



Luxury Dreams, Patriotic Memes: Digital Fandom and Chinese Cult Cinema

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Received: 01 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Aug 2025; Accepted: 04 Sep 2025; Available online: 08 Sep 2025

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Abstract— This article investigates how participatory digital fandom redefines the concept of cult film within contemporary Chinese cinema, using two contrasting yet highly influential film franchises as case studies: *Tiny Times* (2013–2015) and *Wolf Warrior* (2015–2017). Employing discourse analysis of fan interactions on social media and close textual analysis of the films themselves, this study examines how online fan practices convert mainstream films into cult texts. Despite their distinct ideological positions—one emphasising aspirational neoliberal consumerism, the other showcasing assertive nationalism—both franchises are subjected to similar paracinematic rituals by online communities. Fans appropriate, critique, and ironically celebrate these films, thus creating a new form of digital cult status distinct from traditional Western definitions centred on marginality and subversion. This paper argues that digital participatory cultures, supported by social media platforms, reshape cult cinema into an expansive, ritualised practice that merges consumerist and nationalist discourses. The findings challenge established Anglophone-centric cult film theories by highlighting the role of digital platforms and fan-generated content in redefining cinematic value and audience engagement in China's evolving media landscape. This analysis contributes to global cult-film scholarship by showing how digital platforms shape cinematic reception beyond Western contexts.



Keywords— Chinese cinema, cult cinema, digital fandom, memes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cult films have traditionally been defined in film studies by their marginal status, dedicated fan communities, and distinctive viewing rituals. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008) note, a cult film typically inspires passionate, ritualistic consumption and often embodies an ironic or transgressive sensibility distinct from mainstream cinema.[1] Central to understanding contemporary cult phenomena is Henry Jenkins's (2006) idea of participatory culture, which stresses that audiences do not merely watch a film but collectively re-author it by adding their performances, artefacts and readings.[2] Western cult classics demonstrate this pattern aptly: the midnight sing-along screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), where viewers shout scripted call-backs and throw rice, all show how fans transform passive reception into

community-building performance. In these spaces, cult films serve as important sites for communal identity-making, enabling audiences to form shared identities and cultural bonds through collective interpretation and ritualised viewing practices.

This article compares two apparently dissimilar Chinese blockbusters whose afterlives illustrate that process: Guo Jingming's *Tiny Times* series (2013–15) and Wu Jing's *Wolf Warriors* diptych (2015, 2017). *Tiny Times* adapts Guo's best-selling urban-youth novels and follows four female friends exploring the themes of love, career and friendship amid Shanghai's luxury skylines and designer boutiques. Guo, as China's most commercially successful "post-80s" writer-director, embodies the era's consumerist ethos; while Shanghai, as the nation's financial hub, provides the mise-en-scène where capital

and aspiration visibly converge. In contrast, *Wolf Warriors* is a state-sponsored action franchise centred on Leng Feng, a special-forces sniper who defeats foreign mercenaries at the Chinese border and rescues expatriates in a fictional African conflict. Funded through state studios and marketed as part of China's soft-power diplomacy, the films double as patriotic propaganda at home. Following their export to over forty countries, they became international symbols of so-called "wolf-warrior diplomacy". While *Tiny Times* has gained notoriety for its excessive visual style and overt consumerism, which has attracted young audiences who participate actively through digital practices such as memes and fan edits; *Wolf Warriors* has built a devoted following around themes of nationalism and patriotism, generating collective emotional engagement and ritualistic viewing behaviours.

