

PROVINCIAL HEROISM: HUNANESE AUDIENCES AND SYLVESTER STALLONE

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The thesis focuses on analyzing and discussing Hunanese audience members' receptions of three of his films – *Rocky IV* (1985), *Cliffhanger* (1993) and *The Expendables* (2010) to reveal the audiences' motivations of admiring him and his movies. The analysis is based on Hunanese male characteristics because Hunanese culture is a male centric culture. In the *Rocky IV* film, Hunanese fans like his manhood, nature of soldier, and determination. In the response to *Cliffhanger*, some audience members appreciate his manhood, family value. Some members think his character is a coward, some of them even support the bad guys. In the audience's reception of *The Expendables*, audiences have different opinions for different action actors. For example, Barney Ross (Stallone) was perceived as an extraordinary military leader. The thesis is divided into six chapters, and conducted upon Stuart Hall's *Encoding & Decoding* theory.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the film history of the United States, Sylvester Stallone is a name which we cannot ignore. He is a box office champion, he is the creator of *Rocky*, and he is also one of the most successful filmmakers in the sports genre. For instance, his most successful film (*Rocky IV*) ranks #2 in the box office history of sports dramas (“Box Office Mojo,” 2011). In addition, he is highly popular among fans, he is the symbol of a muscular body, and he is one of the most stylized filmmakers in Hollywood. His international appeal is shown by the fact that his fan websites have been created in different languages by different language users around the world.

Stallone began his career in Hollywood as an uncredited actor. As he has said in interviews, his career was not doing well at the beginning, but he became famous after *Rocky* was released in November, 1976. According to IMDB.com, the Academy Award winning movie generated \$225 million at the box office. From then on, his acting career began to thrive, and he was given the nickname “Italian Stallion,” which he has kept his whole life. His career reached its apex in the 1980s. He acted in 13 movies in 10 years, including three *Rambo* movies, three *Rocky* movies, and *Cobra* (1986). Nine of the movies were written by him, and three of them were directed by him. The movie *Rocky IV* (1985), which earned more money than any other film in the *Rocky* series, took in more than \$300 million at the box office.

In the 1990s, he acted in thirteen movies; nevertheless, only two of the movies were written by him, and none of the movies were directed by him. In addition, most of them have been evaluated negatively by both critics and audiences. However, *Cliffhanger* (1993) is the exceptional case in the 1990s. According to the IMDB.com, the movie brought in more than

\$255 million at the box office. On the website, a user wrote that the movie's extremely dangerous situations and unrelenting action are what we want to watch (Sibley, 2004).

Sylvester Stallone and his masculinities on film received worldwide attention again during the theatrical release of *The Expendables* (2010). The movie is an award-winning story of a private military group which solves regional conflicts. It took in \$266,159,621 at the box office worldwide (IMDB, 2010). Mere days after *The Expendables* was shown, several negative critiques appeared in the Chinese mainstream media, written by Chinese critics who disapproved of the movie's violent scenes and the characters' dialogue. They thought the dialogue rude and the violent scenes unacceptable. The Chinese central government even excised part of the movie because some of the fighting parts were considered too violent. Conversely, the movie was well-received by Chinese audiences. Wangfujing Cineplex Changsha, a popular movie theater in Changsha, Hunan province, increased the number of the movie's showtimes after one week. Changsha.cn, the biggest local website in Changsha, Hunan province, reported that the movie had generated more than \$20,000 after its opening week in the city ("Summer Box Office," 2010). In a feedback report from the audiences, a very high percentage of audience members reported wanting to watch the excised scenes. On a Chinese video-on-demand website ([www.funshion.com](http://www.funshion.com)), the full version of the movie received very good user evaluations. The local audiences' responses after viewing the excised scenes are in striking contrast to the China central government's attitude and the Chinese mainstream media's comments. Audience members like a movie for their own reasons. Some people talk about the star power of *The Expendables* (2010). This may not be believed a sufficient reason for the audience members' positive evaluation because star power doesn't work every time. From my observation, the star power works in this movie because the stars present a wide range of masculine identities. The

stars' masculinities were presented in a carefully-designed message through the film's production. The specific opinions and discussions of *The Expendables* is provided in chapter 5.

The issue of the stars' design of *The Expendables* can be extended to the characteristics of Sylvester Stallone's characters and films. In other words, "What makes Stallone being Stallone?" For example, Stallone says, "Everything I am and everything I have boils down to Rocky Balboa. I didn't create Rocky. He created me" (Ervø & Johansson, 2003, p. 140). In other words, the characteristics of Rocky are qualities of Stallone, or part of Stallone. Stallone's characters use their bodies to express themselves instead of using mouths. His successful movie characters are hyper-masculine person, but in his own way. For example, in a discussion of the differences of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bell-Metereau says that Stallone's creates his characters on the position of underdog and suffering person. However, Schwarzenegger's roles are typically coded through his robotic body, invulnerability, and showing they can kill without emotion or coolly taunting his opponents before calmly killing them (Eberwein, 2010, p. 55). She also says that the both actors showed their bodies in seductive ways. They offer themselves as the objects of the desirous gaze of the characters in the film and spectators in their films' audiences (p. 56). In addition, Stallone's roles always maintain close relationships between visions of corporeality and structures of societies. The relationships can explain why and how his bodily representations are created upon cultural and social concerning (Ervø & Johansson, 2003, p. 161). As Ervø and Johansson cite in their books, "We are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society" (p. 161). Yes, they are right, audiences have known Stallone's characters since always.

When I was collecting data for this research, I found that the Hunanese people gave favorable ratings to not only *The Expendables*, but also many other Stallone movies, such as

*Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*. The fourth *Rocky* movie is the best received Stallone movie from the 1980s. *Cliffhanger* is his representative work from the 1990s. Therefore, it is the purpose of this thesis to analyze the Hunanese reception of *Rocky IV*, *Cliffhanger* and *The Expendables*. I also found that most of the Hunanese audiences watched *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger* alone with families and friends on DVD and video-on-demand. This special phenomenon helped audiences to get more solid individual watching experiences and impressions of Sylvester Stallone because, if there are less people, there is less interference. I compare the masculinities of Stallone's movies and male characteristics of Hunanese people by following Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory. The reason is that Hunanese culture is a male centric culture. I do not ignore Hunanese females, because females definitely play important role in the history of Hunan. The truth is that most of the Hunanese characters in literary work (books, articles, movies, etc.) are men. The characters are used as examples to analysis Hunanese and the culture in Chinese society. Hunanese males and the characters recognized as the representations of Hunanese and the culture's value. Therefore, comparing Hunanese male characteristics with Stallone's masculinities can reveal the Hunanese audience members' motivations of admiring the films. In order to reveal the motivations for the Hunanese reception of Stallone's films systematically, I use "wandering view points," and "gap filling" to supplement the encoding and decoding.

This research is done based on solid designed interview questions. Most of the questions are general for collecting broad reception opinions; such as questions of asking their favorite characters and the reasons. The interviewees are Hunanese. The interviewees are chosen by ages for gathering more wide opinions since they all come from Hunan province. The number of interviewees is 50. All of them for the current research are Stallone's fans. They were contacted directly through email and MSN for the collection and analysis of the data for this thesis. I sent



questions through email attachments and MSN profile transmissions. They sent the questions and answers back after they had completed the survey. Three of them are older than 40 years, meaning that they have memories of the 1980s; they experienced the era. The other interviewees' ages are between 20 and 30 years.

Masculinities of Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky IV*,  
*Cliffhanger*, and *The Expendables*

Stallone was the biggest star in Hollywood. His character Rocky Balboa was an American icon. As Gross said, "In 1976, America introduced the space shuttle, a Georgia peanut farmer became President of the United States and a guy named Rocky Balboa captured the world" (Edward Gross, 1990, p. 7). The farmer is Jimmy Carter, who was elected to be the 40th president of the United States in 1976. His leadership style has been criticized as vulnerable and weak. After Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan was elected to be the 41st president of the United States. His leadership style has been perceived as strong and masculine. His presidency and masculine body have been perceived as the mainstream masculinities in 1980s. In addition, Reagan's masculinities and presidency were resources of the body identities in media content at that time (Jeffords, 1993). The first *Rocky* movie was released in 1976. *Rocky IV*, one of the movies discussed in this thesis, was produced in 1985. Rocky Balboa, who is thought of as an American hero, was the masculine image of Reagan's era. In the discussion of Stallone's movies, we shall notice that vulnerable personalities have been coded into Stallone's characters since the first *Rocky* movie. His characters have never been seen as robots but humans. However, the vulnerabilities have never been the main personalities of his characters because and Stallone is presented primarily as a tough guy. In addition, the masculinities of different eras (1980s, 1990s

and after 2000) influenced the production of his films. His characters have been changed through flowing of the time.

In the movie *Rocky IV*, the body characteristics of Rocky Balboa share similarities with the typical masculinities in the 1980s. Susan Jeffords mentions in her article “Can Masculinity be Terminated?” that “US masculinity in Hollywood films of the 1980s was largely transcribed through spectacle and bodies, with the male body itself becoming often the most fulfilling form of spectacle” (1993, p. 245). In the movies, the male body—especially the white male body—became progressively on “assembly-line” display. The display includes representations of muscle, of physical performance, and of great toughness. Jeffords also mentions, “External spectacle—weaponry, explosions, infernos, crashes, high-speed chases, ostentatious luxuries—offered as companion evidence itself confirmed that the outer parameters of the male body were to be the focus of audience attention, desire, and politics” (1993, p. 245). In describing the character Rocky, Stallone says that he wanted to create a character who had not only a tough body but also great determination. In the movie *Rocky IV*, we do not see weapons, explosions, and high speed chases, but we see fists, blood, and fast evasion.

Stallone and his films are stylized in the Hollywood mode. For example, we can perceive some old Hollywood images in his recent movies. However, just as Hollywood is ever changing, his masculinity also changes. For instance, in *Cliffhanger*, the hero has changed. His masculinity involves both toughness and vulnerability. For example, Gabe loves mountain climbing, but he has left the mountain rescue team because he thinks that his mistake was the cause of someone’s death. He is still a masculine hero, but on the other hand, he is sensitive and ambiguous. Toughness and vulnerability are normal characteristics of a hero in current movies, they are started in the 1990s, same era as producing *Cliffhanger*. Stallone is not Rocky Balboa in this

movie; he is Gabe Walker. The character's toughness begins to appear when he faces a group of gangsters. Similar to the character Rocky, Gabe is tough in both body and mind. His body strength allows him to fight with gangsters, to climb mountains, to jump from side to side between wide gaps. His mental strength allows him to climb with only a T-shirt in the really low temperature and to fight with armed gangsters when he does not have any weapon to use.

Films present more and more wide range of masculinities after 2000s. Stallone changes his films as following this trend. In *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*, we can always find the dominant masculinity which is presented by Stallone. However, in *The Expendables*, dominant masculinity is not as obvious as it is in *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*. Stallone presents more various masculinities to audiences by hiring film stars from all over the world. He hires actors from different cultures. Through the performance of these actors, *The Expendables* presents different types of bodies and masculinities. Stallone, himself, is still a symbol of traditional masculinity. He is tall and strong. He chooses power in fighting rather than skill. Jet Li is an expert of martial arts as usual. He is short and agile. He uses skill and speed in wrestling rather than power. Dolph Lundgren is an old soldier who is an expert sniper. He moves slowly but shoots accurately. He chooses shooting instead of physical fighting as much as possible.

After identifying the masculinities of the three movies and the general responses from Hunanese audiences, we cannot find many similarities between Stallone's physicality and Hunan men's physicality. Therefore, my question is, "Since they are not very similar, how and why do Hunanese men enjoy Stallone's movies and masculinities so much?" If the answer cannot be found in physical identities, the reason should be sought in mental characteristics. We should focus analysis on culture and people's minds. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the characteristics of Hunan local culture, and it is necessary to look at the differences between

macro Chinese culture and Hunan culture. The purpose is to reveal the background reasons why Hunanese audiences like his movie more.

### Defining Culture Differences

The different opinions between Chinese mainstream media and the Hunan audiences lead me to ask the following questions: What are the causes of the differences? Why do they exist? Where do they come from? Matei says that audiences and readers are actively seeking media content instead of waiting passively to receive them (2010). In National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, the author says, “Personal identity is shaped by an individual’s culture, by groups, by institutional influences, and by lived experiences shared with people inside and outside the culture” (Alder, 2010). Therefore, in order to discover the reasons for the audience attitudes towards the films, it is necessary that we clarify the cultural facts.

In many descriptions of Chinese people in the United States, the most common characterizations are, “They are polite and modest, and quiet sometimes.” It is true: in China, the civilization keeps a moral and ethical culture, and the core value emphasizes the harmony of interpersonal relationships (Jiali Tong, 2009). Therefore, in order to avoid inharmonic situations, the Chinese have learned to talk indirectly and peacefully to maintain the relationship between individuals. In addition, “tolerance” and “self-surrender” have become an important part of Chinese culture during its thousands of years of evolution. “Harmony,” “tolerance,” and “self-surrender” not only comprise the core of interpersonal communication but also are given high importance in Chinese government diplomacy (Li & Zou, 2011).

In the Hunan province, however, the main values of local culture are “direct talking,” “fighting,” and “determination.” There are two well-known examples of local culture. First, a

Hunan historian mentioned an example which happened 100 years ago. One day, a Hunanese lay on his bed and wrote down the following phrases, “If China will be Greece, Hunan is Sparta. If China will be Germany, Hunan is Prussia. The Hunanese will all be dead before China is not a country anymore” (Wang, 2006). In this example, the author is not saying that China has to be Greece or Germany. The strong confidence in his hometown and the natural motivation of doing something for China are the core values expressed in his phrases. A literature expert says, “Hunanese will do anything and take any risk in order to fulfill their goal from their heart” (Tang, 2009). The author of the above quotation was a politician of the Qing Dynasty in the history of China. According to Tang’s documents, “China faced severe situations in the era of Qing, such as foreign invasion, shifting ideology, and economy crisis.” Hunanese talents began to emerge in large numbers beginning in the Qing Dynasty. “Their energy for change pushes them at the front of storm. They are eager to learn, and they follow what they believe” (2009).

As a second example, a few years ago, a Chinese netizen posted a suggestion on his own blog, “Let’s draw some maps of China based on our own local culture.” Many Chinese drew and posted maps. A Hunan netizen used only two colors in his map. One of the colors was for Hunan, and the other was for the rest of China. He wrote “Home” on the inside of the Hunan border, and “the other place” on the rest of China (“Maps of China,” 2009). We can’t analyze the accuracy of the “maps of China”; however, the Hunan netizen’s map does represent strong emotions regarding his home and his personal associations with the Hunan province.

In Hunan, the main values of the culture are “changing,” “determination” and “fighting.” The value of Hunan culture involves the motivation to change the surroundings. It represents new ideas and energies. In *Provincial Patriots*, Platt says, “All of which is to say that Hunan—like Shanghai or Beijing—was a major engine of change and a fundamental source of new ideas

and energies” (2007, p. 2). The local culture also emphasizes the importance of determination. It represents persistence in facing difficulties in its whole way of life. Moreover, the culture teaches Hunanese the necessity of fighting. “Don’t give up, be tough, be a man: face it and fight it” (Tang, 2009).

All of these cultural features point to one thing – Hunan is a special region with special local culture. The region has its own oral language, customs, and prodigious regional literature. According to Fleissner, local color or regional literature is fiction and poetry that focuses on the characters, dialect, customs, topography, and other features particular to a specific region (2002, p. 45). The theorist Josephine Donovan connects regionalists, local colors, and literatures to specific realistic representations of specific local culture. She specifies the genre of regional literature as “depicting authentic regional detail, including authentic dialect and authentic local characters, in real or realistic geographical settings” (1983, p. 50). Certainly, Hunan local culture is not totally independent. It is part of general Chinese culture, and it is influenced by the general Chinese culture. However, the differences which are discussed in these paragraphs are part of the cause of the clearly distinguished differences in masculine identities between two cultures. Compared to the vulnerable male image in China, Hunanese men are usually described as strong.

