

Chinese *Star Wars*: Vernacular Readings of a Global Multimedia Phenomenon

Call for Papers for a proposed edited volume, edited by Damian Mandzunowski (Heidelberg University) and Nick Stember (Independent Scholar)

With the semicentennial of the first *Star Wars* approaching in 2027, it is evident that few other Hollywood blockbusters enjoy such broad cultural appeal and wide academic interest as *Star Wars*. Whether its initial iteration or one of the many sequels, prequels, TV shows, and spin-offs, hundreds of academic texts have analyzed *Star Wars* from a variety of angles: as modern myth (Gordon 1978, Hirschman 1987); as a lens for understanding American political culture in the context of the Gulf War (Meyer 1992); as a case study for discussing global circulations of morality discourses (Vaidya 2019); as a problematic example of cultural appropriation (Wetmore 2000, Kupis 2020); or as a site for the “grassroots creativity” of fans (Jenkins 2012). In all of this and much more scholarly literature, however, one theme and region is conspicuously absent: China. Exemplary studies do exist. Through translations and scans, Maggie Greene (2014) and Nick Stember (2015) have popularized some of the early-1980s bootleg Chinese *Star Wars* comics; Thomas Bini (2022) provides a comprehensive annotated overview of these and other titles, with reference to his own collection of titles. Stember (2023) has further engaged in a detailed close reading of the early standalone *Star Wars* comics, as has Keblinska (2026). These few studies already show that the history of *Star Wars* in China is (as the recent edited volume Guynes and Hassler-Forest ed. 2018 suggests) inherently transmedial, tracing a fascinating trajectory from its initial encounters to its current presence. And while, within China at least, *Star Wars* has yet to reach equal heights of local reception as the Marvel Cinematic Universe or Japanese manga and anime franchises such as Detective Conan or One Piece, it nonetheless constitutes a fascinating case for studying the multi-layeredness of contemporary popular culture, allowing for vernacular readings — or readings which are both local and informal— across the usual culture and time divide.

This edited volume sets out to shed more light on exactly these aspects. We invite contributions that explore the interplay between the larger *Star Wars* universe(s) and the Chinese (re)production, consumption, and reception of it over the decades following 1977. We particularly welcome case studies and detailed explorations of overlooked artifacts, whether material or symbolic, as well as studies based on oral history. Transcultural approaches that critically engage with Chinese *Star Wars* phenomena are also highly encouraged. In its five decades, *Star Wars* has grown from three films into a wide-ranging multimedia franchise encompassing comic books, films, games, television, animation, and other forms of cultural expression. As such, it operates via a plethora of dissemination avenues which, by and large, need to adapt to a local context. Moreover, as a space fantasy built on tropes of knights, princesses, and feudal bloodlines, and one which is largely driven by nostalgia and legacy characters, *Star Wars* continues to struggle to connect with audiences in places like China, where

“harder” science-fiction has historically been much more popular. At the same time, a dedicated Chinese Star Wars community exists not only in the PRC, but even more so in Hong Kong and Taiwan, with fans often favoring the Prequel Trilogy and the Expanded Universe/Legends for their intricate world-building and political narratives as well as the video games for the immersive nature, while largely ignoring the Sequel Trilogy. A study of all these processes, coupled with the diverse reception, readership, recollections, and impact (or lack thereof) of Star Wars in China, is to form the core subject of this edited volume.

Chinese *Star Wars*: A Force Yet to be Awakened?

It is often said that, because the first three Star Wars films—1977’s *A New Hope*, 1980’s *The Empire Strikes Back* and 1983’s *The Return of the Jedi*—did not receive an official theatrical release in China until 2015, Chinese audiences missed out on participating in that foundational run. And yet, the first direct interaction between a Chinese audience (albeit without the visuals) and the American space opera phenomenon did occur as early in 1979 with the official translation of Alan Dean Foster’s novelization, *Splinter of the Mind’s Eye* (Stember 2023). The book’s translation, alongside presumed cross border exchanges with Hong Kong and Japan where the film enjoyed a wide release, largely served as China’s vernacular foundation for a range of unauthorized *lianhuanhua*—Chinese picture story books or comics—published in 1980 and 1981. These and other bootleg-like comics adaptations, offer a first glimpse into creative interpretations and changes that would define one part of Chinese Star Wars ever since. While not comparable in scale and impact to the American or European contexts, there was a certain reception of Star Wars in science-fiction fans communities and it was mostly via such unofficial interactions that Star Wars, its sequels, and its comic and novel continuations gradually found their way into a re-opening China.