By analysing these two cases, this article aims to investigate how digital cinephilia and fandom in the Chinese context structure particular fan behaviours and articulate distinct sets of values, thereby significantly shaping contemporary definitions of "cult" cinema. This study specifically examines how participatory digital fandom reshapes Chinese mainstream films into contemporary cult cinema.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Cult film scholarship such as Mathijs and Mendik (2008) emphasizes that cult status is defined more by fan activities and rituals than by a film's initial production intent.[1] Fans do not passively consume films; instead, as Jenkins (2006) argues through his concept of participatory culture, audiences actively re-author texts through practices such as meme-making, remixing, and collective interpretation.[3] Cult films thus enter a "shadow cultural economy", in John Fiske's (1992) terms, where fan-generated meanings and pleasures become the dominant currency, surpassing original commercial intentions.[4] Through digital platforms, fans collectively produce an expansive and dynamic archive of memes, edits, and interpretations that reshape mainstream cinema into participatory cultural texts.

The same fan-driven circulation gives rise to two sharply different modes of nostalgia and self-identification: *Tiny Times* channels longing for luxury and urban ascent, whereas *Wolf Warriors* channels patriotic remembrance and collective strength. *Tiny Times* converts Shanghai's glossy *mise-en-scène* into what Bourdieu would call an aspirational horizon. An "horizon of aspirations" (1984) is the imagined upper edge of one's social world—the array of lifestyles, tastes and status a viewer can see and therefore aim for, even if not yet

possessed. It frames desire by making certain markers of class or success appear both visible and attainable.[5] By contrast, *Wolf Warriors* mobilises a backward-looking nationalist longing through slow-motion flag reveals, parade-ground symmetry and stylised close-ups that turn tanks, missiles and fighter jets into gleaming icons of national pride. Alison Landsberg (2003) argues that mass media can implant "prosthetic memory": memories of events a person never lived but nonetheless feels as if personally experienced. Like an artificial limb grafted onto the body, these mediated memories become integrated into one's identity and can shape ethical or political attitudes.[6] Landberg's theory of prosthetic memory helps explain why viewers who never fought a war nonetheless feel an inherited combat pride when they chant the on-screen slogan "Anyone who offends China will be hunted down". Here fandom functions as a ritual of emotional investment: reposting the trailer on National Day or inserting battle clips into family chat groups lets ordinary citizens perform "everyday patriotism" and thereby assert a morally charged subjectivity.

Both franchises also accrue cult prestige by deliberately courting excess and transgression. Jeffrey Sconce (1995) locates these films under the umbrella of paracinema, texts that flaunt excess: too much style, too many explosions, so that violation of sober classical norms itself becomes a source of pleasure.[7] *Tiny Times* overloads the screen with product close-ups, pop-video editing rhythms and melodramatic zooms; *Wolf Warriors* escalates ballistic spectacle until narrative plausibility collapses under rocket fire. Their very lack of restraint produces what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls subcultural capital: recognising, quoting and defending scenes mainstream critics dismiss as "trashy" marks subculture and cult film viewers as insiders who get it.[8] Online, this dynamic is visible in fan behaviour such as ironically rating *Tiny Times* five stars on Douban, a China's user-driven rating platform akin to Rotten Tomatoes. On Douban, five stars typically signal enthusiastic endorsement, but fans often award this rating "for the drama", signalling their insider awareness and ironic detachment. Similarly, *Wolf Warriors* scenes are remixed with K-pop soundtracks on meme pages, creating a hybrid space where mockery and admiration blur into a shared badge of cultural participation. In each case the cult film works as a symbolic toolkit: its stylistic deviations allow audiences to signal rebellious taste positions without abandoning the pleasures of spectacle.

Taken together, these three dimensions: participatory co-production, affective nostalgia, and stylistic transgression explain how *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors*, while ideologically divergent, converge within

the same cult framework. Fans sew consumerist dreams or patriotic myths onto the textual fabric, accumulate subcultural capital by celebrating excess, and thereby keep the films alive as fluid, communal sites of meaning rather than static industrial products.

