 'Soft Power'.

**Keywords:** China, Science-Fiction, Hollywood

“The Asian is no stranger to science, or for that matter, science fiction. Jack London’s 1906 short story *The Unparalleled Invasion*, set in 1976, chronicles the emergence of China as a world power coming out from the shadow of Japanese imperialism; due to its incredibly fecund citizens now numbering in the hundreds of millions.” (Hong Sohn 5)

Although strangely prescient in ways that Jack London could never have imagined, *The Unparalleled Invasion* speculates, in the best tradition of science fiction, on a future where old imperial might wane in the face of China’s growth and subsequent geopolitical change. But of course, the significance of this short passage, not lost on Hong Sohn, lies not so much in its visionary credentials than in its contemporaneous suspicion and wariness of a non-western, and therefore menacing alien ‘Other’. In his study of ‘Techno-Orientalism’, Hong Sohn draws attention to how traditional western Orientalist perceptions of the far east, such as these, did not just disappear in the wave of postcolonial theory, but instead mutated into a techno-orientalism that “reflected American anxieties of the newly emerging ‘Tiger economies’ of the Pacific rim and SE Asia in the 1980s and 1990s” (Hong Sohn 5). This techno-orientalism was particularly more visible in science fiction than in other genres and focused predominantly on Japanese culture and identity as the “figure of empty and de-humanised technological power” (Hong Sohn). Yet, this paper argues that for all China’s recent economic and technological growth, contemporary science fiction has not reflected this same embodiment. The reasons for this will be discussed in more detail in this essay, but the nature of China’s culture and growth, being largely untouched by postmodernism and a host of other western developments in art and culture, may have some bearing. As Christopher T. Fan has observed in his study of ‘Techno Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics’, China’s former isolation from western influences, and specifically postmodernism, is significant both to how we now perceive China and to the representation of China in contemporary western science fiction. If, as Frederic Jameson, David Morley, and Kevin Robins have argued, the postmodern science fiction sub-genre of cyberpunk “articulates the US-Japan rivalry of

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the 1970s and 1980s, by way of... ‘techno-Orientalism’, then post-cyberpunk... articulates US perceptions of China’s post-socialist rise and the beginnings of the two countries’ interdependency” (Fan). This post-socialist rise, untouched by postmodernity, and a subsequent US-Chinese interdependency has had an influence on representations of China in contemporary American science fiction film and television, and in contemporary western science fiction film and television as a whole. However, as Aynne Kokas points out in her study *Hollywood Made in China*, these representations, along with US-Chinese relations, are complex, a complexity that can be seen in the three films this essay will examine.

This examination, therefore, is a re-consideration of science-fiction’s representations of the “Other,” and more specifically, it is a consideration of the (re)emergence of China in contemporary American and western science fiction film. It is a re-consideration largely because postcolonial, global, and transnational attitudes and practices have all served to perceive China differently now, and primarily because China itself has undergone a process of immense change. China has emerged from both Japanese and western imperialism, but for reasons Jack London did not envision. Over the last 10 years, and partly as a result of advances in communications technology, there has been a de-centring of power relations which has seen China move from a position of isolation on the global stage to it being a big-part player. Similarly, societies and cultures have moved increasingly into a new era of global and transnational networks and relationships which have not only informed how we interact with other cultures but has also necessitated a rethink in how these cultures are to be represented through popular media. In particular, this paper will consider how the representation and increasing presence of China in contemporary western science fiction film speaks of a pervasive global and transnational culture informed by global market economics, a “post-hegemonic” culture (Lash), and where concepts of the nation and of national difference has not so much been erased, but rather rearticulated and re-inscribed in interesting and highly symbolic ways. Further, there is a temptation to assign the films chose here to a western disposition and trend, rather than a distinctly American world-view as a whole. This is partly due to a dynamic at the Director level. All three films discussed here, although produced by the Hollywood film industry, have foreign directors and therefore potentially show a foreign influence on Hollywood; The Mexican director, Alfonso Cuarón, the British director, Ridley Scott, and the French-Canadian director, Denis Villeneuve.