Despite the continued lukewarm reception of Star Wars in China, times are also changing. Throughout the 1990s, many of the semi-official continuation books of the Expanded Universe published by Bantam and Del Rey, alongside tie-in comic book storylines published by Dark Horse and Vertigo, would be translated and published in China. Thus, when the prequel trilogy began to be released—*The Phantom Menace* in 1999, *Attack of the Clones* in 2002, and *Revenge of the Sith* in 2005—Lucasfilm and its distributors believed the Chinese moviegoing audiences were ready for Star Wars too. And although this succeeded only partially, Star Wars still had a measured official penetration into the Chinese market (especially with through MMO video games as *Star Wars: Battlefront II* or *Star Wars: The Old Republic*), and an active and vibrant fan community emerged, primarily online (e.g., starwarsfans.cn), that has thrived since the early 2000s. Conversely, the international Star Wars fandom also began to take notice of how it is being received and remixed in China: in 2005, shortly after the theatrical release of *Revenge of the Sith*, a pirated DVD began to circulate and was discovered by an American fan living in Shanghai named Jeremy Winterson (Winterson 2005). Titled *Star War the Third Gathers: The Backstroke of the West*, the bootleg featured English subtitles of staggering inaccuracy and fast became an early meme-like internet phenomenon resulting not only in its very own Wikipedia and Fandom pages, but also a dedicated, fan-produced audio dub that garnered over 12.3 million views on YouTube before facing copyright strikes by Disney in 2024. The profound popularity of this early

new century bootleg is only one illustration of the porous and often chaotic nature of Chinese Star Wars interactions

In 2015, Disney, who had bought in 2012 Lucasfilm alongside the whole Star Wars IP, had high hopes for finally conquering the Chinese box office. A special section at the Shanghai Film Festival was set up in which all six extant Star Wars films were screened, the original trilogy for the first time. *A Force Awakens* also performed relatively well in the Chinese box office, earning some 124 million USD of its total 2 billion USD global box office (Box Office Mojo). Moreover, the Disney era has seen pointed (even if only partially successful) attempts to expand Star Wars specifically within China through publications such as Ken Liu's short novel *The Legends of Luke Skywalker* or the Chinese-only web novel *Star Wars: The Vow of Silver Dawn* that was serialized on Qidian. More recent spin-off series, and especially *The Mandalorian*, enjoyed a more measurable success in China, perhaps in parts thanks to its episodic, standalone narrative heavily influenced by classic samurai cinema (specifically the ubiquitous *Lone Wolf and Cub* trope). And still, subsequent streaming releases have fared exceedingly poorly. *The Acolyte*, for example, released in 2024, received overwhelmingly negative reviews and severe review-bombing on Douban, as has in parts 2022's *Obi-Wan Kenobi*.

In contrast, during the same period since 1977 all Star Wars films were widely screened in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as were local translations of comics and books published and circulated, creating a lively local Star Wars subculture. Especially cosplay is a very popular expression of the Star Wars fan community in Taiwan, where "May the 4th" is celebrated with large gatherings (Scanlan 2025). Mandarin language dubs of the new television series have been produced for this market by Disney, and there is even a local (non-official) producer of lightsaber replicas, the "superfan" Makoto Tsai (OCAC News 2023). In Hong Kong, meanwhile, in 2015 the Hyperspace Mountain attraction at Hong Kong Disneyland has been reworked to have a Star Wars theme. This is in marked contrast to Shanghai Disneyland, which closed its Star Wars Launch Bay attraction in 2019 just three years after opening, presumably due to a lack of visitors. More recently, it was announced that there would be a special Star Wars themed light show on the Hong Kong waterfront for May the 4th, with tie-in merchandise available for purchase (Marketing-Interactive 2026).