III. *TINY TIMES*: DIGITAL LUXURY AND ASPIRATIONAL YOUTH

Released at the height of China's consumer boom, the film franchise embeds luxury brands diegetically and turns celebrity fandom into built-in publicity.[9] Fashion synergy is built into the narrative diegesis, the heroine edits a Vogue-like magazine, thus allowing luxury brands such as Chanel, Dior and Louis Vuitton appear diegetically as props and extra-diegetically as product placement. Casting idol actors like Yang Mi, Amber Kuo and Kai Ko etc, folds celebrity culture into the film's marketing loop, using their social-media followings as de-facto publicity labor. As Bourdieu (1980) would suggest, the franchise generates both economic capital (box-office returns, brand tie-ins) and symbolic capital (youthful chic, celebrity aura) to maintain visibility beyond the cinema window.[10]

Visibility alone, however, does not make a cult, but digital fandom practices do. On China's microblogging platform Weibo, the hashtag "#TinyTimesQuotes" archives thousands of stills captioned with lines such as "Love without money is just loose sand". Users redeploy these quotes as meme-ready reaction images, turning dialogue into what Fiske calls social currency that circulates in the "shadow cultural economy".[4] Social currency refers to the non-monetary value: status, recognition, insider credibility, that people earn by sharing, remixing, or being first to supply desirable information within a group. In Fiske's "shadow cultural economy", the more a fan can contribute quotable lines, rare GIFs, or clever memes, the richer they become in this symbolic currency, even though no actual money changes hands. Douban "interest groups" organise offline cosplay meet-ups where participants reconstruct protagonist Lin Xia's pastel wardrobe; smartphone photos of these events are then fed back into the online loop, illustrating Jenkins's collective-intelligence circuit in which knowledge (e.g., specific fashion labels or lipstick shades) is crowdsourced, verified and disseminated within the community.[3] Even negative commentary sustains the circuit: fans proudly screenshot one-star (the poorest) reviews to prove they "love the trash", thereby displaying what Sconce names paracinematic excess, which is the pleasure of embracing texts the critical mainstream disavows.[7]

The film's material aspirations and critiques explain why these practices matter to Chinese millennials and

"post-00s" viewers. Most fans come from second- and third-tier cities, where luxury is visible yet inaccessible. For these viewers, Shanghai's neon skyline and brand-logo overload become a fantasy mirror: objects to mock for their blatant excess yet eagerly mimic online as markers of a cosmopolitan self they hope to inhabit. Stylistically, *Tiny Times* saturates the frame with boutique interiors, luminous food photography, and slow-motion handbag reveals—visual codes of neoliberal consumer culture that promise self-improvement through purchase. Fans who splice film stills with commodity links perform what Banet-Weiser calls commodity activism which is shopping is reframed as an empowering act.[11] Yet the same imagery exposes generational anxieties. For instance, in *Tiny Times 1.0* Lin Xiao (one of the main characters) pulls an all-night shift at the glossy fashion magazine *M.E.*, frantically retouching layouts after the editor's last-minute tirade. Her tear-streaked face, framed by racks of couture she will never afford, highlights the precarious internship behind the glamour. Meme culture, therefore, works both as an aspiration and as a coping mechanism: joking about Lin Xiao's credit-card debt lets users articulate their own fears without overt political speech.

This tension between glamour and stress also plays out in representations of female friendship. Academic critiques underscore the ambivalence embedded in these portrayals. Feminist scholars argue that the franchise instrumentalises female friendship as a vehicle for brand loyalty, re-inscribing patriarchal norms under a post-feminist gloss.[12] A vivid example appears in *Tiny Times 2.0*, when Gu Li confronts Nan Xiang at her birthday party over a betrayal and hurls red wine in her face. The moment, framed by luxury interiors and couture gowns, became a viral template on Douyin, where fans recreated the scene in slow motion with music filters and fashion hashtags. Female friendship here becomes a branded performance of rivalry and status: emotional intimacy is aestheticised, stylised, and turned into a commodity. Through such recirculation, fans rehearse loyalty and jealousy not as private feelings but as spectacle, thereby reinforcing patriarchal scripts beneath a surface of glamour and empowerment. Critical readings note that the franchise repackages structural inequality as 'pretty suffering'.

