

The Great Wall fails to bring down the barriers in a lacklustre Chinese-US epic

Written by Joyleen Christensen, Program Convenor (Foundation Studies - Central Coast) and Lecturer in Film and Literature, University of Newcastle



The Great Wall, an epic US-Chinese coproduction. Universal Pictures

Matt Damon was right to [insist](#) that commentators wait to see the finished film before making judgements about his role as a “white saviour of China” in the new Chinese-US coproduction, [The Great Wall](#)

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That being said, the initial outrage over the casting of a white American actor as the star of a China-based epic was certainly understandable given Hollywood’s long history of [“white washing”](#);

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Sparked by the prominent placement of Damon in the film’s US promotional poster and trailer, heated social media responses helped draw much-needed attention to an ugly and enduring industry practice.

Most notable amongst these was Taiwanese-American actress Constance Wu’s oft-cited [Twitter post](#), passionately arguing that “our heroes don’t look like Matt Damon”. Ultimately though this particular controversy proved largely baseless, as the star takes a step back from full-blown heroics in the action-fantasy epic.

The plot of the film is straightforward enough, if a little nonsensical at times. Seeking “black powder” in 12th-century Northern China, European mercenaries Will (Damon) and Tovar (Pedro Pascal) escape from a vicious horde of bandits only to find themselves captured by an elite band of soldiers, the Nameless Order.

Caught up in a fierce siege, Will and Tovar quickly discover that their captors have been stationed on the Great Wall and charged with the mission of protecting the country from mythical beasts, known as the Taotie, who descend from their mountain lair to wreak havoc

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every 60 years.

During their first battle, Will, a talented archer, saves the life of a young soldier (Lu Han) and wins respect from Commander Lin Mae (Jing Tian) and Strategist Wang (Andy Lau). As the only members of the Nameless Order who speak English, Lin and Wang soon become Will's guides – providing him with insight into the history and philosophy of the Order.



Commander Lin Mae (Jing Tian) in The Great Wall. Universal Pictures

Eager to assist their cause and increasingly drawn into the mystery of the wall, Will resists the pleas of Tovar to plan an escape with fellow foreigner and long-time captive, Sir Ballard (Willem Dafoe). Various acts of self-sacrifice and demonstrations of the value of trust and unity between Will and his small band of Chinese allies follow. Perhaps the only real twist in the entire film is when Will suddenly decides to take a backseat to his female colleague, Lin, in the rather anti-climactic, final battle.

Despite such gestures to the power of collectivism (as well as some blatant showcasing of Chinese philosophy and inventiveness), those who go looking for evidence will still find some solid examples of the “white man saviour narrative” in the film.

One cringe-worthy sequence shows Will patronisingly instructing some of the Imperial Army's finest minds on the delicate art of how to harpoon a Taotie. Another has Will walking into a banquet hall after assisting in the first siege and being greeted with the rapturous applause of his captors.

Perhaps ironically, given the controversy it has generated, the film's chief failing is the inability to show Will's seemingly effortless transition from greedy mercenary to completely altruistic protagonist.

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