My methodology is different from those of other cultural studies about local culture in China. Most of the cultural researches and analyses have perceived macro Chinese culture and micro local cultures as a whole. The defects of the analyses are obvious. The work misunderstands micro local culture to be byproduct of general Chinese culture. The fact is, macro Chinese culture is the result of the “melting” of the micro local cultures over thousands of years. As the discussion has already suggested, there are even many cultural differences between Hunan and the United States. In the article “The Age of Cybernetic System,” Bill Nichols says,

“The user is trained in the enaction of behaviors in response to image, and images appear in response to behaviors” (1988). In the book *Stars*, Dyer mentions that media stars relate to the society’s type. He refers to “a social type as a collective norm of role behavior formed and used by the group: an idealized concept of how people are expected to be or to act” (Dyer, 1986, p. 53). He also defines the “Tough Guy” as one of such star types. What concerns Dyer is the ambivalence of this type. “A disapproved type of violence, aggressivity, callousness, and brutality would serve a useful function, so it is as hero, not villain, that the tough guy is a problem” (p. 55). The characters of Stallone and of Hunanese people have been perceived as problems several times in movies or in societies, respectively, because of their personalities. Dyer also considers stars as images. Promotion is an important part of stars’ images. It “refers to texts which were produced as part of the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star” (p. 68). We can also understand stardom as promotion for people and society. The key issue is what types of people and society will be promoted.

### Reception Theory Bases

Reception theory is a version of reader response literary theory that emphasizes the reader's reception of a literary text. A basic tenet of reception theory is that a specific sharable meaning will occur when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and interpret the text in similar ways. It is likely that the less shared heritage a reader has with the artist, the less he/she will be able to recognize the artist's intended meaning. It is also likely that the less shared heritage a reader has with the artist, the more identifications and branch meanings will be produced. In the book *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, chapter 3, Robert Allen states, “Reception theory, reader-response criticism, and reader-oriented criticism are all names used to

examine the role of the reader in understanding and deriving pleasure from literary texts” (Allen, 1992, p. 102). He also mentions that reception theory emerged when theorists began to believe in the influences of texts. The texts, which are the movies in this thesis, are made and produced to have meanings, to make sense to the audiences. One key point which should be clarified is that analyzing text in movies is different than analyzing text in typing or hand writing. For example, in the literature reading process, the interaction between text and reader occurs within a framework that controls and limits the interaction, through genre, tone, structure, and the social conditions of the reader and author. In the film watching activity, by contrast, the interaction occurs within both viewing and mental activity. The reading of a paper text usually allows one reader at one time; however, the reading of a movie allows many readers (or viewers) at one time, and they interact and influence each other consciously and unconsciously. There is no single reading of a film that can fulfill all of the potential of the audience’s reading, and it is important to examine the motivations of readers and the factors influencing their readings.

In “Encoding & Decoding,” Stuart Hall says that the traditional model of mass-communication research is “sender-message-receiver” (1999, p. 508). He suggests thinking about the mass-communication process in terms of structure which is constructed and sustained by production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction. Each part of the process retains its own forms and condition of existence. Professionals construct and encode the meanings of media products through production. He explains,

Production, here, constructs the message. It is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production. They don’t constitute a closed system. The broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. (Hall, 1999, p. 509)

The term decoding, he explains, does not follow the encoding inevitably (p. 515). The spectator has the potential to interpret, construct, or meaningfully produce the text from one of



several positions in relation to it (Pribram, 1999, p. 155). Hall provides three hypothetical positions which may construct decodings. They are dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated code or position, and oppositional reading (Hall, 1999, p. 515).

The dominant-hegemonic position is the first hypothetical position (p. 515). In this position, if the audience takes the meanings of media products fully and straight, and “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code” (p. 515). What he means is that audiences (readers) can make a dominant or preferred reading.

The second position he posits is the negotiated code or position. Hall says that most audiences can understand what has been dominantly defined. Audiences can also forge a negotiated position which is “a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” (p 516). For example, “audiences acknowledge the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations; in addition, at a more restricted, situational level, audiences make their own ground rules, they operate with their own exceptions to the rules” (p. 516). In the negotiated position, audiences will make “negotiated application” to local conditions and their own logics (p. 516).

Third, the spectators can secure an oppositional reading in which the message is decoded in a “global contrary way” (p. 517). Hall says, “He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message with some alternative frame work of reference” (p. 517).

For Hall, mass-media texts do not have a univocal meaning but can be read differently by different people, depending not only on their social location but also on their ideologies and desires. Rejecting the tradition which sees the subject of the media as simply “spoken” by

ideological structures and discourses, Hall sees texts as susceptible to diverse readings based on political-ideological contradiction.

Similarly, in Stam's book, he said that David Morley argued for a discursive approach that would define spectatorship as the "moment when the discourses of the reader meet the discourse of the text" (2000, p. 231). He argues that spectators shape and are shaped by the cinematic experience within an endless dialogical process. In addition, cinematic desire is not only intra-psychic; it is also social and ideological (p. 231). Stam mentions,

Any truly comprehensive ethnography of spectatorship must distinguish multiple registers: (1) the spectator as fashioned by the text itself (through focalization, point-of-view conventions, narrative structuring, mise-en-scene); (2) the spectator as fashioned by the technical apparatuses; (3) the spectator as fashioned by the institutional contexts of spectatorship (social ritual of moviegoing, classroom analysis); (4) the spectator as constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies; (5) the actual spectator as embodied, raced, gendered, and historically situated. (p. 231)

In addition to Hall's "encoding/decoding," some other theoretical concepts are used in this thesis. Allen cites Wolfgang Iser, in the article "The Act of Reading," as pointing out that the readers' relationship with narrative works is totally different from the viewers' relationships with painting or photography. When readers are "decoding" artistic work, paintings and photographs can be taken in all at once. Narrative works must be "remembered"; the readers take on what Iser calls a "wandering view viewpoint." Audiences' "wandering view point" is a constantly changing position within the text itself (Allen, 1992, p. 105). For example, on the one hand, authors' ways of telling stories may contrast with the expectations of the audiences; on the other hand, the ways of telling stories may fit the audiences' expectations as well. While Iser seems to exclude visual narratives from his account of the wandering view point, it is clear that any narrative form involves the reader or viewer's movement through the text, from one sentence, shot, or scene to the next. Because narratives unfold in time (reading time or screen time), as

viewers or readers we are always poised between the textual geography we have already wandered across and that we have yet to cover. The tension of wandering which exists between what we have learned from the text and what we anticipate finding out occurs throughout the text and at every level of its organization. The tension of the wandering view point is like the negotiated position of decoding; in Iser's theory, each sentence of a literary narrative or each shot of a television narrative answers questions and asks new questions. He describes this process as an alternation between "protension" (expectation or anticipation) and retention (our knowledge of the text to that point). He also describes this process to be "the geographic metaphor." Then he says that, in order to continue "the geographic metaphor," each new "block" of text we cover provides us with a new "vantage point" from which to regard the landscape of the text. At the same time, it causes us to speculate as to what lies around the corner of the new text. The texts of media products are encoded according to the ideas of media professionals. The texts of professionals' ideas will not fit all the expectations of audiences. Hence our viewpoint constantly "wanders" backward and forward around the text (Allen, 1992, p. 106).

Similarly, Roman Ingarden developed the theory of "gap filling." According to his explanation, gap filling suggests that the words in the text suggest imaginary worlds which are actually constructed in the mind of the readers (audiences) through the reading process. When readers and audiences are reading and watching, they are decoding the encodings through words and images. The notion of gap filling suggests not only a simple mental following process but also a complex self-identify process. In an explanation of gap filling, Allen says,

Gap filling is a much more complex process in which the reader brings to bear upon the worlds of the text previous experiences with literary texts, knowledge of other texts of the same type, and an array of mostly unconscious assumptions drawn from his or her own experiential world. Even based on the same instructions, different fictional worlds are constructed by different readers. Furthermore, gap filling accounts for one of the most fascinating qualities of imaginative literature. (Allen, 1992, p. 104)

Gap filling is also affected by our movement through the text. In short, Ingarden reminds us that reading is a dynamic tension between the reader's expectations and the text's schematic instructions of meaning production.

Therefore, my thesis aims to examine specifically the role of masculinities within Sylvester Stallone's movies and Hunan local culture. All of the interviews' answers are retrieved from my personal interviews of this research, except cited sources. The thesis makes use of reception theories to investigate cross cultural reception.

## CHAPTER 2

### HUNANESE MASCULINITY UNDER CHINESE CULTURE

“Aboriginal inhabitants are sturdy and stubborn; immigrants are open and progressive. They all have to endure great hardships in pioneer work, and they all have to be brave and persevering in order to survive” (Yi, 2006).

“They are wild fire. The fire is fervent, swift, and violent. They are natural, and they flaunt themselves. They are enthusiastic and aggressive” (Yao, 2004).

The two quotations are written by two different authors to describe Hunanese. For most Chinese people, and perhaps for people all over the world, Mao Zedong, soldiers, and gangsters are the images of the province of Hunan and the representations of Hunan citizens. They are well known images in media around the world. They are conversation subjects of the local settlers. Their characteristics can provide cultural clues to people as to why the Hunanese like Stallone’s movies so much. Hunanese’ personalities and body characteristics have always differentiated them from the settlers of the other provinces. They are admittedly independent, prideful, and passionate. For example, in describing Hunanese, a Chinese social theorist says,

A scholar says that quiet is the trademark of the Chinese temperament, for example, asking for help, modesty, obedience, following orders, inactivity and reticence. In other words, these parts of their personalities represent lack of vibrancy and lack of changeability. Obviously, this description is contrary to what people say about Hunanese. People describe Hunanese as active, passionate, willing to change, and willing to challenge. (Jiqing Wang, 2006, p. 106)

The definition of “Hunanese” is not broad. It is not an ethnic definition, but it is a cultural definition because the province received a lot of immigrants throughout history. The term Hunanese specifically refers to two types of people. One type includes the people who live in Hunan province; they absorb the values of the culture all the time. The second type of Hunanese includes the people who have grown up in Hunan, but they live outside of the Hunan province.

The second type of Hunanese may talk other dialects, and may dress differently, but their inner selves (such as their personalities, daily behaviors) have never changed. They identify themselves as Hunanese. They are proud that they follow the values of “enthusiasm,” “determination,” and “fighting attitude.”

Determination is the most typical and visible quality of the Hunan male. Hunan is a place with extreme climate. In ancient times, citizens didn't have modern technologies such as air conditioning. Their lives were all about fighting with nature to survive. After a long time living in Hunan, Hunanese people have incorporated the spirits of persistence and determination in their very blood. In China, Hunanese are usually portrayed as being “too striking” and “unflexible.” Zhongtian Yi, a scholar famous for studying regional culture, thinks that the ideas in these portrayals were the result of disagreements in culture. He says, “Determination is part of local culture. Hunanese emphasize the quality and have done so for an infinite succession of generations.” For instance, General Zuo led Hunanese soldiers to attack Russian soldiers in Xinjiang province by carrying his coffin with him. In addition, Chuanshan Wang finished a series of outstanding academic books in forty years when he lived in a cave-house. Therefore, the Hunan spirit of determination is neither striking nor inflexible. It is tenacious, it is resolute, and it is a courageous mental ability of living. In Yi's point of view, determination should be regarded as a positive cultural impression. It should be accepted by all human beings. He also says that the issue is not “to use or not to use,” but “How are you going to use your determination in life?” People should be “following their heart, but not fooled by their heart.” People might be too aggressive if they have determination and passion in doing something. This type of people is mainly brave and strong in mind, and they want to succeed. However, the type of people could be thought of as prideful. Or, they might be stubborn because they believe in

themselves. In China, Hunanese have been seen as a main source of revolution. Many Hunanese have died in pursuing revolution. An audience member of this research said, “Death and failure are not fearful, and everyone should do what they want; everyone should try their best through pursuing their goals.”

### An Example of Hunanese Men

Hunan is the main source of generals for the Chinese state. There was a general who was recognized as a positive example of a man. He was Zongtang Zuo, a general in late time of Qing dynasty. He was a Hunanese and a national hero, lived in the 19th century, and worked for the government as a head officer of state and commander-in-chief. The official description of him is that his achievements in military and politics supported the Qing dynasty’s “life” for more than half a century.

We can perceive typical Hunanese characteristics from his perspectives on life, culture, and country. He thought that everyone should have their own beliefs. The beliefs can be connected with great destinies and with dignity. In one of his letters to his family, he wrote, “This war is dangerous. However, there is something always that people are needed to do. This country can’t lose the North West border area. I can’t choose to do something easier because of the difficulties. This is something I have to do, and this is something I want to do” (Wang, 2006, p. 65). In this letter, we can see that all of his thoughts are about country and destiny. He didn’t think about his safety when he decided to defend China’s North West border area. He defended not only China’s border, but also his beliefs—that China should be united as a whole. He said, “I will not turn around even though I may face a bottomless abyss.” According to a historical record about him found in the book, *I Am Hunanese*, in the 1870s, Russians occupied Xinjiang

province. 1876, a sixty-four year old Hunan general led thirty thousand Hunanese soldiers to take Xinjiang back for China. Before they left Hunan province, the general made a coffin for himself, and he carried it during the war. The author explains, “Carrying a coffin showed his determination to take Xinjiang province back to China” (2006, p. 67). General Zuo believed that once a person connects his fortune with countries’ benefits, the person must not care about reputations and benefits. He is going to be great man and “backbone” for a whole country.

He was also a person who had determination to believe in his beliefs and to always be prepared. For instance, when he was young, he noticed that China might get in trouble in the North West area. He began to collect information about the area from the age of 22 years. The information includes cultural details, geography, and agriculture. Besides collected information, he also studied potential enemies’ military strategies. When that war was over, he was already 60 years old. Zhou says, “General Zuo was a doer instead of a watcher. His strong desire and energy of doing without regarding safety and danger is common in Hunan province.”

### An Example of Chinese Men

In China, traditional macro culture requires citizens to live peacefully in society and families. A perfect man should follow natural tendency, read books, and behave himself following good ethical principles (Zhang, 2004, p. 310). In this culture, individual values are shaped by common precepts in order to construct a harmonious society. This is the reason why Chinese men’s male characteristics are not obvious in some western novels. One example of this is that Chinese masculinities are “feminized” in Hollywood (Louie, 2002). A survey which was conducted in 2009 shows an outline of the perfect man in Chinese females’ perspective. According to the survey, a perfect Chinese man should be “successful but modest,” “mature and



smart,” and “deep in intellectual depth and understanding.” They also think a man should be “diligent,” “with a sense of humor and peaceful, and “able to work hard constantly.” For the question of “Who can be the representation of Chinese men?” the actor Daoming Chen got the most votes. The reasons are “He is successful and modest,” “he is mature, smart, and deep in intelligence.”

Some society observers and pundits provide another explanation of this survey’s answer. They think the reason is “special.” Chen was the leading actor in the TV show *Chinese Divorce*. His character is that of man who has desire but has “no courage” to fulfill it. He “wastes” his life between “passions” and “responsibilities.” Some critics think that audiences can observe the characteristics of Chinese men in the portrayal of this character. In addition, the survey analysts point out, “Chen is also a typical case of a Chinese man. He uses the social networks (called *guanxi* in China) of his family to build his career and to realize his dream. Of course, he is intelligent and quite deep in knowledge.

There is one thing which should be noticed: in the interviews for the research for this thesis, interviewees think that a perfect Chinese male has to follow the precept of being harmonious in family and society.

According to the literature discussions, the differences in male identities can be divided into three categories. They are (1) perspectives on living attitude; (2) perspectives on social relationships; (3) attitudes regarding soldiers.

(1) Differences in living attitude. In macro Chinese culture, citizens should follow natural tendencies (taking the path of least resistance or of nature, as when water flows downhill). The local culture of Hunan, by contrast, teaches people to fight for a better life.

(2) Social relationships. Chinese citizens have learnt to “hide” themselves to keep the harmony of the society. Hunanese are taught to actively search for solutions in the way of “opening” their hearts to solve interpersonal issues.

(3) Attitudes towards soldiers. Because of the history of emphasizing harmony, armies were described in negative terms. The knowledge of military matters was distinguished from the traditional description of “knowledge.” Soldiers were described as illiterate and rude. In Hunan province, soldiers are usually part of a family’s pride. The local culture creates an atmosphere for inhabitants to study military strategies and practice.