These critiques of cult-film show how *Tiny Times* reshapes subcultural capital, using Thornton's term for insider prestige.[8] To call the series "trashy" on Douban yet attend a cosplay ball in its honour is to signal double consciousness: the fan recognises the text's ideological flaws but also leverages its *excess* to craft a distinctive personal brand. In other words, *Tiny Times* enables young urbanites to perform symbolic distinction without abandoning the pleasures of pop spectacle. The film's

paracinematic style offers just enough deviation from realist norms, hyper-stylised lighting, music-video montage to let viewers mark themselves off from “serious” cinephiles while still indulging in glossy fantasy.

Taken together, the franchise’s commercial design, participatory fan labor and ideologically charged iconography explain its dual status: a mainstream box-office juggernaut and a cult object. Fans co-produce meanings that oscillate between aspiration and satire, thereby keeping *Tiny Times* alive as a flexible cultural resource through which contemporary Chinese youth negotiate consumer desire, socio-economic precarity and identity performance.

IV. WOLF WARRIOR: MEME NATIONALISM AND HYPER-MASCULINE SPECTACLE

Wolf Warrior (2015) and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017) are hyper-nationalist action films written, directed, and headlined by martial-arts star Wu Jing (also known as Jacky Wu). Both films recast the PLA as an almost superheroic brand. The sequel earned 5.6 billion RMB on first release, briefly standing as China’s highest-grossing film.[13] Outside China, commentators adopted the phrase ‘Wolf-Warrior diplomacy’ to describe a new, combative style of PRC foreign policy.[14] Memes using the film’s poster, title font, or trailer music spread on Twitter and Weibo as shorthand for aggressive nationalism.[15] In contrast, on Chinese social media platforms like Weibo and Douyin, similar meme formats are often used to express patriotic sentiment or support for national strength, reflecting a more affirmative and emotionally invested mode of engagement. This mix of official sponsorship, record box office, and ironic global afterlife positions *Wolf Warriors* at the edge of cult territory: it is mainstream at home yet functions internationally as a provocative symbol open to remix.

Reception of the *Wolf Warriors* series is polarised. On Chinese platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, patriotic viewers quote the catch-phrase ‘Whoever offends China will be hunted down’ in birthday videos, wedding montages, even pet clips, turning the line into what John Fiske calls a shadow cultural currency: value lies in how often a fragment is re-used rather than in its original narrative weight.[4] This is because each reuse transforms the fragment into a shared cultural sign, the more it circulates, the more socially recognisable and meaningful it becomes, regardless of its original narrative role. Fans reskin shooter games with Leng Feng uniforms, extending the film into playable space. These activities exemplify Henry Jenkins’s idea of collective intelligence: users pool labour to maintain a living archive of slogans, GIFs, and military trivia that buttress a shared national story.[3]

Internationally, however, the same excess: whether slow-motion flag reveals, rocket-launcher ballet, sermon-like speeches, invites mocking memes. On Reddit, for example, the film’s climactic rescue scene, in which Leng Feng waves the Chinese flag through a war zone and leads civilians to a naval vessel, is re-edited within K-pop soundtracks; YouTube super-cuts compare his slow-motion knife fights and impossible bullet-dodging to 1980s Chuck Norris action clichés. Jeffrey Sconce would place such over-the-top style under the umbrella of *paracinema*, where exaggerated spectacle breaks classical rules and thus attracts both sincere fans and playful detractors who celebrate “trash” as insider humour.[12] By making ideological intensity as its selling point, *Wolf Warriors* shows how a state-backed blockbuster can still generate cult-like devotion: viewers bond by debating, re-editing, or parodying scenes whose very loudness demands a response.