The three films to be examined here—*Gravity* (Cuarón), *The Martian* (Scott), and *Arrival* (Villeneuve)—have all been chosen with these ideas in mind, and also because their depiction of and relationship to China lend themselves to symbolic, economic, and political readings. From *Gravity* to the more recent *Arrival*, we can see a gradual development of the West’s, and primarily Hollywood’s, relationship with a new emerging China. This discussion will first consider how Cuarón’s *Gravity* symbolically presents China’s emergence and influence in global affairs, and how the type of China being represented is a China that is largely progressive, on a par with western technology, humane, and, more interestingly, “safe.” It will then consider how Ridley Scott’s *The Martian* highlights the economic dynamics behind China’s relationship with Hollywood and its presence in western science fiction film—a dynamic that Kokas sees as a double-edged sword and which may ultimately mean “more China-related content for global audiences.” (164). And finally, it will examine how Villeneuve’s *Arrival* speculates on the West’s and China’s political future and cooperation. For David Sims, *Arrival* can be seen as a reaction to “a particularly grim moment in global affairs,” but I will argue that the film’s scenario of linguists trying to decipher a new and alien language offers a metaphor for a contemporary culture that has to overcome traditional differences and find new ways of thinking. In these last respects *Arrival* potentially mirrors the off-screen relationships between China and the West and the West’s perception of China’s “Soft Power” strategy.

As such, contained in all three films also are themes of communication—a desire to communicate, the mechanics of communication, and problems of miscommunication. These themes are significant if we consider how contemporary science fiction film in particular, and contemporary film, in general, have had to reconsider new market places, new ways of experiencing film, and, particularly where China is concerned, new audiences. It is a move that highlights both an economic veracity as well as geopolitical change. China is no longer perceived as backward, or clothed in Zhongshan-Mao-suits, and “hundreds of millions” is more likely to describe China’s monetary largess, fecundity of ideas, and economic clout than the populous fecund citizens envisaged by Jack London’s “The Unparalleled Invasion,” mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

Stephen Hong Sohn's observation, offers not only a small history of how China has been commonly represented in western science fiction and the western popular imagination (primarily, the "yellow peril"), but also a starting point whereby we can compare and contrast traditional Orientalist representations of China with more recent representations and developments. For Hong Sohn, this small history offers a context for speculating on a "Racialized Future," a racialized future that in the 1980s was a largely western anxiety. Fredric Jameson's critique of perceived third-world cultures involved largely in creating national allegories, could not have envisioned China's rise of particular re-branding of socialism. However, a "Racialized Future" is not necessarily the focus here. The increasing future interdependency between the US and China, "and its emergent structures of feeling," as proposed by Christopher T Fan, have "required new modes of representation" that has seen terms such as "Soft Power," "Chinawood/Chollywood" and "Made in China" act as short-hand to these attempts at reconfiguration. As Hong Sohn, rightly observes in his conclusion, although post-race/post-national politics have rightly questioned ideas of ethnicity, the deployment and invoking of race still serves to encrypt, organise, and demonstrate "questions of marginality, oppression...erased histories" (19), but also, and more significantly, changes in attitude. All three films, I argue, demonstrate changes in attitude towards China from a western perspective, and invoke race and race difference (China) to highlight a geopolitical reality. In many ways, Sardar's observation of the "imperial mission of science fiction" (Sardar & Cubitt) has changed and is now largely realised in economic terms and by a thirst for an expanding global market share.

The visibility of these changes in science fiction film and television is significant, largely because science fiction has traditionally been used to project ideas of progress—either through warning or utopian discourse. One particular criticism of US-Chinese collaboration voiced here is that a film such as *The Martian* is almost totally devoid of the type of political and social critique, extrapolation, and speculation the science fiction genre traditionally engages with. It is a criticism worth bearing in mind when we consider the economic dimensions behind both the film and Hollywood's collaboration with China. Similarly, because science fiction has also traditionally been a blend of romance, myth, and extrapolation (Frye), a symbolic reading of Cuarón's *Gravity* and its representation of China potentially involves all three of these elements. The romance of science, technology, and space exploration in *Gravity* is quickly turned upside down in the ensuing chaos which challenges the myth of the largely male-centred American pioneer spirit and subsequently involves extrapolation on the imagined future realities of China in space. Extrapolation is particularly significant to any reading of China in contemporary western science fiction.

Further, and of equal interest where China's "post-socialist" rise is concerned, imagining a future where China features more prominently requires taking stock of past and present geopolitical conditions. All three films partly describe a post-cold war world that is no-longer seemingly polarised between capitalism and communism. However, whilst China's attempt to address what Kokas describes as its "cultural trade deficit" through its collaborative ventures with Hollywood has involved not only an embracing of capitalist doctrine and practices, China's regulatory regimes still largely dictate both the content and nature of these collaborations. These dynamics are not really evident in Cuarón's *Gravity*—hence this essay's mostly symbolic reading of the film's relationship to an emerging China. However, as China's influence over film content grows due to its increasing investment in Hollywood ventures, plus with Hollywood's desire to tap into China's vast potential audience (*The Martian* in particular), there are concerns that artistic decisions or reservations the West might have regarding China's human rights record, may take a back seat to depicting China as an exotic, but welcome partner to a new global landscape. Taking into further consideration this post-Cold-War dynamic, what is also evident in all three films to be examined here is the absence, problematizing, or marginalisation of Russia whose former communist ideological presence, either visibly or metaphorically, informed much of post-WWII western science fiction. In *Gravity*, Russia's largely off-screen presence is seen as the catalyst for disastrous events. The emergence of China in contemporary western science fiction film has simultaneously also seen the demise of Russia from these discourses.