The perception of Hunanese as proud and stubborn strongly reflects the attitude of the settlers who followed their ancestors by being independent, brave, and passionate. They are not, truly, the people who are now seen as boisterous and loud. They are frank and patriotic people who represent a province that has had revolutions throughout history and has been the source of China’s brave soldiers.

In the portrayals of Hunanese culture, local scholars think that the mainstream values are inherited from local ancient ethnic groups. Because of special geographical and environmental factors (great mountains in the west, east, and south Hunan, a large area of lake on north Hunan), it is hard for the macro Chinese culture to be introduced. It is also hard for the macro Chinese culture to be practiced. In Hunan, the ancient spirit can still be perceived within the contemporary citizens (Yao, 2004). The spirit includes the characteristics of “straightforwardness” and “outrageousness.” The spirit has resulted in the creation of two typical crowds in Chinese history. They are gangsters and heroes. Yao also mentions that the spirit of Hunanese is close to the primary spirit of human beings. For example, the more powerful the pressure that is applied to Hunanese, the more the counteragent is given back. He

says, the counteragent is explosive, and it is even outrageous. The research shows that many people feel that the Hunanese are proud of the province and its history. “They are proud of their province and remind everyone that Hunan is their home,” “They are extremely proud of who they are and always think their province is the best,” and “They always say, ‘We come from Hunan, but you do not’” (Zhang, 2000; Zhu, 2005). Some other descriptions are that Hunanese are loud, arrogant, short tempered, and “too ideal” (Xue, 2004). The people with constant impulse of “straightforwardness” and “outrageousness,” if they don’t learn more wide knowledge, if they don’t expand their horizon, may easily become gangsters. If they can jump out from their own world, if they can broaden their perspectives, they are propelled to be heroes (Yao, 2004).

Some early research and studies can show a outline of Hunan male identities. The book *Shiji* (Historical Records), completed two thousand years ago, recorded that Hunanese are “very valiant.” The book *Suishu* (History of Sui Dynasty) described Hunanese as “extremely tough.” In the book *China*, Ferdinand von Richthofen said, “Hunanese are the descendents of an independent ethnic group. The people are the main source of soldiers of the Qing Dynasty; especially, many officers and general were born in Hunan. Honesty, straightness, strong self-awareness and rugged personality, and resistance are the characteristics of Hunanese” (Xu, 2010). Hunan culture values the motivation of changing the surroundings. It represents new ideas and energies. In *Provincial Patriots*, Platt says, “All of which is to say that Hunan—like Shanghai or Beijing—was a major engine of change and a fundamental source of new ideas and energies” (2007, p. 2). The local culture also tells the importance of determination. It represents persistence in facing difficulties and in its way of life. Moreover, the culture teaches the nature of fighting. “Don’t give up; be tough; be a man: face it and fight it” (Tang, 2009).

An American hematologist Reuben Ottenberg developed six human blood types, and one of them is called “Hunan type.” In Ottenberg’s records, the type includes south Chinese, Japanese, Hungarians, and Romanian Jews. It represents sturdiness and exploration (Marks, 1995).

After the Second World War, some Japanese scholars began to study Hunanese because they were “shocked by the people’s courage on the battlefield in China” (Jiqing Wang, 2006).

Hunan males are a combination of “hero” and “gangster” (Zhou, 2001). They never compromise, and they don’t talk much. They act according to personal desires and emotions most of time. Personal desires and emotions are the foundations of their daily behaviors and conversation. In the country where rational thinking and restrained temper are emphasized, Hunanese behaviors and talking are perceived as irrational ideas by non-Hunanese people. Some scholars even compare Hunan men with chili pepper. They think that the Hunan men are as “spicy” as peppers. Some of them elaborate that Hunan men’s straightness, courage, and determination are key factors which encourage the local people to pursue success their own lives, such as in creating their own career without anything at the beginning (Zhou, 2001).

In the book *Provincial Patriots: The Hunanese and Modern China*, the author states:

The people of Hunan are a sturdy and independent race. They are warlike, impetuous, tenacious of purpose; at the same time, they are proud, conservative, and disdainful. Their natural energy leads them to abandon the more peaceful pursuits of life, with the result that probably most of the military of the Chinese Empire are Hunanese. Many of the civil officer positions are also held by these people, their force of character bringing them to the front as the natural leaders of the nation. (Platt, 2007, p. 29)

Such descriptions created several stereotypes of Hunanese in China. Because of the stereotypes, Hunanese people are similar to underdog heroes. As we can observe from the literature, male identities of Hunanese are constructed and portrayed as founded upon personal mental abilities. The point of the identities is to construct strong mental abilities in order to show

and perform toughness in life. Some local scholars mention that while Hunanese are mentally tough, they are not physically large (Wang, 2006; Zhou, 2001; Xu, 2010). According to official research in China, the average height of Hunan men is only 5.51 feet. Hunan people can be strong, but they are not tall obviously. On the one hand, the local citizens are proud of their mental abilities and body sizes. They claim that they can do something which cannot be done by other people. On the other hand, regarding the physical descriptions and mental abilities of Hunanese, some stereotypes have been mentioned in the Chinese media. The mention of “short size” was prevalent (Li, 2001). It is connected to physical disabilities described by some media writers and producers who contribute to making this negative image (Zhu, 2005). For example, physical shortness is described in these terms: “They can’t touch a higher place, and it does not matter whether they can jump very high or not” (Zhu, 2005). More specific descriptions include “short size with a thin body,” “small, but enjoying imagination,” and “a small angry bull” (Zhang, 2000; Zhu, 2005). Hunanese argue against the point every single time when the stereotypical discussion appears. The inborn physical characteristics are the reason why the Hunanese are an important source of gymnasts.

According to another survey, Hunanese usually admire people who have similar personalities. In addition, Hunanese people enjoy social relationships with people who can share similarities in conversation and daily life. The more similarities they share, the more time they will spend together. Relevant to this reception study, several articles point out that Hunanese audiences like characters with whom they share similar personalities, such as determinate and resolute characters (Li, 2005; Wei, 2006). The survey’s result and the scholars’ works lead me to consider the connections between the characteristics of Hunanese and the character masculinities of Stallone. Specifically, why do Hunanese audiences like Stallone’s movies? In the research, I

find that some historically locally important professions can be compared to the characters of *Rocky IV*, *Cliffhanger*, and *The Expendables*.

There are three types of Hunan masculine figures: soldiers, gangsters, and gymnasts (Wang, 2002). Hunan province's special cultural attitudes regarding being a soldier and the solid military traditions of Hunan province and Hunanese people have interested many cultural theorists. The soldier is one of such professions in the province's history. Some theorists point out that the ancestors of Hunanese survived and evolved in wars. They faced stronger enemies who came from north China. Some of the local ancient ethnic communities were belligerent. They fought against more powerful enemies, and they believed that surrender was not their destiny (Yi, 2006; Wang, 2002; Tang, 2009). Years and years of wars forced them to advocate military practices. They trained their children in martial arts and strategies from day to day because they never knew what would come next. In peaceful days, they did farming and business. Once war came, they were soldiers, every one. This is also the source of Platt's "warlike" definition of Hunanese. They had to face not only the invasion from north China but also the extreme environments and wild animals in Hunan province. Some of the Hunanese ancestors consisted of survivors from defeated ethnic groups. They were immigrants of Hunan province. After they were defeated, they were repressed and oppressed harshly. They were forced to live in Hunan where is enclosed by mountains and lakes. They would think of their destiny at that time, and they would protest oppressors (Yi, 2006; Wang, 2002; Tang, 2009). The living experiences of protesting against enemies and the environment became part of the Hunanese' natural instincts. Those instincts are the qualities of soldiers.

In China, military training seemed to be in opposition to ethical education, and the soldier was the opposite of the scholar, almost the antonym. A lot of evidence shows that scholars

described the military as rude; soldiers thought of scholars as pedantic and feminine. The ethos of “delicacy” and “femininity” is not obvious in Hunan. Some Hunanese generals are specialists in studying Chinese ethics. They used the tradition to educate their soldiers. They followed the ethics’ strict codes of behavior in peaceful days. However, they became more aggressive when wars came. The territory of China is big. The most popular explanation is that the Hunanese people’s personalities fit the characteristics of being soldiers (Platt, 2007; Wang, 2002).

Hunanese were described as “heroic,” “valorous,” and “idealistic.” They pursued the desires of their hearts until the end of their lives (Li, 2001; Peng, 2007). They do pretty much the same things that other people do, such as publishing books and farming. Most of their lives were not concerned with military matters. Hunan soldiers enjoyed their lives as well as other ordinary people. In battlefields, they fought and commanded lots of famous battles. Back to normal life, they were fathers and brothers.

The second example of Hunanese masculinity is that of the gangster. Hunanese gangsters are as famous as heroes in China. A writer thinks that the history and reputations of Hunan heroes cannot be separated from the history of the province’s gangsters. If there were no gangsters, there would be no heroes. Heroes can be heroes because they have something to fight against. Gangsters and heroes share the same quality of mind but do obviously different things for a living.

The geography of Hunan province, which has been described above, created a “valiant people only” environment. In someone’s words, “extreme weather creates extreme people who do extreme things” (Wang, 2002; Li, 2001; Peng, 2007). In order to survive, the inhabitants have to be strong and tough enough. Once part of the inhabitants have decided to be gangsters for living, or “just bad guys,” they will be really bad and will be hard to defeat. A motivation for

forming gangster groups was to protest against the great pressure of dynasties' governments. In order to protest the high taxes, the local citizens aggregated together to protect each other. Another motivation is that they want money. For the people who aggregate only for money, they cannot even be called gangsters because gangster usually represents friendship and kinship. Through most of the history, some Hunanese have been called gangsters because they protested against their governments' behaviors at those times. This is part of Hunan history. For instance, some contemporary officers were called and treated as "gangsters" at one time. After the People's Republic of China was established, the Chinese central government organized several military actions in order to extinguish the gangsters. However, gangsters have never been eliminated. For example, in the 1990s, Jun Zhang and his group committed a series of crimes in China. They kidnapped descendants of wealthy people, and the group committed a series of killings.

Some Hunanese are proud of their gangster history. Some people were referred to as gangsters in Hunan, but they eventually got reputations as heroes outside of Hunan province. However, just like everybody else, none of Hunanese really want to be called "gangsters" because the word means "killers" in China. They are proud of the history because most of the so-called "gangsters" were actually heroes. Therefore, a famous Chinese quote describes Hunanese that Hunan people are either soldiers or gangsters.

The quote's point is not looking Hunanese to be soldiers or gangsters. The point is that Hunan gangsters and soldiers share similarities. They all have to go through dark days in their life; they all have to have great persistence (Wang, 2006; Zhou, 2001). For example, the Hunan gangster groups usually have no political purpose. They aggregate for collecting a fortune, or only for making a living. As a historian says, in history, Hunanese heroes were not lucky. They



stayed with “loneliness” and “desolation” for a really long time in their lives. Their lives were about both “shining” and “shadow.” They lived with storms. Their only faith was learned from Hunan culture. They always kept going no matter what they were doing and what they were encountering, and who knew their destinies?

Gymnast is the other Hunanese masculine figure. It is a Hunanese tradition in sports. Hunanese contribute a lot of talented gymnasts, and some of them won golden medals in world class level competitions such as the Olympic Games. One of the reasons is that the sport fits the Hunanese’ body characteristics. Gymnasts are not tall. They are flexible, strong in body, and fast. In their body qualities, Hunanese people are not tall and “big” generally. Their bodies are quite flexible. These inborn characteristic determine the sports which can be engaged in by Hunanese. Hunanese people’s short, flexible and fast bodies are advantageous in doing gymnastics. The other reason is that Hunan is not a rich province. Sport programs cannot normally get big budgets. In order to compete with the other provinces in national sports games, the local government chose gymnastics to be one of the priority projects. Hunanese are people who are not tall, but they are flexible, strong, and able to practice in rigorous environments to be successful.

## CHAPTER 3

### RECEPTION OF *ROCKY IV*

“Tales of heroism, great love, dignity, courage, man’s ability to rise to any challenge” (Gross, 1990, p. 12). The phrase was uttered by Sylvester Stallone and quoted by Edward Gross in *Rocky* and *The Films of Sylvester Stallone*. Stallone explains that he wanted not only to create a boxer, but also he wanted to create a man as a warrior (p. 12). This is one of the movies which was directed, written, and starred in by Stallone. As with the rest of the movies in the *Rocky* series, bravery, faithfulness, and muscular strength are the most typical features of the protagonist. Just like the protagonist’s name, his body and mind are rocky. His international boxing competition is transferred to be another battlefield of two countries and clash of two ideologies. And he, Rocky Bolboa, became a representation of a fighter and an American national hero. In this movie, Rocky defeats a former USSR boxer who is portrayed as an invincible fighter at the beginning of the movie. Rocky is a boxer, a warrior, and a patriot. I want in a moment to look at the way these characteristics come together to form a particular character, I want to look at the way Hunanese judge the character, and analyze them within the reception theories. Simple and broad descriptions will not be written because they are so obvious in the movie.

It is hard to imagine a 1980s American film can have resonance with audiences of another country after 30 years. The phenomenon was explored during the interviews of the reception research for this study. Fans of Stallone build Stallone’s fan websites, and they collect the posters, movie trailers, and sound tracks of his movies. *Rocky* is one of their points of pride. After analyzing all of the fifty interviews, I found interviewers’ main concerns to be the features

of “man” and “stereotypes.” In addition, they also noticed the characteristics of the film relating to the “Cold War” and of “Rocky’s soldier nature” and the fact that “It is an American film.”

Many readers may have noticed so far that Hunanese audiences’ decoding process and its result does not follow the encoding process (*Rocky IV*’s production) totally. They produce their own understandings to understand films. Obviously, Hunan audiences interpreted, constructed, and produced meaningful texts at the time when they were watching the movie or after they watched the movie. The interviewees come from different knowledge backgrounds. Their comments regarding *Rocky IV* may be understood in terms of encoding and decoding. In addition, most of the comments were made through negotiated positions.

First, some comments were made from the dominant-hegemonic position. The comments were made by interviewees who take the meanings of *Rocky* fully and straight. This segment of the interviewees pointed to the “tales of heroism,” “dignity,” and “man’s abilities to rise to face any challenges.” For example, some comments, which have been mentioned in this chapter, are “He is a man,” “He is a hero,” and “He can stand and fight again after he is down.” The interviewees, and the potential Hunanese audiences who share similar thoughts with them, decoded the information of *Rocky IV* in terms of the “reference code” which has been encoded in its production. The reference code includes characteristics of Rocky and masculinities of Stallone. The audiences interpreted and read *Rocky IV* inside the encoded code. We may say that Hunanese share the cultural facts of man and hero with Americans. The cultural facts are the motivations of Hunanese audiences constructing the dominant position in decoding *Rocky IV*.

“He is a man” is the most common interview answer of the question “What is the most obviously characteristics of Rocky?” It can be found in every interview sheet. Some of the interviewees explain that Rocky’s determination to win the final match is the most attractive

point of the whole story. It inspired an interviewee to “fall in love” with Rocky and the movie. Another Hunanese interviewee’s reason for giving this answer is, “Rocky followed his heart. He got huge passion in his fighting. He knows how to win the matches, and he knows the cost of the match. He is stubborn, tough, but not stupid.” One of them even used the movie’s dialogue to prove his point. He told me, “Rocky was willing to die in order to do what he wanted to do. A real man should do this; a real man should face any difficulty. Failure can be an option; fear cannot.” The interviewees provided multiple reasons for describing Rocky as “a real man.” “Determination” was the most common motivation. Some of them wrote, “Men must have determination to realize their desires instead of sitting and waiting. In addition, he loves his country.”

*Rocky IV* is filled with military elements from “head to toe.” Drago (played by Dolph Lundgren) and his wife are soldiers. The ex-USSR boxing stadium is filled with its soldiers. Rocky shows all of his skills, courage, and determination to defeat his opponent. With all of the military features and the qualities of Rocky being a winner, the character Rocky can be perceived as a warrior and a soldier. Another character Apollo (played by Carl Weathers) who is Rocky’s friend, says that boxers are “warriors with a killer instinct that can’t be turned on and off like a light bulb.” “And without some war to fight,” says Apollo, “the warrior may as well be dead.” This conversation happens when Rocky tried to stop Apollo fighting Drago. Apollo dies in the movie. Maybe his death wakes the “warrior instinct” in Rocky’s heart. He fights the Russian boxer. Stallone described the game, “He (Rocky) is being punched, and he is in unbelievable pain, trying to regain his composure while undergoing the close proximity of embarrassment (from Russian)” (Gross, 1990, p. 42). Stallone admitted that he created Rocky to be a warrior. He said, “By that I mean that boxing is the only sport where you have the audience coming right up

to you and saying, 'You stink.' And you got to deal with that. It is like being in front of the lions" (p. 42).