Although the polarity between domestic admiration and overseas mockery seems clear-cut, closer inspection shows that audience affect often oscillates between sincere belief and playful distance within the *same* platform. Matt Hills (2002) labels this condition “ironic sincerity”, where fans can be emotionally invested yet still acknowledge the text’s absurdity.[16] On TikTok, for instance, users post hyper-edited battle scenes with dub-over comedy sound effects but pin patriotic hashtags like #ProtectTheMotherland. The joke signals media-savvy sophistication: a nod to paracinema excess, yet the hashtag reinscribes national loyalty. This dual stance echoes what Fiske calls *double encoding*: a text carries “official” and “expropriated” meanings simultaneously, allowing consumers to slide between resistance and endorsement without cognitive dissonance.[4] Such elasticity is amplified by digital affordances; remix tools let a single clip be re-framed as heroic, comic, or simply by altering music cues or caption fonts. Jenkins argues that participatory culture thrives precisely on this semantic openness, because fans derive social capital from showing how many readings they can juggle at once.[3] Consequently, *Wolf Warriors* functions less as a fixed ideological message and more as a polymorphic resource: a database of images that users adapt to negotiate everyday identity dilemmas: affirming patriotism during diplomatic spats, venting frustration through parody when nationalism feels overbearing, or flaunting media literacy by toggling between those moods in quick succession. Recognising this flexible affective economy complicates any simple binary of “propaganda success” versus “global ridicule” and sets the stage for analysing how masculinity becomes the stabilising core that holds the film’s shifting meanings together.

Underlying these memes is a hyper-masculine nationalism: Wu Jing's chiselled body packages state power into a commodity image. The films project a hyper-masculine nationalism in which ideal manhood equals with symbols of hard muscles, tactical skill, and unquestioned loyalty to the flag. This echoes with Richard Dyer's star theory: a star persona packages social values in bodily form.[17] Wu Jing's chiselled physique, battlefield scars, and stoic one-liners are not mere character traits; they stand in for a state narrative that frames China as disciplined, righteous and physically unstoppable. Fan pages label him *China's Captain America*, collapsing actor, role, and nation into a single heroic brand. When viewers post gym selfies tagged #WolfWarriorSpirit, they perform what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital, which the body becomes proof of moral alignment with the strong nation.[5]

The emotional charge runs deep. Lawrence Grossberg argues that fandom turns cultural texts into affective investments; the more one feels, the more the text anchors identity.[18] *Wolf Warriors* primes this investment through recurring close-ups of shrapnel wounds, swelling patriotic scores, and on-screen crowds chanting in unison. Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory (2003) explains why such scenes work: even viewers with no military background may remember sacrifice because the film supplies vivid sense data: blood, explosions, anthem-like choruses that plug directly into personal memory circuits.[6] Reposting these clips on National Day or during diplomatic stand-offs lets fans perform an imagined veteran status, tightening the knot between screen emotion and civic selfhood. Although approved by censors and boosted by the state, *Wolf Warriors* still satisfies core cult criteria: stylistic excess, subcultural capital, and participatory remix collectively secure the film's cult status.

In short, *Wolf Warriors* shows that cult status is not limited to low-budget exploitation or midnight screenings. A state-sponsored blockbuster can become cult by pushing ideological emotion to operatic heights, encouraging audiences to pick up the fragments, and turning the star's body into a vessel of national fantasy. The franchise demonstrates how contemporary Chinese cinephilia merges digital remix practices with an older politicised spectatorship, producing a hybrid fan culture that is at once patriotic, playful, and globally visible.

V. CONCLUSION

Using the films *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors* as case studies, this article has sought to answer the questions: what makes a twenty-first-century Chinese blockbuster

“cult” when its budgets are high, its release patterns mainstream and its politics either consumer-friendly or openly nationalist. The answer is deeply tied to fan participation and interpretive practices. The cult status of *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors* cult can be largely attributed to viewers actively re-authoring: through clipping, quoting, remixing and ritualizing, such that the original theatrical text becomes just one layer in a larger, fan-built lattice of meanings. In the process, each franchise crystallises as a different affective project. *Tiny Times* offers a fantasy of upward mobility where handbags, skylines and pastel filters stand in for the self-one hopes to become; fandom here operates as a curated mood-board that turns luxury style into personal aspiration. *Wolf Warriors*, in contrast, functions as a patriotic touchstone: slow-motion flag reveals, combat scars, and Wu Jing's chiselled frame invite audiences to anchor their own identity in narratives of collective strength. Both cases confirm that cult energy travels on the back of fan labour and cultural resonance, not textual marginality or production scale.