China's presence in contemporary western science fiction—both on and off screen—may, however, invite the scrutinising gaze of traditional western science fiction critiques and discourses. As Mazierska observes in her study of *Marxism and Science Fiction*, "Western science fiction remains a creative and perfunctory instrument for unveiling and investigating the abuses promoted by different types of capitalism

and contradictions inherent in this system.” (10). For the moment, any criticism raised concerning these ventures has so far been levelled at Hollywood. As Jihong and Kraus observe in their “political economy approach” to understanding the relationship between China and Hollywood—“Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies”—whilst the Chinese film industry “actively imitates the Hollywood system” (420), the dynamic of this relationship is complex, with domestic and international films bearing “the stamp of both Hollywood and the [communist] party” (434). For the moment, China, a country that is still ostensibly a communist regime, and the Chinese film industry, in particular, has yet to fall under the perfunctory instrument or gaze that Mazierska describes.

As such, the actual idea or concept of cultural, even political polarisation in science-fiction, has become thematically secondary to more complex ideas concerning what ties us together—hence the themes of communication which run through all three films to be examined here. China’s voice whispers (soft power) into the popular imagination and into western science fiction film.

## Gravity: a Symbolic Reading

In the film *Gravity* (Cuarón), we see not only a drama in space but a change in power balances.

Described by Cuarón as less a science-fiction film and more a “drama of a woman in space” (Masters), *Gravity*, nevertheless presents a scenario of astronauts, and in particular Dr Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), overcoming adversity after a catastrophe in space. Initially and primarily seen as a technological masterpiece, the film has also lent itself to a variety of symbolic readings, being described as a story exploring spiritual and existential themes, themes of human evolution (Roger Ebert 2014), and incorporating motifs from shipwreck and wilderness survival stories (Zoller Seitz 2013) as a means of examining the human condition.

## Scenario

During a spacewalk from the shuttle *Explorer* to repair the *Hubble Space Telescope*, a team of astronauts, commanded by veteran Lieutenant Matt Kowalski (George Clooney) and including Biomedical Engineer Dr Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), encounter a debris storm created by a Russian missile strike on a defunct satellite. The storm and subsequent “Kessler Effect” kills most of the crew and leaves the space shuttle wreck and unusable. With both Lieutenant Kowalski and Dr Ryan Stone being the only survivors and now stranded in space, the film follows the attempts by the remaining two astronauts (later, just one—Dr Ryan Stone) to reach safety. Using existing space stations and orbiters as life rafts or islands in space—first, the International Space Station (ISS) and its two Soyuz TMA capsules, and finally, the Chinese *Tiangong* space station and its *Shenzhou* capsule—Dr Ryan Stone’s journey can be read as a symbolic move away from the unpredictable anarchy of Russia towards the sanctuary of China and its new-found technological and cultural status.

The films’ starting point and description of Russia’s destructive missile strike on a “defunct” satellite, not only initiates the chain of events that follow, but potentially a symbolic way of reading events in the film in ways that arguably reflect wider geopolitical factors in the real world. First, Russia’s independent reckless act in destroying a defunct satellite, although not dwelled upon in any great detail, can be considered as a reference to the Cold-War—a “traditional” metaphor in science fiction that David Seed observes encouraged analogies between the former Soviet Union and “dangerous predators” and “chronic aggressors,” and which also produced narratives of “attack” (Seed). As such, this event in the film can also be seen as initiating a move away from these former power relations in science fiction towards a new global veracity and new power relations both within science fiction and with China.