The audiences also think that Rocky has the essence of a soldier. Besides the interviewers who perceived American style and the Cold War aspect of *Rocky IV*, lots of them perceived Rocky as a tough guy who has strong inborn ability to be a soldier. For example, there is a phrase, "And to kill me, he's gonna have to have the heart to stand in front of me. And to do that, he's got to be willing to die himself." The interviewers who wrote "Rocky is a soldier," connected the soldier nature with the idea that "he is a man." Their reason is, "A good man must have a sense of toughness, must be strong mentally, like a soldier." "Did you see how tough he is? He was not playing a game, he challenged Azrael. That was what makes this movie amazing." An audience member of this research told me, "I particularly enjoyed his counterattacks in the final match of this movie. Oh, and his fighting passion. Fighting in boxing is part of his blood. He is a fighter, and a soldier not only in boxing but also in life. He keeps his fighting energy in everything he does, and his energy always helps him. In addition, his energy also influences everyone." As this audience member said, Rocky is a fighter in everything. When his physical abilities cannot sustain him in matches and training, his mental abilities drive him to conquer obstacles.

Second, there is the negotiated code/position. In his statement about the negotiated position, Hall says that the mixture of adaptable and oppositional elements can result in audiences standing on a negotiated position to experience the movies and to think about the information which is captured from movies. Hunanese audiences can stand in the dominant position to understand the reference code (production code) of the movie, such as the heroism elements that are part of *Rocky IV*. Some of them also stand in the negotiated position to decode

Rocky and the movie. The comments relating to the negotiated position can be explored in the aspect of the “Cold War,” the observation that “this is an American movie,” and “stereotypes.” The fact that *Rocky IV* is a “Cold War movie” was noted by some interviewees, from the youngest to the oldest, in the survey group. They mentioned the year 1985 (*Rocky IV* was released in that year). They identified strong ideological background of the movie and the relations between the two countries. For example, they noted the clash of two boxing gloves with the national flags. Some of them concluded the movie’s success to be the influence of the Cold War. Most of my interviewees did not have strong concerns about ideology. However, three of them who are older than 45 years showed some mental connections with the USSR, saying things such as “That flag is familiar.” They said, “In the ending of the movie, Rocky hopes the Russian can change in the way of his understanding because he can change. Is it really possible? Of course everyone can change, but a country like Russia or China will never change in the way which is expected by Americans.” He also said, “Every country faces different political, economic, and religious situations. They deal with these situations on their own ways.” In comparison to the comments of agreeing with *Rocky IV* totally, this audience member developed his own understanding. There is a similar case: the audiences also think that the movie is a typical “Made in America” film. To the question, “General description of this film?” they answered that “This is their movie.” “I like this movie, I like Rocky, but why do Americans always win?” In the interview answers, I could perceive responses like “Maybe they want to show their spirit of winning everything.” The interviewees also expressed specific ideas about boxing and American culture. They said, “Boxing is an American sport.” “It is not popular in China.” “Americans got all those big muscles; maybe this sport is designed for them, or they

might have not known many martial arts skills at that time, or maybe they just cannot perform kongfu. Anyway, I like it because it requires a strong sense of determination.”

Boxing is a cultural representation. In the term of masculinity, Rocky’s masculine characteristics fit the representations of traditional and dominant male images of America. In *Boxing, Masculinity, Identity*, Woodward mentions that boxing masculinity carries many of the features of the traditional, hegemonic masculinity of American society (Woodward, 2007, p. 2).

It is a cultural representation. He says,

It is a sport characterized by corporeal contact, courage, danger, and in some cases violence, which might seem out of place in the contemporary world of change and fragmentation and the emergence of more ambiguous, less traditional gender identities. One might also expect to find resistance to the challenge of new masculinities and strong ties to more traditional, gendered identities in boxing. (Woodward, 2007, p. 2)

Woodward also says that traditional masculinities as enacted in boxing may offer the promise of secure boundaries to the self, but they are based on extremely dangerous practices (p. 5). For example, people die in boxing matches sometimes. In this film, Rocky’s close friend, Apollo, has died in the match against Drago. Stallone was actually seriously injured by Dolph Lundgren in a practice boxing session. As we have already discussed, identities of a culture and identities of a society are constituted through social, cultural, and economic processes. In the United States, boxing is a popular sport. It illustrates the some representations of mainstream American culture, such as toughness and a muscular body. Woodward offers the suggestion that boxing represents “the possibility of the investment of physical capital within the habitus that encompasses a gendered, racialized domain of life and a set of dispositions” (p. 5).

Hunanese audiences observed the mental and physical needs of boxing players. There is a common description of boxing. Some boxing fans describe boxing as the sport which takes courage. Players and fans have to be really braced to take part. This is one of the reasons why

Hunanese audiences like Rocky and this film even though boxing is not a Hunanese tradition. They appreciate Rocky's bravery and determination. For example, an audience member said that he would like to see Rocky able to be more flexible. To explain being flexible, he mentioned, "When he was hit, he was hit. Maybe he should have waited until the Russian boxer made mistakes. Dodging several times more is not a bad idea sometimes."

In this film, again, with two rolling boxing gloves, the movie's background is told clearly in the beginning. It is a boxing movie, but the deep meaning of the film goes far beyond that throughout the production process. *Rocky IV* was a film which American audiences watched in the 1980s. It was a time when Americans and Russians were in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviets. At that time, Reagan successfully instilled a strong sense of national pride by showing his masculinity, forming some military and political strategies. Ideologies are powerful because people believe in them. American athletes beat the Russian athletes in real life such as in the 1980 Olympic games. Also, in some sports movies, such as *Rocky IV*, American audiences may love to see the "righteous" underdog beat the communist "menace." In this way, *Rocky IV* was not only a movie but also a reflection of the time. It is a time that has long been discussed since it passed us by. *Rocky IV* was popular because it was framed by familiar and deeply held Cold War beliefs. Stallone did not have to explain the Cold War to his audience — they shared his beliefs and biases, they understood the conflictual context of the story, and they came to the theater with complete knowledge of why Rocky Balboa was good man and Ivan Drago was bad. Clearly, the Cold War is the underlying theme and context of the movie, the meaningful framework in which the drama is played out. It is a test of the relative strengths of the striving American spirit and the corresponding rules of American society. The film intended to express that the American spirit can control Soviet machine and technology. In the end, the American



spirit wins not only the physical fight, but the hearts and minds of the Soviet crowd as well. In the final scene, draped in an American flag, Rocky proclaims, “If I can change, you can change, everyone can change.” At that moment, Rocky becomes a messenger (Hirshberg, 1993, p. 104). His speech about changing is not just personal, but much broader in scope. Based on the information from the film, some interviewees even talked about stereotypes of communism in the film. They think the stereotypes are related to the Cold War era. There are two stereotypes of the movie which were perceived by the interviewers. One is that of the cold communist soldier; another is Drago’s violent fighting style. The stereotypes made an impression of “cold blood.” Filmmakers may “zoom in” to their ideas, making them into stereotypes in movies. Audiences can observe the stereotypes and add their own understanding. For example, an interviewee made a connection between movie and the US government’s diplomacy. He said, “In that movie, they portrayed people in a communist country as being cold and mad. Comparing this to the relationship between China and the United States, do they really hate us? Or, did they at the time of producing this movie, at least?”

The other is Drago’s fighting style. An interviewee connected Drago to the word “dragon.” He said, “Maybe they want to create a character who looks like an angel from the hell. Maybe they want to show the violent side of a communist country, but, being violent is part of Human nature, right?” If we dig more deeply in American film history, the former USSR’s high technology and the sophisticated training of the boxer can be traced in some horror film characters, such as evil scientists and Frankenstein. Or, some interviewees mentioned that Russians are actually not like their portrayals in the movie. The comments of this segment of Hunanese audiences fit the traditional Hunanese culture. Hunanese culture “teaches” citizens to think independently. Hunan people also admire people who have unique ideas instead of just

hearing others' ideas. The audiences compared Rocky's speech with their own expectation of the development of their country. Similar comments can be found on the Internet. The audiences "operated" the meanings of the movie and their expectations according to their rules.

The third position is the oppositional position. By comparing Hall's theory and Hunanese audience members' comments, the research result doesn't show an understanding Rocky IV in a "global contrary way." They understood the story and masculinities properly. They did form some opposite opinions, but those opinions remained in the area of the negotiated position.

Finally, we notice that the filmmakers' ideas lead audiences to think during the watching of a film. The audiences' understandings of dominant code and audiences' dominant position for watching are the direct result of watching films. This position, or audiences understanding films from the dominant position, is the result of interpreting film production ideas without much thinking. Audiences decode the reference code of films without doubts. The reason is, in order to interpret films from this position, the audiences need to take the meaning of films fully and straight. In this position, the result of interpreting and reading a film's message usually comes from direct visual and audio stimulation. For example, blood provides the visual stimulation, and the boxers' screaming stimulates audiences' hearing. The more direct the stimulation is, the better understanding of reference code the audience will have. If direct stimulation does not work, or if audiences cannot understand dominant code, there is a negotiated position. To interpret films from this position, film audiences must have already understood the information which is defined dominantly. After they have received the dominant code, mass audiences will compare the code and information with their knowledge backgrounds. The different personal experience results in different negotiated positions. The key to understanding and analyzing this position is that we should fully understand the specific case's background first; indeed, we

should understand individual background. If we do not understand that, we will not be able to analyze the negotiation. The more comments have been made, the more comments will be made because audience members will compare their thoughts to the films and to other audience members' comments. Not only do they negotiate with films, but also they negotiate with any information they can get, such as film reviews. Their knowledge and cultural backgrounds can also lead them to take the oppositional position. The more discussion audiences have, the bigger the possibility that the oppositional position will be secured. The oppositional position might be formed through watching films. It may also be formed after watching films, such as through online discussions. For example, the audiences may argue with each other about their comments. Some audience members could be convinced during the discussions, while some could not.

If we identify the positions of the Hunanese audiences' encoding/decoding process, their gap filling procedure will be seen to be more complex. The theory of encoding/decoding reveals the results of interpreting films. However, it does not and cannot uncover the access and the procedure of the interpreting. The advantage of gap filling's is that the theory suggests a self-identity process. The comments are expressed by Hunanese. The interviewees have different backgrounds. However, it will be misleading to think of the Hunanese impressions of Rocky cumulatively as a sum that constructs the image in Hunan, or alternatively simply as being single images that appeared one after another. In Hunan, because of local culture's influence, the fans talk about Rocky's determination and "warrior spirit" all the time. That is the reason why gap filling can be used as an extension of encoding/decoding. This research intends to discover the motivations and inspirations of Hunanese audiences' three hypothetical codes/positions in encoding/decoding *Rocky IV*.

In the light of the research on encoding and decoding, the dominant decoding position gives us clues about Hunan culture. The dominant code of heroism, man, and fighter are gaps filled by getting the meanings of the movie directly. The most obvious reason is that Hunanese have natural energy to overcome difficulties. The natural energy represents the attitude of pursuing the goal at all cost. In Hunan, a person who can do anything necessary in order to get ahead of the others is thought to be a successful person in any area. The qualities of this type of person are the same qualities of hero, man, and fighter. The reason is that all of them have to experience great pain.

Two main negotiated positions are identified in this thesis. They are boxing and the stereotypes regarding Hunanese people within. The first negotiated position can be traced to the tradition of practicing martial arts. Based on the official statistics, there are forty types of martial arts in Hunan province. Each type of martial arts has a different specialty. Their developments were promoted through imitations of wild animals. The main purpose is to defeat the opponent in an effective way. To do that, Hunanese kung fu professionals are asked to learn to attack the different parts of an opponent's body. Therefore, body flexibility is given an important position in martial arts. A qualified martial arts professional usually spends ten or more years in training. The glorification of martial arts is not only found in the military profession in Hunan; it is also in the blood of the ordinary citizens. Unlike the common perception of warlike people, Hunanese martial arts masters have to be both warriors and scholars (Wang, 2006; Tang, 2009). Educating in fighting skills is not their only responsibility; writing books and propagating the warrior spirit are also part of their professions. The warrior spirit is well known as the soul of "inner peace." The soul is not sitting and doing nothing. It is an attitude of seeking resolution actively. The great generals thought that a warrior must be able to find solutions in fighting instead of sinking

into a mess. The independent thinking of Hunanese culture has the connection with the negotiated position in relation to stereotypes. It is the source of the second negotiated position. The regional culture teaches its inhabitants that a man has to be able to think and live independently. A man should be able to develop his own special skills in order to live. In addition, Russians are always introduced as part of the family in China. Given the ideology in China, it is easy to understand that Hunanese think the portrayal of the Russian is a stereotype.

Hard work is a key of Rocky's success. This response from interviewees led me to think about their Hunanese identities and their ideas about Rocky. Why did they think that hard work is the source of Rocky's success? Are there any possibilities about something in their mind? In the history of China, Hunanese are famous for having great determination and persistence in every area; such as military. For example, about 800 years ago, fifty thousand Mongolian soldiers attacked Changsha city. The city is the capital of Hunan province. At that time, only five thousand soldiers were in the town. The general of the Mongolian army even claimed that they would conquer Changsha in a week. However, it took them five months to defeat the local army. Many contemporary history documents show that Hunanese couldn't have won if they had not had great faith and determination in protecting their home.

The theory of gap filling was designed to reveal the underlying motivations and procedures of interpreting the information in films. For example, theatres provide dark spaces for audiences to watch films. The relatively private and dream-like spaces leads audiences' imagination to be more active. In the watching activities of this movie, Hunanese audiences have more private spaces than theater. Because of the spaces, audiences usually compare movies' narratives to their own experiences more dynamically compared to what happens when they watch movies with friends and families. In the dark film-watching environments, audiences are

more actively seeking and choosing messages which are thought to be the true and real meanings of the components of the “true” Rocky. In the dominant and negotiated positions of Hunanese audiences’ receptions, most of the information which is captured and remembered by audiences is present through body performances. Then, the bodies are treated as objects. Because of the influence of Hunanese culture, the audiences chose to gather information and think about Rocky on mental level; they did this either consciously or unconsciously. In the dominant positions of the reception, Hunanese audiences see that Rocky is a man, a hero. The most impressive movie scenes are his counter attack: “he can stand up and fight again when he was down.” Where do these impressions come from? They come from the audiences’ observations. In the film, Rocky is beaten and hit by his opponents. No matter how he has gotten hit, he stands and fights. The bloody and tired body tells audiences that it is a hard situation. The fallen body and the movements of standing present a man who will never give up. The observations capture the performances of Stallone and other actors, and then the audiences transform the information from body to mind.

In the negotiated position of the reception, objects of the audiences’ reception can be found more easily because the objects filled audiences’ mental gaps. The main perceived objects are around the images of the two countries. They are the national flags, characteristics of the countries’ citizens, and the images of two societies. For instance, in the film, Drago always keeps his face cold looking. Another example is that most of the spectators are soldiers in the Russian stadium. The decoration and the Russian spectators make an impression of solemnity and coldness. However, in the American boxing stadium, the decorations are vivid and shining. The colors of American audience members’ dress are multiple. All of these elements provide resources for the audiences to decode the film on the negotiated level.

In the article “Makeover Television, Governmentality, and the Good Citizen,” Hay and Quелlette say, “Within this context, cultural technologies have always played an important role in the formation of idealized citizen subjects, becoming instrumental as resources of self-achievement in different ways” (2008). This is a precise definition. In addition, in the process of achieving selves, people not only identify similar characteristics with objects or subjects but also identify distinctions.

In *The Productive ‘Consumer’ and the Dispersed ‘Citizen’* Nick Couldry mentions that consumer and citizen are two connected definitions (2004). He also mentions, “Spaces of public connection that frame both practices are sustained and so are the common issues of trust that affect them.” If we connect Couldry’s idea to the discussion of *Rocky IV*, we can conclude that people consume products because the products have certain value in culture. Hunanese audiences like *Rocky IV* because there are cultural connections between Hunanese culture and American culture. Furthermore, we have already discovered that the identifications are related to their “previous reading experiences.” That is also the reason why Hunanese appreciate Rocky’s persistence in conquering obstacles.