Tiny Times and *Wolf Warriors* embody different forms of transgression. Jeffrey Sconce's category of *paracinema* highlights deliberate stylistic overkill.[7] In *Tiny Times*, the overkill is *gloss*, rack-focus reveals of jewel-tone macaroons, circular crane shots around weeping heroines, and costume changes every thirty seconds. Such visual surplus breaks the realist restraint prized by Chinese art cinema and by moral-education dramas on state TV. It also troubles gender norms through a form of gender inversion: male characters appear in stylised, delicate fashion—eyeliner, pastel suits, carefully styled hair—while female leads occupy positions of commercial and emotional authority. The fandom, largely composed of young women and queer viewers, engages with fandom activity to contest patriarchal values of masculinity and feminine passivity. The subversion, therefore, lies in blurring class and gender codes, a soft rebellion inside a sentimental package. *Wolf Warriors*' transgression works on a geopolitical axis. By casting Western mercenaries as one-dimensional villains, the films flip Hollywood's long-standing portrayal of Chinese characters as secondary or exotic threats. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) argue that reversing filmic stereotypes can feel liberating to historically marginalised audiences.[19] Here liberation arrives via bazookas and flag slow-motions an “aesthetics of payback”. The subversion is less about sexual politics than about cinematic hierarchy: China writes itself as centre, the West as disposable background.

These findings carry two key implications for cult-film scholarship. First, the field must move beyond its

traditional focus on the Anglo-American film industries. While concepts such as *paracinema*, *subcultural capital*, and *participatory culture* remain analytically productive, their application to non-Western contexts reveals new emphases: consumer aspiration, state-sponsored nationalism, and algorithmic spreadability. Recognising these dynamics allows for a more global and differentiated understanding of what cult. Treating *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors* simply as outliers to a Western norm would miss how they expand the very definition of cult by infusing it with post-socialist market desire and geopolitically charged spectacle. Second, the cases complicate the received view that cult fandom is automatically resistant or counter-hegemonic. Digital platforms enable ambivalent modes of engagement in which the same clip is hailed sincerely, laughed at ironically and recycled commercially, sometimes by the same user in the same feed. This plastic form of fandom blurs the line between subversion and endorsement: a parody remix can go viral yet still bolster the parent film's visibility and symbolic power. Scholars must therefore treat irony, satire and meme-culture not just as tools of dissent but also as potential multipliers of dominant ideologies.

Methodologically, the article also shows the value of analysing circulation and context alongside textual style. Box-office data, state marketing, platform affordances and informal peer-to-peer networks all co-produce cult meanings. Future research might trace how these meanings mutate when the films travel—how *Tiny Times* memes play out among Chinese diasporic fashion influencers, or how *Wolf Warriors* imagery is redeployed in African or Southeast Asian social-media spaces where the sequels were shot and partially set. Comparative work of this kind would refine cult theory to account for the uneven geographies of digital distribution and the multiple publics who attach competing values to the same set of images.

To sum up, what links branded macaroons in *Tiny Times* to bazookas in *Wolf Warriors* is not a shared theme but a shared participatory logic: both spectacles invite audiences to project their own desires, whether personal success or national power, onto an excess of style. Recognising that logic helps us see cult fandom not as a niche subculture sealed off from the mainstream, but as a dynamic process through which mainstream products are continually re-sorted, re-valued and re-purposed in line with changing social dreams. In twenty-first-century China that process can produce designer cosmopolitanism and muscular nationalism within the same digital ecosystem, proving that cult cinema is alive, thriving and more ideologically plural than ever.

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