



GLOBAL CHINESE CINEMA

The culture and politics of *Hero*

Edited by Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley

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Global Chinese Cinema

The film *Hero*, directed by Zhang Yimou and released in 2002, is widely regarded as the first globally successful indigenous Chinese blockbuster. An expensive film with multiple stars, spectacular scenery and astonishing action sequences, it touched on key questions of Chinese culture, nation and politics, and was both a domestic sensation and an international hit. This book explores the complexities for the film's popularity with its audiences, discussing the factors that so stimulated those who watched the film. It examines questions such as Chinese national unity, the search for cultural identity and role models from China's illustrious pre-communist past, the portrayal of political and aesthetic values, and attitudes to gender, sex, love and violence, which are relatively new to China. The book demonstrates how the film, and China's growing film industry more generally, have in fact very strong international connections, with Western as well as Chinese financing, stars recruited from the East Asian region more widely and extensive interactions between Hollywood and Asian artists and technicians. Overall, the book provides fascinating insights into recent developments in Chinese society, popular culture and cultural production.

Gary D. Rawnsley is Professor of Asian International Communications and Director of the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, UK. **Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley** is Research Fellow at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, UK. Their most recent jointly edited publications include *Political Communications in Greater China: The Construction and Reflection of Identity* (also published by Routledge) and *Critical Security, Democratisation and Television in Taiwan*.

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Editorial note

This book follows the Chinese convention for Chinese names, that is, family names precede personal names (e.g. Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige). However there are two exceptions: first, the names of the contemporary Chinese authors of both English language and Chinese language sources follow the English convention of the personal name preceding the family name (e.g. Fei Lu, Jinhua Dai). Second, if a Chinese individual has adopted a particular English name that is well known in the field, the book will use the English formation (e.g. Ang Lee, Jackie Chan).

The Chinese pinyin system is adopted for the Romanization of Chinese names (e.g. Chen Daoming, Hu Jintao) unless the individual has already obtained a particular English spelling of the name that is well known in the field (e.g. Chow Yun-Fat, Chiang Kai-Shek). The Chinese pronunciation of important Chinese phrases and terms that are directly relevant to the discussion of the book are given in pinyin after the English translation. For example, kung-fu movies (*gongfu pian*), killing within ten paces (*shibu yisha*). The editors also provide a Chinese Glossary at the end of the book that gives conventional English spelling, pinyin, Simplified Chinese characters (used in the PRC) and Complex Chinese characters (used in Taiwan) to minimize confusion.

As China is not a Christian society, this book uses BCE (Before Christian Era) instead of BC in order to reflect Chinese history in a more appropriate way. The appendix of Chinese dynasties is designed to help readers easily see the timeline of China's often complicated history, while details of the films referred to in individual chapters can be found in the Filmography.

About *Hero*

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Film title: | <i>Hero</i> (<i>Yingxiong</i>) 英雄 / 英雄 |
| Year of release: | 2002 (China) |
| Director: | Zhang Yimou |
| Writing credits: | Li Feng, Wang Bin and Zhang Yimou |
| Cinematography: | Christopher Doyle |
| Original music: | Tan Dun |
| Main cast: | |
| Actor | Character |
| Jet Li | Nameless (Wu Ming) |
| Tony Leung Chiu-Wai | Broken Sword (Can Jian) |
| Maggie Cheung | Flying Snow (Fei Xue) |
| Zhang Ziyi | Moon (Ru Yue) |
| Chen Daoming | King of Qin (Qin wang, aka Ying Zheng) |
| Donnie Yen | Sky (Chang Kong) |

Synopsis

Set in the period known in Chinese history as the Warring States (c.475–221 BCE), *Hero*'s narrative is illustrated in a series of flashbacks representing multiple interpretations of the story by the main protagonists, the assassin Nameless and the King of Qin. Each version is filmed in a specific colour to symbolize mood and character, truth and falsehoods, different agendas and consequences. Slowly the stories unravel to reveal an unexpected reality and an ending that has, for China, timeless political effects.

At a time when Qin is slowly destroying the six other states, Nameless is brought before the King to be rewarded for having killed three assassins. An important part of the narrative is the physical distance between Nameless and the King. Each time the King is convinced of Nameless's victory, the assassin is allowed to get closer

to the throne, and thus closer to killing him. On entering the palace Nameless must remain 100 paces from the King. After presenting to the King the weapon from the assassin known as Sky, Nameless is given the right to approach the throne within 20 paces and tells in the first set-piece flashback how he killed Sky.

We are then introduced to two more assassins, Flying Snow (a female warrior) and Broken Sword, who almost killed the King inside his own palace three years earlier. Upon receiving the weapons which belonged to the two assassins, the King gives Nameless the right to approach him within ten paces. The story of how Nameless killed Flying Snow and Broken Sword is again told in flashback: at a calligraphy school Nameless asks Broken Sword to write a Chinese character, sword (*jian*), on a scroll for him. While Broken Sword writes, Qin archers attack the school, and Flying Snow and Nameless leap to its defence. As the army is defeated Nameless reveals he is a soldier of Qin and challenges Flying Snow and Broken Sword to a duel. That night, Broken Sword makes love to his servant and disciple Moon, knowing that Flying Snow is watching. The enraged Flying Snow kills Broken Sword by mistake. Moon tries to avenge her master but is also killed by Flying Snow. The next day Flying Snow fights with Nameless, but is defeated in part by the trauma of the previous night. The King of Qin doubts the authenticity of Nameless's story because he does not believe that Broken Sword and Flying Snow are so driven by emotion. The King suspects that Nameless has been working with the assassins all along in order to allow Nameless to get close to his throne. Now the King considers Nameless the most dangerous assassin.