The key of the wandering view point is the relationship between “expectation or anticipation” and “our knowledge of the text to that point.” The relationship can be conflicting, it can also be non-conflicting. The more we watch and read, the more comparisons we will make. Our viewpoints gather information from the movie as the resources. The traditional thought is that viewpoint is the result of gathering information. However, it is not. Or, we may say that the traditional explanation of the relationship between viewpoints and gathering information is not appropriate for a reception study. The appropriate explanation is that our gathered information is the result of our viewpoints. Our viewpoints are the way that we think about things in general.

Our knowledge backgrounds decide the information that will be captured by us. The way information is gathered is the result which comes from viewpoints and knowledge background functioning in our brain simultaneously. We collect whatever information we want. For example, some audiences chose to understand Rocky and the other elements of the film from a dominant position, while some people chose to understand these characteristics from a negotiated position or even an oppositional position. Our brains analyzed information and made meanings around the information. For the audiences who understood the film from the dominant position, their expectations fit the meanings of the dominant code, or we may say that their expectations fit their readings of the code. One of interviewees, whose point of view was from the dominant position, said, "Rocky is such a tough man, I want him to win." "He faces a guy who is much taller and stronger than him," the interviewee said. "Rocky's training and fighting situation can be connected to the similar situations of the Hunanese founders of the People's Republic of China. At the beginning of realizing the idea of China, before the country was established, they did not have many resources to use. Compare them to Rocky; they all faced the threats of numerous enemies and much higher technology. Their works were portrayed as impossible. Their common ground is that they were not afraid. They did what they had to do. And they did it successfully, how exciting is that!" This interviewee connected Rocky's situation with his knowledge. If we read this interviewee's comments carefully, we can find that he connected the situations because he admires the characteristics of people who can do those kinds of things. He gathered the information based upon his personal fancy. His fancy decided what he collected from the film.

On the other hand, for the audience members who interpreted the film's information from a negotiating the information, their expectations cannot be fit with the dominant code totally.



They understood the dominant code, but their life experience suggested other readings and meanings. For the audiences who constructed readings of the Cold War and stereotypes from the negotiated position, obviously, their ideology influenced their judgments of the film's production code, even though the influence may have been slight. For the audiences who thought about the other meaning of American film, their viewpoints constructed the meaning that "other countries will not be changed as Americans have hoped."

## CHAPTER 4

### RECEPTION STUDY OF *CLIFFHANGER*

With a good guy seeking redemption and bad guys 200% evil, the battle lines are as clear as in a cartoon or a World War II movie.

*Todd McCarthy*

This chapter intends to analyze Hunanese audiences' reception based on a specific era (1990s) film, focusing on specific examples of the male body in sports and in society.

In some critics' points of view, men and masculinities were having a crisis in the 1990s. For example, Susan Faludi argues that the feelings and ideas of women have definitely influenced portrayals in films. They are more and more important in movies. Female characters are given more time in films, and actresses have been provided more time and space to perform since then. These screened characteristics of female and female characters are shown through male characters' concerns about women. "It's in the air," Susan Faludi expresses her sympathetic point of view in her book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male*. She talks about how men are lost and unhappy. She thinks that men are "without the spiritual center that women, in their role as the underdog, have taken solace in." "There are dozens upon dozens of nurturing, reassuring pop-psych books for women, most of which boil down to 'Feel good about yourself'" (Faludi, 1999, p. 1).

Similarly, in the 1990s, Hollywood filmmakers began to think about the meanings and influences of masculinity. For example, the 1980s Hollywood films' emphasis on action, explosions, violence, and body counts diminished a lot in the 1990s because the social opinion changed in regard to what qualities were considered positive for masculinity to embody (Gates, 2004). Although the hard-body heroes of the 1980s, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Mel

Gibson, and Sylvester Stallone, continued to thrive on the big screen, then tended to do so in more sensitive-man roles. Unfortunately, most of the action stars' characters and the films are not successful. However, the trends of portraying masculinity in films differently did not stop. For instance, since the mid-1990s Bruce Willis has been playing more sensitive men in films like *Mercury Rising* (1998) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and when he does appear in an action film, for example, *Tears of the Sun* (2003), he is a hero more concerned with saving lives than exacting violent retribution (Gates, 2004).

In the 1990s era, masculinity showed both toughness and sensitivity. It was the era which saw the continuation of the characteristics of 1980s' action films but at the same time introduced the attributes of films of the 2000s. Through his act of self-sacrifice, at the end of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Schwarzenegger as the Terminator melts his "hard body," taking with him all of the "machine-men," leaving behind John Conner – the future of the new masculinity. For this movie phenomenon, Milovanovic says, "spectacle and violence are not enough to determine a character and that action takes more than ability – it takes the heart of audiences" (Milovanovic, 2011). Then, in 1993, *Cliffhanger* was released as another movie which stepped back to 1980s masculinity. *Cliffhanger* was directed by Renny Harlin, who is also known for directing *Die Hard 2* (1980) and *12 Rounds* (2009). The film has been described as "the pure definition of the quality of action movies produced during the 1990s" (Surpless, 2010). Stallone plays a mountain climber named Gabe Walker, who is also a rescue ranger. While he is crossing a ledge rescuing his friends, 4000 feet above the earth, the malfunction of their equipment causes one of his friends to slip out of his hand, falling to the ground. After that, he quits the mountain rescue team, moves to another place, and finds another job. Almost a year later, when Gabe is asking his girlfriend to go with him, he is asked to go back to the team in

order to rescue a group of stranded people in the same mountain range. The only catch is that these so called stranded people are in fact looking for three boxes which are filled with \$100,000,000, and they need a mountain ranger to lead them. The rest of the film is well portrayed by the quotation at the top of this chapter, as story with a clear battle line is begun. Therefore, this chapter analyzes Hunanese audience members' reception of Sylvester Stallone's masculinity and the group of stranded people's masculinity in *Cliffhanger* under the backgrounds of Hunanese culture and 1990s Hollywood films.

In the audience members' point of view, the connections to Rambo and Rocky may never go away from Stallone. The connections are still so strong for both Stallone and his fans: even when he plays a comedy *Oscar* (1991), or he packs on forty pounds and plays an ineffectual wimp in *Cop Land* (1997), his fans still expect him to act in the roles of Rambo and Rocky. They want to see Stallone play types of characters which are similar to Rocky and Rambo. Stallone played Gabe Walker in this film. Gabe is a mountain climber and rescue ranger. Therefore, the backgrounds of this character can be categorized as that of an athlete and soldier. The film shows Gabe's climbing skills even at the beginning with a wide angle shot which includes precipitous cliffs and Gabe climbing. Climbing to such a high place is something that not even average level rock-climbers can do; he is not only an athlete, but a good one. For his nature of being a soldier, the feature is not that of a soldier. However, the film offers much imagery, such as physical fighting, gunfire, and bombs, indicating that Stallone's character does not have simply the role of climber and ordinary ranger. All of his capabilities can be done only by a person who has been well trained in military skills. Besides these skills, his mental abilities of being a soldier are also obvious. For example, he can keep his mind clear while he is surrounded. He can keep high-spirited will of fighting when he is injured. He can also figure out a way to win after going

through heavily snowing weather. His physical fighting skills are shown very well in the movie. He can use all the resources to fight when he does not have modern weapons. For example, he knows how to use wood to make effective weapons.

Some other audiences told me that Gabe was different from Rocky. Gabe returns for Jessie (his girlfriend, played by Janine Turner), and he asks Jessie to leave with him. He shows much more concern and respect to women than Rocky does. Rocky is the type of hero who focuses only on his own desires, at least in the first five *Rocky* movies. For example, he does not want to fight Drago the first time, and his friend dies. Then, because of his friend's death, he accepts the challenge from Drago and does not listen to his wife's suggestion at all. As the enemies of Gabe, the group of thieves also impressed Hunanese audiences in some level. The gangsters are smart. The crime is well-planned and coordinated. They show very nice teamwork before they fall into internal disturbance.

Stallone's age is an issue in audiences' conversations on the internet. In the interviews, most of the interviewees made positive comments on the issue. One of them said, "He is a guy with brave heart and wonderful skills. He was that tough guy in the *Rocky* and *Rambo* series. His wrinkles indicate his age. However, his age has zero influence on his performances." "Age should not be an issue for any actor or actress, at least not for him, because he is good, always." Another interviewee answered, "His performances not only showed another hero on the big screen, but also the performances showed who he is. A guy who still can do that many actions at this age should be respected. This was not going to happen for every actor." "Maybe his characters were who he was in real life. He has Rambo's spirit and Rocky's body. I can see both Rambo and Rocky in Gabe. The filmmakers might really have made this character by capturing qualities from the two characters."

The audience members also observed that the character Gabe shows more concern and respect to women. He cares about the feelings of Jessie. The relationship between them is equal. Males do not completely dominate “male-female relationships” in films anymore even though Stallone solves the main battles in the film. Some audience members responded to this question by noting that Gabe is like a family man in modern society. One of them wrote, “Compared to Rocky, Gabe is a more complete man. Rocky and Gabe fight, and they love, but the difference is that Gabe expresses much more emotional feelings than Rocky. This is what a family needs.” Another interviewee obviously knew a lot about Stallone’s movies; he told me that Rambo leaves his lover in one of Vietnam’s forests, but Gabe does not do this. “They are fighters, but Gabe made me realize that Stallone is not a robot, but a man. His face is not iceberg like, but expressive.” “He also wants a family, he asks Jessie to leave with him, not just leaving by himself.”

In their responses regarding the members of the thieves’ group, audience members mentioned that the members of the group of thieves are experts in different areas. High technologies, professional specialties and specific division of labor are the basic features of their group. The group members include professional pilots, a banker, and a radio devices operator among others. The group has the basic characteristics of being a high-tech group. Its members can be perceived as operators proficient in certain technologies. For example, they can transmit cases from one flying plane to another through cables. Their speed of gathering information is much faster than their opponents’ because they can use all of the high-tech equipment. In the perspectives of audiences, people are familiar with the skills and equipment which are owned by the thieves. However, the equipment and skills, such as operating airplane and using tracking devices, can hardly be experienced and operated by ordinary people. Some audience members

perceive that Gabe's enemies are representative of the possessors of greater technological power. The powers of the gangsters include skill in gathering confidential information, ability to make air plane arrangements, and abilities to provide high technology devices. Then, the technological advantages result in the possibility of realizing their plan of hijacking money. In addition, the high power of building technological advantages and collecting useful information makes audiences believe that their plan will be realized.

Few of the audience members hoped the bad people can win. One interviewee told me, "Money was the only connection between the thefts. They planned the action very well, and divided their work specifically. They had all the needed talents except that of a mountain climber. No one would think the plane crash would happen in that place." When I asked his reason for admiring the gangsters' behaviors, he said, "I definitely do not like their illegal behaviors. I like their good work of planning and coordinating." Some other audience members answered that, if we eliminate the story's background of crime, the plan and the movements of the thieves are actually pretty good. They have not only experts in technology but also an inside person who can provide key information. They might have been fine special agents if they had done something positive for the society. They also said that criminals must be punished. Their desires for money look like a strong bond which ties them together. However, once the hope of realizing the desires becomes minimal, their desires of working together are transferred to be protecting themselves only, and they turn on each other. The audience members also expressed their concerns about bad people always wearing more clothes than good people in film. They think that good characters should wear more, and bad characters should wear less. Their reason is that good people should dress as polished as they can because they are good. The specific discussion of characters' dressing style will be show on following paragraphs.

Some audience members said that *Cliffhanger* (1993) was a typical Stallone movie because it featured a lot of stunts and actions. Some other audience members said that it was not so typical because the film's protagonist (played by Stallone) was somewhat vulnerable, especially compared to the character Rocky. In this 1990s film, Gabe is not as tough and mentally determined as Rocky. Rocky's toughness and courage were shown in everything he did. However, Gabe is different. He needs incentives to force him to do something. A lot of audience members felt that Gabe's courage and determination were written as a developing process in the film. For example, he is not tough at the beginning of the film. All his mental abilities, such as passion and sturdiness, are shown in the hopeless situations. He climbs with a half-naked body in the extremely cold environment. Stallone is still that tough guy who played protagonists in *Rambo* and *Rocky* series. He shows his muscular body with aerobic outfits when he is climbing.

In contrast, the bad guys wear overcoats all the time. Their outfits cover their true identities. Audience members might have never known who the bad guys were if they had not hijacked the plane. They dress like normal citizens, and hide their purpose under their suits. The only bond of the bad guys is money. However, they share some similarities with gangster groups. They all have specific division of labor and a well-organized plan of actions. In the history of gangsters in Hunan, there were real gangsters and "just bad guys." They both influenced Hunanese culture. The audiences' answers reflect the historical cultural facts concerning gangsters and bad guys. For example, some audiences think that the physical appearance of the bad guy should have been somewhat different. In addition, as some of their answers indicated that they were hoping that the bad guys would win, instead of thinking "they are tired about hero films," I researched the audience members' motivations in their cultural background. The



interesting interview results were definitely related to Hunanese culture. They encouraged me to seek explanations in the local culture.

The most popular Hunanese reception comments of this movie come from internet fan websites and the interviewees of this research. Their points of view covered all of the three hypothetic positions in encoding/decoding. Some of them did identify with the thieves' teamwork, their clear division of labor, and possible positive directions of their teamwork. In addition, the audiences' decoding results indicated some of their knowledge source backgrounds, such as family values and the value of smartness. Stallone's body was perceived during his performances of climbing and fighting. The film's codes, which are shown through Stallone's performance, provided basic information to audiences for watching and interpreting. The information stimulated and influenced audiences during the film watching activities through the audiences' perceiving and constructing of meanings.

The dominant position of understanding was drawn upon the clear battle line of the film. The line divided the righteous side from the evil side. In this chapter's case, the Hunanese audiences' dominant position was formed upon a mainstream understanding of their local culture. In Hunanese culture, especially Hunanese male culture, men are educated to have fighting spirit (or spirit of competitiveness) and professional skills for life. The local media "establishes" the Hunanese male image as that of a righteous man who can protect himself, his friends, and his family; and he can fight bad guys.

In addition, the local families usually expect their children to be successful; they push children really hard in developing skills for career and living (Zhang, 2009). The difference between Hunanese family and traditional Chinese family is that Hunanese family pushes children hard in pragmatic living skills, not just reading official text books. This is the reason why the

Hunanese audiences see Gabe Walker as a character who has Rocky's spirit and Rambo's skills. They understand that Gabe is a brave and smart mountain rescuer and ranger. He has a well-trained body and well-developed skills. In an interview of this research, a climbing trainer said that a strong, muscular body (such as Stallone's) and mountain climbing skills need years of rigorous training in order to achieve the conditioning exhibited by Gabe Walker. In this film, Gabe can climb to reach really high places without any assisting equipment, he can jump to cross very wide gaps from one side to another; and he can survive in extremely cold weather (even though some people have said that the movie's scenes were actually impossible). Some other audience members have argued that the film scenes were possible because we never know how far a human can push himself. The possibility or impossibility are not at issue in this part of the research. The issues are his excellent climbing skills, his well-built body, and the spirits of a proficient sportsman. In the scene of climbing, his masculine body was also shown in a tight and good looking aerobic outfit. In addition, the movie shows Gabe Walker is a character who can endure great pain every single time when was necessary. In China, braveness is the most obvious characteristic of Hunanese. Nevertheless, local culture prescribes not only braveness but also wisdom and active thinking while people are facing difficulties. The culture educates people to use bravery and wisdom in daily practice and work. The purpose is to go beyond the current self-limitations continuously and to become stronger and stronger.

Gabe Walker was a sturdy man in both body and mind. He saved people, and he hated the evil gangsters. The audience members, who identified Gabe as being in the dominant position, did not perceive Gabe to be a "cowardly" person. They thought "Gabe is an extremely brave man" because "he can always find solutions, or at least do something when he is faced with dangerous situations." They do not think Gabe's decision to leave after his friend's death should

be considered as the evidence that “he is a coward.” In addition, the audience members thought Gabe was a righteous hero because he fought against the gangsters who were bank robbers. “The point is, there is always good and bad in reality and in the movies. We should not define people by their mistakes at beginnings, but we should define them by the rest of their stories.”