All this is to show that, ultimately, to explore how Star Wars was read in China is also to explore how China was read into Star Wars. In doing so, the volume aims to deflate the prevailing self-importance of much extant Star Wars academia: rather than (over)interpret the Force or downplay the politics of Star Wars, the volume is to highlight the force of Star Wars as a global political medium. Through a selection of case studied with a historical and contemporary focus ranging in interest from literature and arts to culture and politics, *Chinese Star Wars* also offers a showcase of how to conduct mass media scholarship when the studied mass medium is in fact not more than a niche.

Book structure and topics of interest

We welcome papers on, but by no means limited to the following topics:

- Early reception history: historical accounts of the earliest reception of Star Wars in Guangzhou (via Hong Kong and Macau) and its circulation through bootleg channels before official distribution—especially oral history contributions from this period;
- The Taiwan / Hong Kong / Macau dimensions: how the reception of Star Wars differed in the larger Sinosphere, where the films received an official theatrical release;
- Chinese dimensions of Star Wars cosplay culture: these could include ethnographic and/or sociological explorations via oral history interviews, participatory study, and other innovative methods, especially of the 501st Legion Chinese Garrison;
- Collecting, memorabilia, merchandise, and Star Wars toys, either from the aspect of their prominence in China, or from the point of view of their actual manufacturing, as already the very first Kenner Star Wars figures were in fact mass-produced in China;
- The Expanded Universe in China: explorations of the role and impact of 1990s/2000s Star Wars books and comics in China;
- Socio-cultural analyses of the Prequels: studies that explore the reception of the Star Wars Prequel Trilogy in China against the backdrop of the late 1990s socio-cultural landscape;
- Homemade translations, scanlation processes, and crowdsourced subtitles: other aspects of the 1980s–2000s gray-zone Star Wars consumption, as well as the smuggling and selling of VHS, VCDs, or DVDs;
- Disney-era Star Wars: the reception of Disney-era Star Wars content, including most recent shows like *Andor*, and its intersections with discussions of authoritarianism in China;
- Chinese web novel/web comic adaptations: analyses of official and unofficial Chinese web novel, web comic, or animated adaptations, variations, and official and unofficial expansions of the Star Wars universe;
- Industry perspectives: contributions from individuals involved in the production side of Chinese Star Wars, including translators, poster artists, dubbers, and comic adapters;
- Critical takes: examinations of the franchise's reception in China, including the perceived impact (or lack thereof) of the sequel trilogy and discussions surrounding issues of biases within fan communities or adaptations;
- Political readings: analyses of how political metaphors present in Star Wars (e.g., Vietnam War, Nuclear War, and Iraq War allusions from George Lucas's original intent) have been received and interpreted within a Chinese context;
- Linguistic/semiotic approaches: investigations into the challenges and strategies involved in translating Star Wars' myriad names, languages, and technical terms into Chinese.
- IP, legal structures, and legal issues and challenges: the legal landscape of Star Wars in China, with a particular focus on bootleg and/or piracy culture.

All other relevant topics are also welcome!

Submission and publication details

We intend to publish the edited volume as part of a publication series on the politics and practices of reading culture in China with a major academic publisher (preliminary spoken agreement reached) following a blind peer review system. We also hope to organize an online workshop and/or conference panel/roundtable with all contributors in the advanced stages of research and writing for an enhanced cohesion among the chapters.

We aim for a balanced mix of academic rigor and engaging, insightful explorations of Star Wars lore “with Chinese characteristics.” Contributions should maintain an academic standard while also embracing a self-aware appreciation for the unique and often compelling nature of this transcultural phenomenon. While we are particularly keen to include papers that make use of Chinese language primary source materials, we are also open to contributions from scholars with areas of expertise outside of Chinese studies who nonetheless are interested in exploring Chinese Star Wars realms.

Abstracts and other inquiries are welcome until **Monday, 10 August 2026**. We will inform you about acceptance by Monday, 31 August 2026; first chapter drafts are expected by **Monday, 4 January 2027**.

Please submit your proposal (300 words), alongside your name, email, affiliation, and short bio (100 words), here: <https://forms.gle/Ryg584dZX66GpLUV6>. You can also use the form to get in touch with us in case of questions of inquiries

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