The King constructs his own version of the truth in which Nameless demonstrates to Broken Sword and Flying Snow his ability to kill within ten paces. Using this technique he can kill the King of Qin only if he can claim to have killed Broken Sword and Flying Snow in front of witnesses, thus allowing him access to the palace and the King.

First Flying Snow duels with Nameless at the Qin camp but loses her life. In one of the most spectacular and visually stunning scenes of the film he then fights Broken Sword on a lake, but the duel finishes when Broken Sword gives Nameless his blade. Nameless now has possession of the three weapons he needs to present to the King as proof of his victory.

Back at the palace, Nameless, admitting the King is perceptive, begins to tell the truth. In the final flashback Nameless shows his technique of 'killing within ten paces (*shibu yisha*)' to Sky, Broken Sword and Flying Snow. Believing that Nameless can kill the King, Sky deliberately loses to Nameless, but the wound only appears fatal in front of the Qin royal guards. This means that neither Broken Sword nor Flying Snow will be killed by Nameless. Flying Snow agrees to cooperate in the illusion, but Broken Sword refuses because he does not want the King to die. Eventually Broken Sword gives Nameless his weapon, but begs him not to kill the King: the King must live, explains Broken Sword, by writing '*tian xia*' (literally 'all under heaven') in the sand.

The King of Qin is both shocked and moved by Nameless's story. As his army gathers around them, the King rises and turns his back on Nameless saying that

he can die happy knowing that Broken Sword understood his vision. Nameless employs his deadly technique and hits the King, but he leaves his target unharmed.

As Nameless leaves the palace the Qin soldiers and bureaucrats surround him and beg the King of Qin to order the assassin's execution. The King hesitates and then agrees. The army unleashes thousands of arrows and Nameless is killed. Outside the palace, Flying Snow learns that Nameless failed his mission, and accuses Broken Sword of ruining another assassination attempt. Broken Sword allows Flying Snow to kill him, and she then kills herself to be with her lover forever. Meanwhile, the King of Qin gives Nameless a royal funeral. Before the credits roll, a caption appears on the screen: The King of Qin united China and became the First Emperor.

Acknowledgements

Gary D. Rawnsley and
Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley

Well, we finally got there! As we put the finishing touches to the chapters and prepare the manuscript for submission, we heave a huge sigh of relief and hope that the book is as fascinating to read as it was to edit. We acknowledge not only the expertise and cooperation of all our contributors, but also their enduring patience. This volume of essays is based on an international symposium on Zhang Yimou's 2002 blockbuster movie, *Hero* (*Yingxiong*), held at the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (UNNC) in early 2006. It took another three years for the editors to finish the manuscript and submit it for publication, far longer than we ever anticipated. So a big thank you to all involved for understanding and tolerating the sluggish pace at which this project proceeded. We hope the readers will appreciate and enjoy the final result and agree that the wait was worth it.

Organized by Ming-Yeh Rawnsley at UNNC, the conference location was appropriate: as the first Sino-foreign venture university to create a campus in China, UNNC represented a unique opportunity to witness cultural interaction and global flows of information and culture. It personified the East-West transnational relations at the very heart of *Hero*. The editors spent 18 months at UNNC, Gary Rawnsley as University Dean and Ming-Yeh Rawnsley as Head of Chinese Studies and of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Ningbo. Working there was both a privilege and an adventure in equal measure. We would like to thank all our colleagues and students who helped with the organization of the *Hero* conference and participated in its proceedings. We extend special thanks to Ian Gow, the former Provost of UNNC and still a much valued friend, for his continuous encouragement and support for this project and all our other endeavours to help create a vibrant research culture in the university. Moreover, we thank our many friends who travelled to Ningbo from the UK, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia and Beijing to take part in the conference and the associated film festival. You were all a joy to host.

Gary Rawnsley would like to thank the editors of *Media Asia* for allowing him to guest edit soon after the conference a special issue of the journal (34:1) in 2007 in which four papers were published. He thanks the editors of *Media Asia* for allowing us to revise and publish three articles by Gary Rawnsley, Yingjie Guo and Yiyan Wang. We also thank Cambridge Scholarly Publishers for giving us permission to use an earlier version of Mary Farquhar's chapter on *Hero*.¹ In addition, Ming-Yeh

Rawnsley would like to thank the director, Zhang Yimou, for writing a personal note of encouragement during her organization of the *Hero* conference in China. The joy of being inspired by academics and practitioners in the field has given her the strength to come through the darkest moments of the project.

The editors naturally acknowledge the work and friendship of all the contributors. Reading the successive drafts of their work was always a pleasure and we enjoyed learning from them. Perhaps the most exciting part of this project was drawing on the multidisciplinary perspectives and approaches our contributors submitted.

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We would like to dedicate this book to the students in the Division of International Studies who graduated from UNNC in 2008. Teaching them International Relations in 2005–7 was a real pleasure and we are delighted that they all remain close friends. We wish them all the success they so richly deserve.

Notes

- 1 A later version of this paper will appear in Mary Farquhar (ed.) *Twenty-First Century China: Views from Australia* (forthcoming).