In addition, the thieves were identified as a typical negative representation in the film. The audience members’ dominant position stands on the behaviors of hijacking money, killing innocents, and murdering kind-hearted people; they even killed their team members if they felt it necessary. All of the behaviors, we can expect, would be judged negatively by people in every country in this world. A scholar’s research provides evidence for this point of view. He says, “In China, Hunanese are representative of energy and determination. The people always intend to use the energy to do something good. The challenge for the people is the definition of “good.” They stick to their points of view, rarely changing” (Zhou, 2001). He also says that Hunanese deny and protest against something if they think it is wrong. They will demonstrate against it until the end. A Hunanese scholar says, “In the local media’s contents, gangsters are representative of the “wild” part of Hunanese because of their directness in communication. In the products of Hunanese media, the thieves and gangsters are usually portrayed to be males who have lots of energy in their everyday lives, but the energy causes troubles.” This is the reason why Hunanese scholars always use macro Chinese culture (such as Confucianism) to educate children: they want their children to do some good for Chinese society (Tang, 2009; Wang, 2006; Zhou, 2001). For the audiences who stand in the dominant position, the history of Hunanese gangsters does not necessarily mean the admiration of the bad guys in *Cliffhanger*, but it is the information source Hunanese people use to judge the bad people’s behavior. In most cases, mainstream Hunanese media do not simply judge the wildness to be negative. They intend

to say that we should use the wildness and the energy to produce good and positive results for society.

In the film production, filmmakers make each frame and dialogue have certain meanings. However, film audiences can understand movies' codes from different angles, which will result in different meanings; this is why Hunanese audiences understand the movie's elements based on their own cultural backgrounds. The audiences can also construct different meanings by combining observations of films and their knowledge. This is how audiences' negotiated responses are made.

In this film's audiences' responses, there are two typical negotiated responses. One is that audiences add meaning to the film's dominant codes. The meanings of the codes are not changed. Some audience members think that this character represents a certain family value. They think Gabe is a family hero because he wants to be with Jessie. Before *Cliffhanger* was released, Stallone's films were about himself. The characters' values were established upon the value of the individual. The fans are happy for this movie's change. They told me that they got "some feelings of family." According to a Hunanese scholar's book, "It is a common local recognition that a man should take the responsibility for organizing his family. The men must be responsible, protective, and active" (Wang, 2011, p. 26). In Hunanese people's family value, the male and the male body are always the center. No matter whether the bodies are thin or thick, the descriptions are always based on the questions of sustaining the family by using one's own body, such as "How much can you protect your family? What can you do to sustain it? If your body is not appropriate to protect your family, why do you not just find a way to do it?" The male must do whatever he can to organize and protect his family. The performance of a male body may decide the fortune of a family. For example, a hunter has to hunt enough animals for his family.

An herbalist has to pick enough herbs to sell. When Hunanese audiences found out that Gabe is the type of man who is responsible and protective, their expectation matched the character's characteristics.

The only drawback is that Gabe is not very active in doing. This attribute of his personality results in most of his passive situations in this movie. It is also the key to constructing the audiences' oppositional position. In Hunan, men are expected to always be active in real life. For example, in Hunan, people think that a man must actively seek resolutions and always stands at the front line when he faces difficulties. A man's movements and thinking should not be forced, but active (Wang, 2011, p. 28). In this film, as we have discussed, Gabe has vulnerable part. His fights with the thieves are forced by situations. He leaves the rescue team because he does not want to face his friend's death. All of this information produces an image of a "man with passive behaviors," and a "man who is a coward" to some Hunanese audience members.

Returning to the other negotiated point of view, from that point of view they observed the film's codes (such as the gangster's physical appearance); then they began to wonder whether the film's codes are true. In *Cliffhanger*, the thieves wear more clothes than Gabe. Some of the audience members observed the meaning of the bad characters' style of dress. They said, "Bad guys wear more clothes than heroes because they need something to cover their real purposes. They do not want people to know their real goals while they were planning or doing something."

However, those audience members also challenge this code. They thought that the gangsters' leader could wear more than others, but the other gangsters should have worn fewer clothes. Their reason is that bad people should dress poorly because they are bad. In China, people use dressing and talking style to identify individual features, such as personalities and

careers. Therefore, in order to be gangsters, they have to be shown in more slovenly way, such as wearing less and dirtier clothing than others. However, they thought that the gangsters' leader could wear more because he was the "head" of the whole group. "He cannot be known and found by outside people." "He must hide himself because he is the most important one who dictates all the movements." In Hunanese culture and history, bad people always wear less than good guys. The reason is that behaving oneself is part of the mainstream local culture. The culture educates people to dress properly, such as dressing like a hero or wearing appropriate clothes for work. Therefore, soldiers have military uniform, and thieves have their dressing style.

In addition, a local cultural theorist's work explains the reception response to the gangsters' makeup well. He says, "In the area of dress, Hunanese culture is the combination of higher class culture and grass roots culture. Hunanese citizens always want to provide, to show their best to other people" (Tang, 2009). He also says that, on the one hand, a wealthy person should dress as well as he can. On the other hand, poor people do not care too much about their clothes. They are usually afraid of nothing because they have nothing to lose. In addition, poor people have a larger possibility of being thieves and gangsters because they have more things to struggle against. Based upon this special cultural phenomenon, higher class people may use poor people to do something which is not appropriate for them to do by themselves because they want to maintain their luxury life style, and they successfully hide their real identities by dictating to people who work for them. Therefore, they hide their purposes under the covers of their fine suits. The people who work for them still keep the "poor" style of dress. Therefore, this part of the knowledge is the resource that audiences think the gangster group's dressing style should be changed.

Third, there is the oppositional position of decoding *Cliffhanger*. The audience members who have the oppositional opinions thought Gabe was a “coward,” and “the bad people should be admired on some level.” Their reason was that Gabe is not an inborn fighter; everything he did is forced by the specific situations. He ignores small things and reacts only if he has no way to retreat. His first reaction is always “escaping.” “Most importantly, he escaped without any positive reason. For example, some great military leaders ordered a retreat in order to fight back. However, Gabe left the mountain rescue team because he wants to forget some unhappy memories. He escaped for escape.” The emergence of the response that “Gabe Walker is a coward” was based on the cultural values of actively thinking and seeking chances and resolutions. In Hunan, a person will be criticized negatively if he is always forced to take action.

In the reception responses to *Cliffhanger*, the gender identities are more obvious. The reason is the gap between the acceptance of gendered behaviors expected by individuals and the limitations of socially constructed gender pathways in Hunan. It is also connected to the Hunanese custom of gymnastics and climbing. The performance of climbing skills is perceived as a sport. As some authors have written, “Bare-handed climbing has a thousand years of history in Hunan. It originated in the professions of rhizotomists who collected herbs for making medicines” (Zhou, 2001). We should know that dominant positions are chosen according to ‘tastes’ of dominant social values. Based upon the Hunanese tradition, the climbing history and the cultural value of sports are reasons which motivate Hunan audiences to like this movie more. In Hunanese culture, the meaning of sports is not winning but participating (Wang, 2006; Zhou 2001). The culture does not provide the criteria necessary to consistently and unmistakably divide winner and loser. Instead, it creates a basic understanding of the importance of doing instead of waiting. In the book *Sport, Masculinities, and the Body*, the author says that sport in

its current form, rather than producing winners, is more likely to create an understanding of fear in relation to the failed performances, which is a gradual step in the right direction (Wellard, 2009, p. 134). This is because theories of the body emerged only when the problem of nature versus culture became a major consideration (p. 25).

In this film, Stallone showed the importance of a strong body. The thieves' behaviors of using high technologies show fear and cowardice of using the body. Wellard says that in culture, the concept of body is particularly relevant as it provides a means of acknowledging the role of the individual and individual experience in wider social relations (p. 27). For example, being strong is part of the stereotypical representation of a male. He also says that, in sport, the body is used by the player to present the opponent with signs of strength and power (p. 38). The protagonist conquered many natural obstacles. In Hunan province, the citizens climb and fight against natural disasters all the time. In this case, the film's codes and the audiences' responses are exaggerated forms of strong male masculinity related to displays of strength and power, which are considered most appropriate for success. The filmmakers seem to say that technologies cannot bring success, and that the male figure is still the main value of the society.

In the book *Screening the Mafia*, Larke-Walsh says, "As with masculinity, ethnicity in postclassical gangster films is displayed as a collective identity based on a shared cultural heritage, definable characteristics, and ideals" (2010, p. 18). In China, some people think Hunan people are rather dangerous people, due to the military and gangster history in Hunan province. As with members of mafia groups in the US, in the history of Hunan, being gangsters was actually just a way of life for the people who were gangsters. Some Chinese people point out that some features of Hunan ethnic heritage, such as clothing styles, speech behaviors and so on, are identified with the characteristics of gangsters. However, in *Cliffhanger* (1993), neither can



audiences identify the bad guys by ethnicity, nor can they identify them by their social bonds. They do not have much in common besides the fact that they want to hijack the money in the plane. They are not precisely a mafia group, but they share similarities with them.

The thieves in the film share some similar features with Hunanese gangsters. However, they do not share similarities in cultural characteristics. The motivations and psychological impulses of some Hunanese audience members supporting the bad guys can be found in the mentioned cultural features. The strong desire to do something is one of the reasons. Some of them do something positive for Chinese society, while some of them do something negative for the society. The theaters' dark and dreamlike spaces may awake the negative sides in Hunanese audience members' ideological world.

## CHAPTER 5

### RECEPTION OF *THE EXPENDABLES*

Old soldiers don't die, they just fade away.

*Douglas MacArthur*

This chapter aims to discuss and analyze the Hunanese audience members' reception comments of *The Expendables* under the background of Hunanese culture, focusing on discussing three characters (mentioned in following paragraphs) and their actors' masculinities.

General Douglas MacArthur spoke this famous line in his farewell address to a joint session of the US Congress on April 19, 1951. The general was 71 years old when he addressed the congress. Similarly, the actors of the *The Expendables* are not young anymore. For example, Stallone was born on July 6, 1946, and Jet Li was born on April 26, 1963. Their average age was older than forty-seven at the time when the movie was released. As the background story of the film, they are a band of highly skilled old mercenaries who have retired from armies. The members of the Expendables include knife enthusiast Lee Christmas (played by Jason Statham), martial arts expert Yin Yang (played by Jet Li), heavy weapons specialist Hale Caesar (played by Terry Crews), demolitionist Toll Road (played by Randy Couture), and sniper Gunnar Jensen (played by Dolph Lundgren). When the group is commissioned, or hired by the mysterious Mr. Church to assassinate the merciless dictator of a small island country in South America, Barney (Sylvester Stallone) and Lee (Jason Statham) head to the isolated locale to spy on their opposition. Once there, they meet with local rebel Sandra (played by Giselle Itié) and discover the true nature of the conflict engulfing the city. The mission is far more complicated than they had thought. Their opposition is an army. When they escape the island and Sandra stays behind,

Ross must choose to either walk away, save his and his teammates' lives, or attempt a suicidal mission that might get all of them killed.

The ending of the movie is that five old men defeat a whole army. This movie is criticized as being both “amazing” and “ridiculous” in its audiences' comments. The film was constructed with the participation of many world class action film actors. Their martial arts fights and masculinities amazed audiences and were unique among action movies. The involvement of these actors is not only shocked the film industry but also astonished film audiences as well. Some fans used “incredible” and “extraordinary” to describe the film. Fans got excited even before *The Expendables* was shown in theaters. In addition, however, some parts of the movie were commented on as ridiculous. Audiences laughed and ridiculed the movie. However, even though some audiences gave negative comments, they all admitted that they watched this movie because of these well-known actors.

The actors presented various masculinities in *The Expendables*. This is also a trend in Hollywood. In *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, David Bordwell says, “naturally, during the years I'm considering, American films have changed enormously. They have become sexier, more profane, and more violent; fart jokes and kung fu are everywhere. And, to come to my central concern, over the same decades some novel strategies of plot and style have risen to prominence” (2006, p. 100). Audiences do not enjoy a traditional, dominant big-guy-only movie any more. For example, Jet Li plays an important role in this film. Filmmakers have “coded” more and more different elements and elements' definitions into films. Masculinity is one of the movie elements.

Stallone himself is a traditional, muscular hero. An audience member told me that he saw some typical American people fighting skills in Stallone's performance. Jet Li, a martial arts

expert as usual, is not undefeatable in the film. His skills cannot promise victory when he encounters stronger person, such as Dolph Lundgren. Dolph Lundgren plays a sniper in the film, his character is described as being a loose-cannon. He makes trouble for both his enemies and his teammates. Hunanese audiences will have more angles from which to perceive the male body, especially when we treat the body as an object. In the book *How We Became Posthuman*, the author describes the physical object that constitutes the text as the staples of literary interpretation, i.e., “character, plot, author, and reader” (Hayles, 1999, p. 35). The development of portraying human body will be more general; the meaning will be wider for multiple audiences to understand (p. 35). Therefore, this chapter focuses on analyzing Hunanese audience members’ receptions of more wide range of masculinities. Specific examples are Barney Ross, Ying Yang and Gunnar Jensen.

The inspiration for presenting a wide range of masculinities is the process of globalization. Globalization has impacted every area of human civilization, including people’s lives, culture, intellectual activities, and so on. The globalization, in this case, is expressed by multiple masculinities from different actors who come from different cultural backgrounds. Their masculinities were “packed” in the Hollywood “assembly line,” expressed in Stallone’s own way. In order to show the different characteristics (body, culture, etc.) of each character, the filmmakers chose several characteristics or stereotypes for each role; then they coded and packed these characteristics in the Hollywood production process. In addition, Stallone added some of his personal directorial style into the movie. In a book addressing the Hollywood films’ impacts on our subconscious within the globalization background, Wenders and Hofmann state, “The Americans have colonized our subconscious” (1992, p. 98).

This does not refer to a so-called “Americanization” process which has been discussed for a long time. The film makers coded information in their understanding of film

production and cultures. The longer we watch, the more impacts we will receive. The longer we watch, the more our knowledge backgrounds will be “woken up.” Finally, the impacts and our knowledge will cause us to think more and more deeply.

It is a fact, blessedly confirmed, that the American movie is affectionately received by audiences of all races, cultures, and creeds on all continents, amid turmoil and stress as well as hope and promise. This isn't happenstance. It is the confluence of creative reach, storytelling skills, decision making by top studio executives, and the interlocking exertions of distribution and marketing artisans. (Valenti, 1998)

This last quotation is an accurate explanation of Hollywood film production. Increasing numbers of foreign cultural features have been incorporated into aspects of American films. The richness of cultural features has nourished American films in both their cultural elements and their production codes. This also means less of the ideological story telling strands of communism and capitalism. Films are more and more about the environment, human rights, the future of human beings, and so on. This makes Hollywood films more acceptable in global markets. In this film's case, the cultural elements were provided by different actors. Their performances also led to audiences' comments becoming more plentiful and interesting. This does not mean ideology conflict is zero. It means that conflicts of communism and capitalism have been minimized because people receive a large amount of information every day, from anyone, anywhere, at any time. For example, this research shows that while some Hunanese people's receptions of *Rocky IV* were influenced by political ideology, some Hunanese audience members were not influenced by ideology. The amount of information leads to the result of different opinions even though we are consuming the same thing. The influences are on not only film audiences but also filmmakers. *The Expendables'* expression of multiple muscular bodies is the result.

Moreover, most Hunanese audience members do not have the experience of watching the trailers of *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*, but they did watch the trailers of *The Expendables*. Before

watching *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*, the audiences' expectations of Rocky and Gabe were based on word-of-mouth conversation and on limited paper (or electronic) texts. Before *The Expendables* was released, pre-release movie trailers expanded the audiences' imagination. Therefore, their expectations were led by more direct visual and audio texts. Their expectations, which can be analyzed from their comments, were much more varied than the expectations regarding *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*.