The problematizing of Russia in the film can also be read symbolically through subsequent events. As Kowalski and Stone attempt to reach their first “island” or haven—the International Space Station—they find that it has been abandoned. One of the Russian Soyuz TMA capsules has left, but the remaining Soyuz capsule has deployed its parachute leaving it useless for returning to earth. The scenes of mayhem and disorder that are depicted in these scenes and in the space station reinforce the initial representation of

Russia depicted early on in the film. Similarly, the parachute cords deployed by the Soyuz are not strong enough to support both Stone and Kowalski, and Kowalski drifts off to die in space. There is a fire on board the space station, the trailing parachute cords prevent the remaining Soyuz capsule from detaching from the space station forcing a spacewalk, and the Soyuz capsule is out of fuel making it virtually redundant. Throughout the first half of the film, Russia is symbolically represented as chaotic, unreliable, and “defunct.”

With Stone seemingly helpless and her situation bleak, it is at this point in the film that a series of strange interventions take place in the narrative. First, Stone tries to make communication with earth and makes contact with a non-English-speaking fisherman, and then has a hallucinatory conversation with the now-dead Lieutenant Kowalski.

If we are to see themes of communication operating in all three films to be examined in this essay, then Stone’s accidental radio communication with a Greenland Inuit fisherman, followed by her hallucination of Kowalski, are by far the most abstract and interestingly symbolic examples. In fact, a desire to communicate and the acts of actual and symbolic communication in this hiatus in the action, serve to draw attention to how the character of Dr Ryan Stone is, in the words of Jonás Cuarón, at that moment “literally and metaphorically disconnected” (Han). Again, we can make a symbolic and metaphorical link between old-world science fiction and power relations and new world science fiction and global communications and power relations. Whilst Stone’s conversation with the Inuit fisherman offers some sort of connection with humanity, even though neither understands each other, and her conversation with Kowalski is imaginary, the scene can be read as a turning point. As Jonás Cuarón states, “It’s this moment where the audience and the character get this hope that Ryan is finally going to be OK.” But more significantly he makes the point “that everything gets lost in translation” (*The Guardian* 2013). In *Gravity* the need to be able to translate may describe Stone’s predicament, but it also reflects how translation is an act of cultural negotiation and subsequently, ideas of translation, cultural negotiation, and communication are represented in highly symbolic and interesting ways. This prepares both the audience and Stone for an eventual encounter with the Chinese space station. In fact, the significance of the scene has not been lost on both Alfonso Cuarón and his co-screenwriter son Jonás Cuarón who later went on to make the short companion film *Aningaaq* based on Ryan’s conversation with the Inuit fisherman in this scene.

After this turning point, Stone and the film, leave past events behind and move forward. Events push Stone to seek sanctuary and safety in the Chinese space station *Tiangong*. Again, it is another opportunity for the film to show China, and the West’s relationship with China, in new and symbolic ways. On entering the *Tiangong*, and eventually the *Shenzhou* capsule, Stone finally finds some sort of haven or sanctuary from the chaotic events that have propelled her there. There are still problems with translation and communication, and problems with re-entry and a return to earth, but Stone seems more prepared to meet these difficulties. Further, the need to communicate and its representation through attempts at translation is encapsulated in Stone’s exasperated comment of “no hablo Chino.” This small piece of dialogue, spoken in Mexican Spanish as a nod to the film’s director Cuarón, consolidates examples of desired communication, acts of communication and miscommunication evident elsewhere in the film. But it also expresses a desire to see China as part of the international community. Similarly, the image of China that is represented in these concluding scenes is one of a China that is technologically on a par with the West, reliable, and open to religious freedom and tolerance—hence the brief glimpse of a Buddha statuette on the control panels. It is China-as-soft-power. The Buddha can also be read as both reflecting a western postmodern influence, and also a possible reference to traditional Orientalism. These Buddha’s have become ubiquitous through global tourism and the cultural tourism economy, and in these respects, their traditional significance and former exoticism serves to show how local cultures have been re-inscribed in ways that hint at first at former imperialism but one that has been superseded by the “imperialism” of global market economies. The message is unambiguous. China is not only part of the space race and of the global community, China is safe.

For Cuarón however, this representational and narrative strategy had less to do with transnational and global symbolism and more to do with the veracity of the moment. In an interview with the Chinese press on a promotional tour for the film, Cuarón claimed how the inclusion of the *Tiangong* (Heavenly Palace) and *Shenzhou* (Devine Craft) was purely an attempt to make use of what was in space at the time—“We had