In the production of *The Expendables*, the filmmakers coded a lot of ambiguity into each character. The consequence is that we cannot find any one hundred percent good or evil characters. Every character has a dark side. Every character does something for himself or herself. The conflicts emerge from different personal benefits and points of view. For example, the local rebel is the general's daughter. She provides all of the information because she does not like what has happened. Is her behavior right? What if the plantation can bring profits for local citizens? A hero always does the right thing. However, Ying Yang lies to his teammates that he has a family. All the portrayals of the characters resulted in audiences' comments being split. This movie received many plentiful reviews from critics and audiences. The reviews criticized the movie from almost every angle, such as performances, storyline, and characters. For the three characters under consideration, reviews can be generally categorized into two opposite groups. One of the audience groups' comments are made upon more brightness of the characters, the other are written upon dark sides of the characters. However, the actual ideas found in the comments are more abundant than those related to *Rocky IV* and *Cliffhanger*. In this movie, every character has a dark side and a bright side. There is no perfect hero because the filmmakers did not provide absolutely clear definitions for each character. They developed the characteristics

of the characters by means of conversations and life behaviors. Audiences got definitions for each character through the conversations and behaviors.

When I asked, “What are your general thoughts about this movie? And how are they related to Hunan local culture?” they all expressed their opinions, such as teamwork and heroism. An interviewer answered, “There are many similarities between the characters and Hunanese people. For example, Barney Ross is brave, and he is willing to take big responsibility. Lee Christmas is really an independent individual. Ying Yang is flexible and smart. Most important, they all hate to lose. They have those winning desires.” For the same question, there was another interviewee who answered, “They are really determined; the Captain saved the general’s daughter because he wanted to do it. In order to save the woman, they almost entered “the lion’s mouth.” Moreover, they had really nice teamwork. All of them followed their captain’s plan without any questions.”

“Stallone is back!” was one of the most common responses I received when I was asking interviewers’ opinions about this character. They thought that nothing had changed except his age. The audience members do not care about the “slow” movements which were caused by these actors’ ages. Their concerns are for what the movie presents.

Barney is an underdog. Indeed, we can say that every member of this team is an underdog. The movie’s trailer claimed that the members are “ghosts.” They are not known by citizens, but they execute dangerous missions. They are not a well-known military group like the Delta Force and the Navy Seals. They do not have salaries and insurance. They do this job for a living. Saving people and accomplishing military missions with his teammates are the two ways which Barney can use to sustain his life. He and his team protect and save people, but money is

the biggest motivation. He is not supported by the system of super powers, even though his decisions defend the system indirectly.

In all of the audiences' reviews, there is one idea that received the most responses. The audience posted, "You know, it is true about Barney is a warrior. But, he is also a good leader. He is not alone; his teammates support him anytime he needs help. This movie is not only about Barney Ross doing the right thing, but also his team members are doing the right thing." In this movie, Barney has buddies; he cares about his teammates and fights for them. This point is well fit to Hunanese culture and the local citizens' personalities. In the history of Hunan, because of lack of administration from central government and extreme weather, people were united village by village. People in same village are like one family. They care about one another. This phenomenon was transplanted to be an idea utilized in organizing the military unit in the Hunan army. The army was established as a family. This idea helped the Hunan army overcome many difficulties. Haoming Tang writes, "The generals of the Hunan armies would care for their officers like one family; then, those officers tended to organize their soldiers place by place. Therefore, the whole army is like a huge family. This is the main source of the fighting capacity of the Hunan armies." This point is substantial because almost every dynasty's historical documents deal in part with Hunan armies. The author also writes, "Even Kublai Khan admits that his army's biggest obstacle appeared when they were attacking Hunan province."

Some Hunanese audience members understand this character in terms of the dominant code. Both interviewees and local internet users expressed the opinion of "Barney is a good leader." As some audience members commented, Barney always stood at the front line of the expendables. The work of the Expendables is a job for them, but for most of us, it is a series of unimaginably hard situations. The situations are either to live or to die. Those are what they do



for a living. Comparing the Hunan general character and Sylvester Stallone's character in the movie, they are both perseverant and impetuous about their goals. In the book *I am Hunanese*, Wang writes that in the 1870s, Russia occupied Xinjiang province, which was a part of China. In 1876, a 64-year-old Hunan general lead thirty thousand Hunan soldiers to take Xinjiang back for China. Before they left Hunan province, he made a coffin for himself, and he carried it during the war to take Xinjiang back. The author explains, "Carrying a coffin represented his determination to take this place back for China" (2006, p. 67). The general's energy to conquer obstacles is always given as an example of the characteristics of Hunanese people. It has been written about in local history records, and it is always mentioned by history teachers.

Barney is a character who can take big responsibilities to save people without regarding his safety. In this movie, Barney Ross knew the mission was dangerous, but he still decided to join it. A photo shown in the film precipitated his decision. The photo was given to him by a local rebel, who was a man with a bleeding eye. The islanders wanted their land back. At this moment, Barney's decision was not about himself any more, but about someone else. His personality has the feature of wanting to puzzle adventures out. This is part of the character's natural energy. Stallone is old now. He cannot use his body to show a soldier's courage as he could thirty or forty year ago. He used something more mental to show Barney's bravery, dignity, and determination, which were exhibited through the revealing of his inner thoughts.

Barney wanted to execute this mission by himself because he knew the mission was too dangerous. On the way returning to his home, he was attacked, and Ying Yang was with him at that time.

The comments regarding this character can be divided into two sides. The positive comments refer to Barney Ross as a great leader because he is responsible. He never risks his

teammates' lives. His tenacity, responsibility, and active problem solving attitude are necessary constituents of a leader. On the other hand, the negative comments point out that he is sometimes selfish. Some interviewees mentioned that if Barney had been willing to blow up the house earlier, his team members would have been much safer. He ordered the house blown up late because he wanted the woman alive. This decision was made based on his own willingness rather than a pragmatic analysis of the situation. In the responses by interviewees, the two opposite directions of the answers seem to describe separate personalities, but in fact they are inextricably connected in Hunanese minds. Ten interviewees admitted that they got excited easily. They also admitted that decisions might be wrong if they are made upon impulses. In Hunan, people are always tenacious regarding things which they want and ideas which they think. Hunanese are willing to debate with each other on an issue even when people on the opposing side are their best friends; consequently, other Chinese may think Hunanese have less self-control. In the book *I am Hunanese*, Jiqing Wang writes, "The inhabitants are really straightforward. Most of them are not the type of people who can hide daggers in smile. If they don't think someone's point is true, they will just say it, and argue it" (2006, p. 49).

"Barney Ross has really unique personal characteristics. He is good at fulfilling responsibility. However, he needs more communication with his teammates." One of interviewees said, "The similarities between Barney Ross and Hunanese are tenaciousness of purpose and desire to pursue dangerous life." When I asked the meaning of "pursue dangerous life," he answered, "The expendables could shoot the main bad guys by using sniper rifle. However, they chose the most dangerous way to finish this mission instead of the safer choice. This is why we are excited about them." In his feedback, this interviewee connected Hunanese people and Barney Ross by using the notions of determination and desire.

Audience members also think Barney should have used more smart ways to complete the final mission in the film. However, when I asked, “If you were Barney Ross, if you faced all of the situations, what would you have done?” Most of them answered, “I probably would have done what he did.” In the audiences’ negotiated positions, we can discern that Hunanese culture teaches people to be smart, to consider challenges and solutions before moving. The audiences thought they might choose a way which involved more challenges, as did Barney Ross. Their comments can be understood as representing ideas which are cultivated in Hunanese local culture. The oppositional position in the reception of this character is not common, few of the audience members said that they did not like this character because this character is selfish.

In Hunan province, people are always passionate for what do they want to do. Moreover, if a Hunan person wants to do something, he will do it until he succeeds. In the history of Hunan, Guofan Zeng, who was a Hunan general in later Qing dynasty, showed his determination, which resulted in the birth of the greatest army in China’s history. However, Zedong Mao’s determination for “the Cultural Revolution” resulted in the biggest human rights disaster in the history of the People’s Republic of China. In *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction*, Jopi Nyman says, “the conflict between desire and self-control is central in hard-boiled fiction: the male character is often tempted in different ways. Desire attracts him, but the consequence of desire may be lethal” (1997, p. 124). In this film, Ross’ decision put him and his teammates in danger. They defeated an army with only 5 men. This situation is similar to the Hunan general’s military operation. Based on the history records, the general, whom I mentioned before, led the army to take 160 square kilometers of land back. Even though the film character and the general both put themselves in danger, their natural desires to “abandon peaceful pursuit” led them to face difficulties without flinching.

“Stallone is not alone in this movie. He has buddies; he cares about his teammates and fight for them.” One interviewee pointed out, “Everything they did could not have been finished by any single person. For example, Ying Yang fought Gunnar Jensen when Barney was still in the coma which was caused by the car crash. Then, when Ying Yang could not stand in the fight, Barney woke up and shot Gunnar.”

The role of Ying Yang is played by Jet Li in this movie. He is a Kung Fu master in the team. He uses speed rather than a heavy punch. Compare to that of the traditional Hollywood “Tough Guys,” the masculinity of this character is different. For example, the word “hard body” is used to describe people with big muscles and tall size usually, and we can also use the word to describe most of the Hollywood heroes. They are tall and strong. Their powerful bodies are their natural power to beat antagonists. That’s why we always see the half-naked bodies of protagonists. However, Ying Yang’s advantages are incredible body flexibility and nice quickness. He is short; his muscles are not big. He can attack opponents when they have not even noticed. Unless his opponent can take lots of hits and hit back, he will win.

He is a fearless team player, and he hates to lose. He can jump out from a truck to face enemies when they are surrounded. He will also say “I could have won” after he has lost a fight. Ying Yang should be described as a kind of hero who is called the “Martial Arts Master.” In *American Masculinity under Clinton*, Malin Brenton writes, “The typical martial arts master presents interesting brands of masculinity well suited for the conflict sensitivity of the 1990s. On the one hand, this martial arts master develops skills in fighting (2005, p. 31). More and more martial art skills have been substituted for the simple body hit after the 1980s. Power cannot promise wins. The type of character like Ying Yang, or the type of actor like Jet Li brings new

definition of masculinity into Hollywood. They are tough, and they do not have to have tall and big body.

In Hollywood, a Chinese face almost always represents good kung fu skills. Nevertheless, unlike in Li's previous movies in Hollywood, in this movie this character's nationality is not mentioned. Ying Yang's nationality is an issue on internet. Li has always played Chinese kung-fu heroes in his movies. However, according to some internet discussion, Ying Yang is Vietnamese. During the interview, every interviewee told me, "I think Ying Yang's nationality is Chinese because his name sounds similar to the Chinese word 'Yin Yang'." This analysis is understandable because "Yin Yang" is a word employed in ancient Chinese philosophy. They are two opposite principles in nature. The first word, "Yin," means feminine and negative, while the latter word, "Yang," means masculine and positive.

When I asked them, "How could this character be related to Hunanese local culture, especially masculinity?" Some of them told me, "Well, the reason could be that Hunanese people are both easily excited and composed. Even though we are not tall and big, we are still good at military work. Fighting is not all about big muscles." That Hunanese become angry easily is one stereotype of Hunan people; however, emotional toughness is just part of Hunan characteristics, we are composed if we face big issues. This is evident from the successful military missions which have been commanded by Hunan generals. The stereotype can be found in some ancient Chinese history records. In the book *Shiji*, the author wrote, "Hunanese are eager to fight, and their social morality always emphasizes that people should be courageous and independent" (2007). In China, people frequently cite this sentence when they are criticizing Hunanese people, and it has always been supported by referring to the idea that Hunanese are fighting with each other all the time. However, the actual meaning of the description should be that Hunanese will

fight if fighting is necessary, and they are never afraid to fight. In Hunan, people could be either agitated or composed. The myth is that they will choose unconsciously. The ability to adjust their temper seems like part of their genetic make-up. In the movie, Yang wants more money from the reward of their mission. However, Barney Ross refuses his request. Even though he still wants more money, and he is not satisfied to be refused, this idea never influences him to be lazy in his job. This part of his personality is just like his name and like the personality of Hunan people: they know how to do the right thing at the right time.

In addition, in the history of Hunan, teamwork seems to be implanted into nature of Hunan people even before they are born. One example is that people united together village by village. In the villages, they treat each other like members of their own families. Another example can be found in the records of the military operation which I mentioned before also. Before the mission, the general worried that those Hunan soldiers might not want to do this mission because of two reasons. The first reason was that distance and weather (there are almost 3221 kilometers between Hunan province and Xinjiang province). In addition, Hunan is a humid place, but Xinjiang is a province with dry air and much desert). Another reason is that those soldiers were really tired because they had already fought against another enemy for about five years. However, the results of fighting the war in Xinjiang were positive. Finally, they won it by helping each other. Some Hunan soldiers were even killed because they wanted to save their teammates' lives.

In the movie, Ying Yang has always been a team player and has served teammates. For example, he sustains his teammates using his own body in order to let his teammates put explosives in very high places. When they are assaulted by enemies, he also sits on the top of the truck to fight enemies alone so that Barney Ross can drive safely. All of the interviewees made

the following point in their answers, “He is really good at doing teamwork, and he always seems to like to do something for his teammates.” If some people say that history can be faked, the interviewees’ answers prove that there is something which connects Ying Yang’s teamwork to Hunanese attitudes. The idea of teamwork exists in Hunanese people’s minds and in Hunan local culture because spectators have this response.

We also can gain insight into Hunan local culture and the characteristics of Hunan people from the interviewees’ answer. In stature, Hunanese are not tall but flexible. In the military culture, Hunan generals don’t want their soldiers to fight enemies with physical power because Hunanese are not tall and not big. In addition, their soldiers will die meaninglessly if the soldiers just use power to fight. In the local culture of the province, Hunan generals emphasize using their bodies’ agilities and smart strategies to fight with people who are tall and strong.

In my interviews to study Hunanese people’s reception of *The Expendables*, interviewees’ ideas about Ying Yang can be generally summarized as expressing two sides also. On the one side, they found this character to incarnate wonderful teamwork and resolute “can do” personality, which are also two strong points in the personalities of Hunanese people. In addition, the character of Ying Yang also represents some general Chinese characteristics and stereotypes in Hollywood cinema, such as a smart head and kung fu skills.

On the other sides, people think that this character does not have a really important role in this movie; what he did was just “fly everywhere.” One interviewee answered, “He is flexible, but he is unimportant.” When I asked the reason why he felt Jet Li is unimportant in this movie, he answered, “He used to play invincible and crucial characters. Nevertheless, he is defeated and the butt of jokes in this movie. Chinese kung fu should be invincible, right?”

The answer of the interviewee who believed that Ying Yang was unimportant in the movie implies that part of his thinking related to the idea of being “unimportant.” This part of his thinking could result from his own life experience, or it could result from his ideas about Hunan culture. In China, everyone knows that the Hunanese are an irreplaceable crowd because they provide most of the reforming ideas in the process of modernization in China’s history. However, they are still amusing. Other Chinese citizens may joke that Hunanese are short. They may also describe Hunanese people’s determinations as a kind of personality which makes a person look like a donkey. Their reason is that in traditional Chinese culture, people should do their job at a slower pace. However, Hunanese people would like to fulfill their responsibilities by working fast. Sometimes, Chinese people’s jokes about Hunan people sound like abuse. Hunanese people don’t have positive feelings about these jokes. Then arguing who the most important people for China are, people always choose by following their feelings, but not by looking at the truth. For example, if you ask who the most important citizens for China are, most Chinese will answer that they are the people from their own home town. In this case, Hunan people’s feelings may be similar to Ying Yang’s feeling when his teammates are joking about his short size. As one of the interviewees wrote, “Well, you may say that Ying Yang is too sensitive to what people are saying. He is sensitive in his dignity. He knows he is short. He hates people talking about his height. However, if this is part of who he is, people should respect it.”Li is not invincible in this movie. He is defeated by Gunnar twice. However, he never gives up, and he is not afraid of anyone. His movements are based on his needs, without regard for discouragements and previous failures.