the Hubble Space Telescope, the International Space Stations, *Tiangong* and *Shenzhou*. That's what was in space; and this is way before China became sexy for the Hollywood box office" (*Hollywood Reporter* 2013). Nevertheless, Cuarón's awareness and acknowledgment of China being "sexy," and the mere recognition of China's existence in the space race, does highlight changing fortunes as well as geopolitical change that has impacted upon this type of films. *Gravity* is significant in discussions about the emergence of China in contemporary western science fiction largely because China's presence in the film was not, as Cuarón states, a commercial or marketing ploy. Therefore, China's presence in *Gravity* can be seen as reflecting China's recent emergence and presence on the global stage and its new-found relationship with the West. Similarly, in an article for the *China Daily* regarding advances in China's space programme both *Gravity* and *The Martian* are acknowledged in terms of Hollywood's vision of China. In particular, the article points out how the Ryan Stone seeks "refuge in the Chinese space station" (2015). *Gravity* can, therefore, be seen as a stepping stone in the representation and emergence of China in contemporary western science fiction. In *Gravity*, China whispers into the western popular imagination and into contemporary western science fiction.

## ***The Martian*: an Economic Veracity**

Whereas China's presence in Cuarón's *Gravity* can be seen as largely having a passive role, more recently, Ridley Scott's *The Martian* represents both China and Hollywood's more active and dynamic relationship. As with *Gravity*, *The Martian*'s scenario of a marooned American astronaut on Mars being rescued, partly through the help of the Chinese Space Agency, shows a development in the West's and China's relationship both on and off screen. However, this relationship offers something very different to Cuarón's *Gravity*.

Kokas's observation that "As China's media market grows, foreign media companies will increasingly need to consider the Chinese market first when developing content" (163) is almost entirely applicable to Ridley Scott's *The Martian*. Not only does China help to save the day in the film (another positive representation), but the film made \$52 million dollars at the box office in its first six days in China alone. However, ventures such as these have raised questions about control and content. *The Tracking Board* - self-proclaimed provider of "Hollywood inside information" -, recently ran three in-depth special themed issues on *The Influence of Chinese Money in Hollywood*, where China's collaboration and financial investment in western films prompted some obvious questions—"Is it just pure investment? Is it about propaganda? Control? Usurping a signature industry and making it its own?". Similarly, in an article for "Class, Race, and Corporate Power," Bryant Sculos observe that in terms of political critique *The Martian* is largely toothless, offering a vision of a "pervasively depoliticized neoliberal utopia" largely as a result of the film being a Hollywood-Chinese public relations exercise. For all its determination to represent China as part of a welcome geopolitical change, *The Martian* does also provoke questions about the nature of that change and future Chinese-Hollywood relations.

## **Scenario**

Set in the near future of 2035, the film depicts the attempts by marooned astronaut botanist Mark Watney to first survive the Martian environment after being left behind by his crew, make communication with home, and finally to be rescued. It is the nature of this rescue, however, as with *Gravity*, where the representation of China in contemporary science fiction shows a development. In the film, technical problems which result in NASA's rescue probe exploding just after lift-off, leave Watney facing certain death on Mars. However, China's National Space Agency enters the film offering NASA the *Taiyeng Shen* booster rocket that will resupply the NASA ship *Hermes* and its mission to save Watney. The scenes which show China's initial offer of help, along with jubilant celebrations in the Chinese space agency and on the streets after the successful rescue, illustrate not only the symbolic partnership in the diegesis but highlights the dynamics of economic and artistic collaboration off-screen.

Chinese Investment in *The Martian* and in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, by the Chinese distributor and studio Bona Film Group, has been to the tune of \$235 million dollars, meaning not only that Chinese investment is "critical

to long-term economic success” (*Variety Magazine* 2015), but that positive portrayals of China are likely to carry on into the near future. *The Martian*’s inclusion of Chinese scenes and its overall positive portrayal of the Chinese space effort is almost definitely as a result of such investment and almost certainly designed to endear the film to regulators and audiences in China. It is perhaps these dynamics which prompt Sculos to describe the film as “one of the shallowest movies likely to be considered for an academy award.” The film can also be seen as an example of both what Kokas describes as China’s attempt to counter a perceived “cultural trade deficit” and “Hollywood’s thirst for an expanding global market share”—a dynamic that has potentially impacted upon the type of content being produced. *The Martian* is just one of a number of films that display China-Hollywood relationships. *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Transformers 4* (2014), and many more serve to “assert a vision of China’s global power through media branding” (Kokas). But these examples, and China’s presence in the contemporary western film, as a whole, is also indicative of official Chinese policy of soft power, a feature of China’s foreign policy at the highest level and one that Kokas observes leaves the “Hollywood dream factory and the Chinese Dream... mired in a state of perpetual negotiation” (Kokas 20). Concepts such as soft power and the “Chinese Dream” are guiding ideals propagated at the highest level in the Chinese government, and not solely to redress a perceived lack of cultural cache. As Michael Barr points out in his study, *Who’s Afraid of China?*, there is still an “ambivalent feeling and emotion” regarding China’s new-found position in global politics, and soft power only works for China because behind it is China’s “Hard Power”— its “global economic leverage.”

As Kokas points out “The upside of Hollywood producing content for China is that it may diversify the type of stories that Hollywood studios produce, as well as the types of people represented on the screen.” (164). However, “greater focus on the Chinese market also may privilege content that is more likely to be accepted by Chinese regulators.” (164).

The ambivalence towards China’s growth as observed at by Barr is only hinted at in *The Martian*, and only in the form of traditional mutual suspicions and secrecy regarding each nation’s space programme and technological developments. In the scene where China decides to help NASA, both former US-Chinese relationships are hinted at—“they [NASA] don’t know. Our booster technology is classified”—and new desired relationships are revealed - “a co-operation between space agencies.” The scene immediately after this consolidates not only the symbolic and actual concept of a new partnership but also the diasporic and transnational dynamics of US-China relations; NASA JPL director Bruce Ng addresses his team with “Thanks to my uncle Tommy in China, we get another chance at this.” (*The Martian*). The presence of Chinese (Eddy Ko and Chen Shu) and ethnic Chinese actors (Benedict Wong) in these two scenes also reveal another strategy employed by Hollywood films in trying to appeal to Chinese audiences.

The new economic and cultural relationship between the US and China, as represented by films such as *The Martian*, indirectly reveals possible future tensions regarding film content in this and other economic-cultural relationships. As Kokas observes, “... Hollywood’s accommodation of the Chinese market could substantially shift the type of media produced—not only for China but also for other global markets.” (164). This economic veracity also has implications for western science fiction film and television where the representation of China is a factor. Western films seeking to cash in through the vast Chinese market will have to be sympathetic in their representations of China. As films such as *The Martian* reveal, joint collaborations limit the type of content “that Chinese and US partners can jointly produce and distribute on the [Chinese] mainland” (Kokas 155).

While traditional western suspicions of China are only hinted at in *The Martian*, and in order to show a new relationship, more recognisable and traditional suspicions are evident in Villeneuve’s film *Arrival*. Here China is approached with much more caution and China is shown as much more belligerent—even if, as with both films already examined here, China does once again save the day again.

## **Arrival: a New (Political) Reality**

Whilst we have seen a symbolic coming together with China in the film *Gravity*, and the economic logic of Hollywood-China relations with *The Martian*, *Arrival* presents a scenario where the veracity of political

futures with China are becoming more apparent. Here, themes of communication are arguably to the fore, but they are also arguably at their most symbolic and significant. The film's scenario of an alien arrival to earth, and of a team of professional academic linguists and language experts trying to make communication with the aliens seems quite straightforward in these respects. However, *Arrival's* indulgence of nonlinear narrative complexity, the juxtaposing between personal and public sphere, local and global knowledge, and studied observation of temporalities, can also be read as a metaphor for contemporary culture, especially when we understand how the film's message of "re-wired" thought exemplifies Castell's idea of global network communications prompting alternative projects of social organisation. *Arrival* takes ideas of alternative social organization and reconfigures them in terms of thought meaning-making processes. *Arrival* also makes much of linguistic theory and relativity (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) which proposes the idea that the language we speak affects how our brain works and therefore has a cultural impact (determinism) upon how we think. *Arrival*, I would like to argue, can therefore also be read as an analogy of how western cultures have had to change their way of thinking in order to understand better their relationship with eastern and Chinese culture in particular, but with global networks and a new geopolitical situation as a whole. China's presence and role in the film is symbolically pivotal to this analogy.

## Scenario

When twelve alien spacecraft arrive at twelve different locations around the world, initial panic gives way to attempts to communicate and find out why they have come to earth. Enlisted by various government and armed forces around the world, Linguist Louise Banks (Amy Adams) along with other scientists are brought together to help decipher and understand alien intentions. Through the efforts of Banks and her linguistic skills, rudimentary communication is eventually made with the seven-limbed aliens (Heptapods), but her growing proficiency in the alien language leads to her experiencing disorienting visions and misunderstandings and communications with others around her—especially the military. Although these visions - which depict Banks and her daughter—are initially perceived as flashbacks, as the film develops it becomes apparent that these are pre-cognitions—glimpses into the future. The turning point in the film comes when Banks translates a message from the Heptapods which potentially reads "offer weapon." This is a mistranslation and Banks argues that "weapon" could also mean "tool," but the Chinese decide to break off communications with the aliens and the rest of the world and start preparing for war. In order to prevent an escalation and a war with the aliens, and realising that her visions are pre-cognitions and a gift from the Heptapods (a fundamental part of their language), Banks contacts Chinese General Shang (Tzi Ma) in hope of persuading China to back down. Her pre-cognitions or flash-forwards allows Banks an insight into a future meeting with General Shang at the United Nations where he relates to Banks his dying wife's last words. Back in the present, and armed with this information, as well as his personal telephone number, Banks repeats these words to Shang in Mandarin and convinces Shang and China to back down from military action. The Heptapod's language, it turns out, is a tool for those who master it and serves to alter perceptions of time, allowing users to see into the future.