There are two fights between Ying Yang and Gunnar. The first fight happens at a time when Gunnar wants to hang a pirate. Yang tries to stop him because Gunnar’s behavior is not



morally right. In this movie, Stallone wanted to portray Ying Yang as a warrior with high moral standards. The second fight happens when Gunnar wants to kill Barney Ross. Yang gets out from the truck first and begins to attack from Gunnar's back. Two fights are initiated by Yang. He is fast, skillful, and fearless. The situation of being "initiated by Yang" can be related to both Hunan masculinity and Hollywood masculinity. For Hunan masculinity, ability to finish a task independently is adored not only in military operations but also in ordinary life. A Hunan historian says, "In military missions, working independently is not permitted most of the time. However, Hunan generals were willing to send extraordinary soldiers individually and to attack enemies quietly" (Wang, 2006, p. 107). For Hollywood masculinity, a hero who kills all the enemies by himself has been a tradition of many action movies. For example, in *First Blood*, Rambo defeated the soldiers and police officers by himself. Comparing the Hunan masculinity and Hollywood masculinity with regard to initiative in attacking (as illustrated in Ying Yang's role), one can see that they both share the same element. Even though they share the same element, Ying Yang is not a "old Hollywood hero;" he can't finish attacking by himself. Barney Ross saves him every time. Ying Yang is part of a team.

Regarding Ying Yang, some Chinese critics think that he is not masculine enough because this character is defeated in this movie. However, this idea should be related to the discussion of Gunnar Jensen. Dolph Lundgren plays Gunnar Jensen in *The Expendables*. Gunnar is a fine sniper and a combat veteran. He is a "bomb" for both sides. Gunnar Jensen has a short temper personality; that's one of the reasons why Barney does not let him in the dangerous mission after they have rescued hostages from the Aden Gulf. In the many contemporary Hollywood films, bad boys can be heroes. This type of character has never been written into Stallone's films. Gunnar has fine military skills, but he uses drugs, and he has psychological

issues. Barney feels he cannot trust Gunnar; therefore Gunnar rebels, takes the enemy's side because he is upset. His mission is to kill Barney but he fails. He fails because he cannot be better than the combined force of Barney and Yang.

Gunnar is the most special expendable. Some audience members called him a "fallen angel." He made decisions based on his personal desire without regarding any needs of his team and teammates. The characteristics also confused audience members. When I asked, "What do you think about Gunnar Jensen?" some audience members expressed complex feelings about the character.

An audience member answered, "I don't know how to judge this character. On the one hand, he is a good sniper, and he has very good close-quarter combat skills. He is definitely military elite. On the other hand, his mental situation is kind of unstable. He almost killed Barney Ross and Ying Yang. This bipolar personality really caused problems for his team. He seems like he has realized his mistakes before the movie's ending because he rejoined the team. His mind travels really fast. He can switch between angel and devil in any second." The audience members consider Gunnar to be both soldiers and gangsters because this character makes contributions, and disasters. To relate this character to Hunanese people, the interviewees related Gunnar to the Hunanese history of soldiers and gangsters. He answered, "I think Hunanese people make contributions to China, but they also make many troubles for the country once they are out of their mind." Hunan has provided the best generals and soldiers in Chinese history. Based on the statement of statistics in the official website of Chinese government, there were sixty two generals from Hunan province (out of 150 in total) at the time when the People's Republic of China was founded. However, China's most famous gangsters are also Hunanese. These gangsters are not a group of "hippies." They have organizations, and they have leaders.

Their movements show that they are trained. A documentary reports, “In 1960, by defeating ten thousand Hunan gangsters, the Chinese official army lost almost two divisions” (“Records of eliminating gangsters,” 2009). The history of having gangsters puts Hunanese people in a very dichotomous position in the history of China. On the one hand, Chinese critics and government appreciate contributions from Hunanese people. On the other hand, gangster events are still bothering them. They think that those events may happen in the future because they have happened before. In addition, the personalities could be divided into two opposing extremes. For their buddies and people they don’t hate, Hunanese people will do everything they can to help. For the people they hate, Hunan citizens will do whatever they can to discourage.

During the time I was interviewing, an interviewee answered, “I don’t like Gunnar Jensen because he is cold-blooded. He never smiles, even when he is facing his teammates. Besides this point, he never cares about his teammates. A good soldier has to care about his teammates.” In the Hunanese culture, enthusiasm to assist people is part of local custom. A person who is as cold as Gunnar is not common in the culture. For example, if a foreigner visits Hunan province, if he/she asks for help, the local people will help him or her as much as they can. If they treat a dinner to a foreigner, they will offer a meal with the best food which they have. They will not bring guests to a restaurant if they believe that the food is not good enough (Wang, 2006, p. 33).

Gunnar is a loner. The director used a really unique method to portray the masculinity of this character. His personality is binary. It is composed of both positive elements and negative elements. In this film, every character has uniqueness. Every character has not only advantages but also disadvantages. However, the components of the other characters’ personalities are not as opposite as those of Gunnar Jensen. For example, Gunnar is sturdy when he is fighting, but his habits of using drugs also results in his becoming psychologically disordered. He can solve big

problems, but he can also make big troubles for his teammates. For example, he shoots a pirate from a long distance with a grenade launcher, but he also tries to use his pistol to shoot Barney Ross because Ross does not want him in the final mission.

Ultimately, the movie ends the way of many movies do – the happy reunion. Gunnar Jensen is back; no members of the Expendables are dead. The Expendables are reunited. Based on the encoding\decoding theory, the three reading strategies are related to the dominant ideology. The spectators' responses are related to the dominant ideology of Hunan province. They are attracted by the “big guys” in the movie. However, when comparing the masculinity in the movie to masculinity of Hunanese, one can see that Hunan people are more easily enchanted by masculinity in mentality instead of physical power. With regard to Barney Ross, Hunan people appreciate his tenacity and determination to do what he wants to do. Ying Yang's sense of teamwork reminds the audience that that part of their cultural makeup have always been vital part in their life. In the character Gunnar Jensen, the sense of a dichotomous personality could lead people to do either “positive” or “negative” opinions.

Just as teamwork, determination is mentioned again and again by interviewees. No matter how big the differences in the interviewees' answers, crucially, they share many of the same points. This phenomenon raises other questions: Why does this phenomenon happen? Why do the same points emerge? In Hunan province, people think that social ideological discourses will influence people's thoughts. Among these interviewees, some of them will strongly admire one of the characters in the movie. Some of them may think critically as they are negotiating points with others who have posted comments. Others will express dissatisfaction with the characters.

The theory of gap filling shows that audiences' points of views and responses are influenced by the information which exists in their minds. Even though the director didn't make

this movie working within Hunan ideology, Hunanese people will approach this movie's ideology, shown in the personalities of characters, by comparing themselves to the movie's elements. Hunanese spectators are attracted by the masculinities in the film because this movie's elements can fit something in their minds.

Therefore, based on the discussions of the audience members' responses, on the one hand, willingness to take responsibility, sturdiness, bravery, and other natural energies lead the people to be leaders of China. They stick on their beliefs, realizing and protecting them. On the other hand, these energies may also result in making troubles. The troubles represent unique personalities and cultural characteristics in Chinese society. They are made by people who are willing to challenge, and created new.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In the previous discussion of Hunanese audiences' reception, we have already seen that Stallone's star images actually exist in the audience members' thoughts. Everything, which is thought to be part of Stallone, are not really him, but a virtual masculine body in many films. His body is actually a virtual body for Hunanese audiences. The Hunanese audiences members observed those coded and virtual physical characteristics. In addition, Hunanese Stallone fans' behaviors of watching the movies (V-O-D, DVD, downloading) enhance the virtual image. In Hayles' point of view, a virtual body, a physical object, and the filmmakers who operate within virtual reality space also become patterns rather than physical entities (p. 36). The audiences capture the physical entities, and compare them to their own (Hunan) culture values.

Filmmakers' thoughts about bodies are the main patterns of the presented bodies in films. The human body is now presented and performed in a literal sense metaphysically, above and beyond physicality (p. 38). We can see that the tensions between cultural codes (such as American culture and Hunanese culture) dislocate audiences' traditional expectations to do more than structure the narrative. The tensions help audiences to negotiate. They help Hunan audiences negotiate because they (the audiences) have so much information to observe and think about. Some of the information may fit their knowledge backgrounds, while some of the information may directly contrast with it. For example, the audience members who are older than 40 years want the USSR boxer to win the battle with Rocky. Obviously, in this research, interviewees' answers show that they have different perspectives in observing things in our life. The different perspectives are constructed from different experiences of living, ideologies, and even the amount of information they can get in this fast-changing world.

Nowadays, action films and their presentation of masculinities have been coded with more sensibilities and with regard to the complexity of humanity. We cannot use single genres to categorize films. We cannot use one perspective to perceive characters. The media keep calling to the notice of audiences the sensitivity of males. We're far from perfect as a culture and as a species, and quite certainly many sensibilities of our current action movies will impact future generations because each generation has certain standards with which to value masculinities and bodies. The standards are made from daily observed information, of which films are a part. But the film industry does seem to be making some halting steps forward as we expand our conception of who is important, who deserves care and consideration, and how we feel about someone being punched, kicked, chased, and stabbed.

The human bodies in films are usually constructed via dominant codes through film directing and performance. However, the actors are not storytellers, nor are they professional authorities. It is the film maker who uses the codes which are changed into another kind of subjectivity, precisely one which exists and is recognized because of knowing the filming codes and their meanings. In contrast, the actors are manipulators of codes. They show the films' codes through their performances. Assuming that the codes were digitized at some phase in their existence (such as the films' space), in a literal sense they (the actors) are these codes. The reader is similarly constituted through a layered archaeology that moves from listener to reader to decoder. The possibilities of reading texts are actually the production of diverse codes. We read and produce more. The nature of the film narratives' information and discussions of the mass public make that possibility an inevitability, "for they often cannot be understood, even on a literal level, without referring to codes and the informatics that produce and are produced by these codes" (Hayles, 1999, p. 46).

There is no longer any shared, unchangeable context that helps to “anchor” meanings and guide interpretations. Like reading activities, decoding takes place in a location arbitrarily far removed in space and time from the source text only. The decoding of films implies that there is no original text—no first editions—because films are another version of literary text, not fair copies, because we all make meanings on films. What binds the decoder to the system of text is the impression (cultural background) from which his or her physicality is constructed. That is the reason why the interview responses of the Hunan audience members in this research are so different. They have the same cultural background, but they read the movies differently.

During the reading process of films, we all have dreamlike memories which emerge; it does not matter whether they are good dreams or nightmares of the body; what other alternative exists? We can see beyond this dream, we have argued, by attending to the material interfaces and technologies that make disembodiment such a powerful illusion, such as posters and online discussions. However, as (we already know) bodies are never entirely material, and our minds and our feelings are never entirely immaterial. The reason is that we live in this complex process. For example, we are grown between our bodies, our minds, and the cultural practices that infuse such growth (Corbett, 2009, p. 210). The experiences are part of our memories which influence our points of views of bodies. Corbett says, “Masculinity carries greater cultural capital. These are located in bodily performance and are learnt at an early age, particularly through comparison and evaluation of the individual body and others” (p. 225). He also says, “Traditionally, boys and masculinity have been characterized by aggression, muscularity, exhibitionism, dominance, and phallic preoccupation (p. 210).” These masculinity values help filmmakers to construct characters and help audiences to read, i.e., to understand the characters and the movies.



In addition, the evaluations of bodily performances help the individuals to construct an understanding of his or her position within the social world. In the United States, the characteristic and desired qualities are those of being hard, a fighter, powerful, dominant, muscular, strong, fit, and athletic. They are generally considered to be ‘male’ traits (p. 225) in American culture. They share some characteristics with the ideals of Hunan culture, such as being hard, a fighter, and strong. They are all part of daily experiences and part of the two cultures.

At the time of writing of this thesis, the second movie in *The Expendables* sequel is about to be released in theaters. It is hard to predict the movie’s box office and DVD or video-on-demand sales; all we can say is that the movie will most likely be successful. Its cast list has more “old big names,” such as Jean-Claude Van Damme. It will “wake up” more audiences’ memory about the stars, their masculinities, and their eras of films. We live in a time of great flux. Stallone’s identity is fluid, and the spectator in many ways holds the key which unlocks the meaning of his performances and spectacles, interpreting it variously as “dressing up, as putting on, or as stepping out” (Cohan & Hark, 1993, p. 225).

Everything is flowing and shifting fast, including films, masculinities, and cultures. In Hunan province, when movies are available on the internet with multiple accesses, when the central government’s censorship cannot keep audiences away from movies, the communication between the two different masculinities (Hunanese and that of Stallone) has become quicker and more frequent through film watching. Different audiences form different opinions. The definitions of Hunanese male identities and masculinities may change. However, the culture’s main values have never changed; people always seek similarities to compare. Hunan is the cradle of Chinese soldiers and government officers. Loyalty, uprightness, strong self-awareness and

roughness, and a heart of resistance are their personality characteristics” (Wang, 2006, p 50). The culture’s values of determination, changing, and fighting are not only the basic construction of Hunanese male identities and culture; they are also the knowledge backgrounds of Hunan audiences, used to make judgments when they are watching movies. In addition, the Hunanese tradition of being soldiers, gymnasts, and gangsters, along with family values, influences Hunanese audiences’ reception of these films. As I suggested before, Stallone himself and his movies capture audiences’ attention by the uniqueness of his body along with character design and story developments.

From the first *Rocky* film to *The Expendables*, his movies have changed a lot, but his fans still love his films. Stallone says that Rocky created him. The reality is that the features of his characters are parts of his star image. And the features are also part of the history of Hunanese and Hunanese culture. His images of underdogs, suffering individuals, and successful stories of fighting are the facts which inspire Hunanese audiences to pursue him. Hunanese share similarities with Stallone’s characters in culture. The similarities are the reasons Hunanese audiences like the movies so much. Stallone himself knows that he has a huge fan crowd in China. Before *The Expendables* was released, he planned to go to China to meet his fans. However, he was not in fact able to make the trip. This may actually have been a good idea because his fans can generate more imagination about him and his body if his Chinese fans never meet him.

In the *Rocky IV* film, Hunanese fans like his manhood, his nature of being a soldier, and his determination. The political ideological differences have not had much impact on Hunanese audiences. They appreciate Rocky’s patriotism. Nevertheless, they are sure that other countries will change, each one following its own ways. In the response to *Cliffhanger*, some of the fans

think that Gabe Walker is vulnerable, but they do appreciate his sense of family and of fighting. The history of Hunan gangsters does not make Hunanese audience take their side even though the “dark side” of Hunanese people could be awakened during the film watching. The reason some Hunan audiences support the bad guys is the Hunanese traditions of team work and making plans. In the end, in the interviewees’ answers regarding *The Expendables*, Barney Ross was perceived as an extraordinary military leader; he has everything a wonderful soldier needs. The reception of Yin Yang is different from that of Jet Li’s former characters. Audiences still like his martial arts skills, but they do not like the way he is defeated because the Hunanese fans think that the skills are more important than physical powers. As for Gunnar Jensen, he was seen as a fallen angel by fans. On the one hand, he is a trouble maker; on the other hand, his wonderful military skills placed audiences in the position of hesitation when they were considering the character.

Though his career has rebounded remarkably in the last few years, Stallone’s age can’t be denied. Even if his stunt-work in some films like *The Expendables* is impressive for a 66-year-old, there’s no way he can keep making this kind of movie forever. In recent years, he has become a vocal advocate for anti-aging treatments like human growth hormone (Milovanovic, 2011), which he has used to help himself get in shape for his physically demanding roles. I wonder if such a legendary fitness figure like Stallone thinks of the idea of freezing himself—and therefore preserving his remarkable physique against the ravages of age—as less of a nightmare and more a fantasy for himself and his fans (Housden, 2002). Why else would he hang the pictures from his earlier years from the rafters of his restaurant?

## Suggestions for Future Research

Web 2.0 technology provides platforms which allow the online discussions to happen with more interactivity. In *On Free Labors: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy*, Terranova describes this type of phenomenon as connections between the internet and an autonomist “social factory.” In her description, internet platforms are like a virtual factory, and internet users are resources of the “factory.” In addition, she also says, “Cyberspace is about escaping reality in order to understand how the reality of the Internet is deeply connected to the development of late postindustrial societies as a whole” (2003). This is another advantage of online discussion: people don’t need to be face to face in order to talk, and they will not have scruples while they are expressing themselves. In this process, internet users not only “talk” culture but also invent something. In another article, “Co-creating Games: A Co-evolutionary Analysis,” Banks and Potts point out, “Co-creative media culture occurs when a non-trivial component of the design, development, production, marketing, and distribution of media product proceeds through the direct involvement of consumers or users” (2010). In the time of production showing more and more user involvement, future researchers can work more on online activities.

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