*Arrival's* focus on the nature of language, interpretation, communication, and time and space would be interesting without the involvement of China, but China's presence and role in the film offer symbolic, economic, and political readings of all these elements and in ways which reflect contemporary Sino-Western relations as a whole. Equally significant is the representation and construction of China in another contemporary western science fiction film. Based on the book *The Story of Your Life* (1998) by American-Chinese science fiction author Ted Chiang, *Arrival* offers an interesting take on the alien "other" in science fiction, and can also be considered in terms of "first-contact" films and its relationship to science fiction "invasion" narratives that were predominant in post-war western science fiction film. As with invasion narratives of the 1950s, *Arrival* can be read in terms of "myth, metaphor, and allegory," and just as 1950s films acted as "conduits for playing out the ideological battle that emerges from the Cold War" (Redmon), *Arrival* and its scenario can be seen to "symbolically foreground the importance of the new power elites" (Redmond 318) that in the 1950s were concerned with post-war decision making, but which now extrapolate



on Global networks, market share and geopolitical shift. But Villeneuve's film taps into political intrigue and suspicions which hark back to both "traditional" western Orientalist perceptions of China and east-west cold-war confrontations. In *Arrival*, the world is polarized between east and west but with China now perceived as having the dominant position in global affairs. This perceived dominance is significant if we consider the emergence and representation of China in western science fiction film as indicative of new relationships and China's strategy of soft power.

Interestingly, criticism of the film and of China's role in the film, within China itself, have focussed on these very issues highlighting how the film relies on traditional, outdated and stereotypical representations. This said, very little has been written on China's newly assumed mantle of power in the film. In *Arrival* China is depicted as militarily belligerent and quick to rush to global war, and whilst there are attempts to show transnational understanding and empathy, the film's depiction of China is very different to that of Cuarón's *Gravity* and Scott's *The Martian*. It is interesting to note also that possibly as a result of these representations, *Arrival*'s box office takings in China were not very lucrative - \$74 million as opposed to *The Martian*'s \$52 million. For some, the film's Chinese elements condescended as well as pandered to local audiences, and whilst China once again saved the day, for Chinese audiences this has become almost formulaic. From *Gravity* to *The Martian* and so on, Chinese moviegoers are becoming increasingly hip to this Hollywood strategy, which could also further explain why audiences in China were less enthusiastic for the film. This makes Villeneuve's representation of China all the more interesting. Whilst the representation of China saving the day is still in keeping with recent trends and makes clear economic sense, there is also a clear suggestion in the film that China's new-found power could be problematic if not managed by a guiding US hand. *Arrival* potentially provides the example of a balancing act in contemporary western science fiction film and one that speaks of the current symbolic, economic, and political state of US-Chinese film relations.

If we are to consider China's investment in Hollywood as indicative of its strategy of soft power, we have also to consider the reasons for this strategy. As Wendy Su observes, film and the film industry in China is "considered by the Party-state an indispensable manifestation of soft power" and has been used not only to counter Western/American cultural hegemony, but to "serve as a tool for the ruling party to maintain its legitimacy, to consolidate its power, and to impose an ideological hegemony over a Chinese society" (321). *Arrival*'s representation of China, whilst playing the marketing game to some extent, may also show an attempt at anticipating future political tensions that may arise as a result of US-Chinese collaborations. For many in America, Chinese investment and influence in Hollywood mean a certain amount of censorship and a certain amount of promotion for Chinese interests and ideology, which leaves many uncomfortable. This unwelcome influence was manifested in a controversial promotion for the film which saw posters for the film depicting the alien ship hovering over the skyline of Hong Kong. The main problem was that the picture/poster showed Shanghai's iconic Oriental Pearl Radio and Television Tower in the middle of Hong Kong. This promotional mistake and controversy are all the more striking when bearing in mind the sensitivities and divided opinions of Hong Kong residents regarding Chinese control over the former British colony. For some, it illuminated the increasing and pervasive influence of China in popular media and for some residents of Hong Kong matters were made worse when the poster was changed; the Hong Kong skyline was removed altogether and replaced by the Shanghai skyline.

Similarly, Neil Turitz, writing for *The Tracking Board*, points out that "Soft power is not something with which to be trifled," and further, that "Things like cultural subjugation, societal infiltration, undercutting American content, altering of storytelling styles and tropes, the very specific—read: heroic—portrayal of Chinese characters and the limitations that then result" demonstrate not only Chinese influence, but warns that the "American public is particularly susceptible to manipulation." *Arrival* arguably anticipates a future where Chinese dominance could be problematic for the west, but the film also recognises the economic sense of having China on-board. *Arrival*'s themes of communication, and the need to speak a common language, therefore, are highly symbolic of present and future relationships between the West and China.

Linguistic misunderstanding and themes of miscommunication relate just as much to Western-Chinese relations as it does to Human-Alien relations in the film. As Derry observes, *Arrival* is an example of a "rare type of alien film" - "ones in which our attempt to understand the unknown becomes the explicit catalyst

to better understand ourselves” (1). The film’s message is that a new way of thinking is required if we are to communicate successfully amongst ourselves.

## Conclusion

The emergence and presence of China in contemporary western science fiction film can be read symbolically and understood economically and politically. All three films examined here have been chosen because they demonstrate a development in the West’s relationship to and collaboration with China. *Gravity*’s depiction of a move towards a largely benign China is largely symbolic. Cuarón’s insistence that *Gravity* was not a conscious attempt to tap into the lucrative Chinese film market only serves to make the film even more interesting in terms of the representation of China in western science fiction. *Gravity* is an example of certain films, books, artworks reflecting the conditions, attitudes, and belief systems that are present at the moment of creation. Whilst Cuarón claims to have merely used what was in space at the time, his depiction of China avoids stereotypical and Orientalist representations. Whilst China’s role in *Gravity* is largely passive *The Martian* offers an example of how relations with China—both on and off screen—have become more dynamic and mutually profitable in economic and cultural terms. Ridley Scott’s *The Martian* serves to shine a light both on China’s strategy of “soft power” and current Hollywood-Chinese collaborations and relations. As with *Gravity*, the representation of China is largely positive, and equally significant is how these representations avoid resorting to Hong Sohn’s concept of “Techno-Orientalism,” despite the obvious references to China’s technological ascendancy. In fact, the argument put forward here is that techno-orientalism is largely absent from representations of China in contemporary western science fiction film—unlike representations of Japan in science fiction films of the 1970s and 80s. The reasons for this difference in representation lie partly with China’s relative isolation from western discourses in modernity and postmodernity, and partly with the nature of China’s “post-socialist” rise in the global economy. In fact, global and transnational networks, linked to global market share, have arguably impacted more on cultural exchanges and the culture industry than any postcolonial agenda. But *The Martian* also suggests that China’s economic influence and investment in global media may also be a strong factor in Hollywood’s largely positive depictions. Whilst Kokas observes how the upside of Hollywood producing content for China is that it may diversify the type of stories that Hollywood studios produce, as well as the types of people represented on the screen (164), she also warns that greater focus on the Chinese market also may privilege content that is more likely to be accepted by Chinese regulators. *Arrival* arguably demonstrates a widely supported sense of caution towards China’s media and global influence in these last respects by speculating on the political veracities of future US-Chinese collaborations and relations. Although all three films examined here demonstrate themes of communication, *Arrival* is both circumspect and desirous of promoting new ways of thinking. *Arrival*’s message, in some respects, attempts to resolve the message tacitly mooted in the films *Gravity* and in *Aningaaq*, and explicitly related by screenwriter Jonás Cuarón—that everything gets lost in translation. All three films not only depict the act of translation and of communication as a shorthand for connecting to the world and as a metaphor for contemporary culture, but they also show how translation is a matter of cultural negotiation. The emergence, presence, and representation of China in contemporary western science fiction, therefore, demonstrate an ongoing negotiation with the veracities of geopolitical change which has seen China’s desire to overcome a perceived cultural trade deficit impact upon the type of content being produced.

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#### Films

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- Aningaaq*. Directed by Jonás Cuarón, performances by Sandra Bullock and Orto Ignatiussen, Warner Bros, 2013.
- The Martian*. Directed by Ridley Scott, performances by Matt Damon and Jessica Chastain, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2015.
- Arrival*. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performances by Amy Adams and Jeremy Renner, Paramount Pictures, 2016.