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Depictions of the Chinese Claim of the Nine-Dash Line in Cinemas

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Abstract

Barbie (2023) becomes one of the most anticipated films worldwide in 2023. However, this is not the case for the Vietnamese, as the authority has announced that the film would be banned. The reason: it features the Nine-Dash Line, the controversial China's claim over the ownership of the South China Sea. This claim brews territorial disputes with the surrounding countries: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, from which it has emerged as a significant geopolitical flashpoint for decades. Nevertheless, *Barbie* (2023) is only one of the cinemas that have faced scrutiny and censorship due to the depictions of this contentious issue. The last five years have also seen *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Pine Gap* series (2018), *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* series (2019), *Abominable* (2019), and *Uncharted* (2022) experience the similar fate as *Barbie* (2023) in Vietnam, the Philippines, or Malaysia. This paper aims to examine the depiction of the Nine-Dash Line in each cinema mentioned and the responses of other claimant countries, considering public reactions, diplomatic protests, and censorship measures. The depiction of the Nine-Dash Line in cinemas shows that the depiction of any sensitive geopolitical issues can lead to diplomatic tensions. As governments seek to protect their best national interests, they engage in censorship or ban the cinemas from being shown in their territories altogether.

Keyword *Nine-Dash Line, South China Sea, territorial dispute, depiction, cinema*

Introduction

The Nine-Dash Line refers to a demarcation line that the People's Republic of China uses to claim sovereignty over the vast majority of the South China Sea. Forming a U-shape, the Nine-Dash Line encompasses around 90% of the sea's area, including numerous islands, reefs, and atolls within. Overlapping with territorial waters, the exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and/or territorial land claims of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, the Nine-Dash Line claim becomes the most prominent territorial dispute in the Southeast Asian region. The dispute within the Nine-Dash Line arises from the conflict over the maritime features and resources between China and other countries with competing claims in the region.

The Nine-Dash Line is closely tied to China's historical claims over the South China Sea region. This can be traced back to 1946, originally drawn on as a U-shaped eleven-dash line in a map published by the nationalist Republic of China (now commonly known as Taiwan) (Wu, 2013). Ever since the victory of the communist People's Republic of China in 1949, the claim has been reinforced by including the Nine-Dash Line in China's official maps. However, the claim is continuously contested by other claimant countries, as well as the international community, which views the Chinese assertion as inconsistent with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which China is also a party (Gupta, 2015).

The contestation has led to ongoing negotiations, diplomatic tensions, and occasional military confrontations between China, numerous claimant countries, and other stakeholders. Regional forums and international organizations have been involved in facilitating dialogue and dispute resolution, although a comprehensive and permanent resolution to the issue remains elusive. The complexity of the dispute makes it a crucial area of concern for regional and global security and stability.

The dispute also impacted cinemas recently. The portrayal of the Nine-Dash Line in cinematic media, particularly depicting the South China Sea as being part of China's territory or in a manner that supports China's

claim, attracts attention from other claimant countries. Given the sensitivity of the issue, films or series that appear to legitimize China's stance on the region have sparked negative reactions and faced scrutiny and censorship in countries that are heavily involved in territorial disputes with China—most notably Vietnam and the Philippines. These include *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), the *Pine Gap* series (2018), the *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* series (2019), *Abominable* (2019), *Uncharted* (2022), and *Barbie* (2023).

The *Pine Gap* series (2018) includes elements that touch upon geopolitical tension, including the Nine-Dash Line. Two of the episodes are inspired by real-world competing claims over the South China Sea that could impact the activities at the Australian defense facility. The strategic interests of involved countries also heighten the sense of geopolitical intrigue, highlighting the regional security issue concern. However, the depictions of the Nine-Dash Line in other cinemas are minor plot elements, aimed at a general audience without delving deeply into the complexities of the South China Sea disputes. *Abominable* (2019) revolves around the magical journey and the friendship between Yi with her friends and the mythical Yeti. *Uncharted* (2022) focuses on the action and adventure of Nathan Drake who is recruited by Victor "Sully" Sullivan to find the fabled treasure from the Magellan expedition. Both *Abominable* (2019) and *Uncharted* (2022) garnered controversies with brief scenes involving a map of the region with the Nine-Dash Line, resulting in bans in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* series (2019) also briefly touch upon the issue by including second-long scenes with a map depicting the Nine-Dash Line. Lastly, *Barbie* (2023) focuses on the adventure of the titular character Barbie and her companions. The controversy began when Vietnam's film censorship authority banned the film in July 2023 for allegedly displaying such lines.

Some similarities of the measures taken by other claimant countries to the mentioned cinemas can be noted. Governments or authorities of the claimant countries might first issue official statements or protests to the films' producers or distributors, expressing their concerns and objections to the films' contents. This was carried out to assert their position on the South China Sea dispute. Later, the governments or authorities engage in censorship or ban the cinemas from being shown in their territories altogether. They considered the contents to be politically sensitive or in violation of their national interests, as it was seen as promoting China's controversial territorial claim in the South China Sea region. This paper aims to examine the depiction of the Nine-Dash Line in each cinema mentioned and the responses of other claimant countries in the South China Sea region, considering public reactions, diplomatic protests, and censorship measures. This paper provides insights into how fictional media like films or cinemas portray geopolitical issues and their impacts on other countries involved in the particular issue.

Theory and Method

Different types of studies will rely on different methodologies (Stake, 2010). The research was done qualitatively. According to Kothari (2004), qualitative research makes use of available facts or information to analyze and make a critical evaluation (2004). The study was conducted with theoretical and operational concepts as well as variables with qualitative data characteristics. The available facts of information were obtained through extensive research from numerous sources on each case study: (1) *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), (2) *Pine Gap* series (2018), (3) *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* series (2019), (4) *Abominable* (2019), (5) *Uncharted* (2022), and (6) *Barbie* (2023). The available facts and information include the synopsis of each cinema, the depictions of the Nine-Dash Line in each cinema, and measures taken by the claimant countries to respond to the cinemas. The latter includes diplomatic protests and actions taken by these countries in response to the films' release.

Findings and Discussion

This section provides the analysis of the cinematic depictions of the Nine-Dash Line based on the case studies involving: (1) *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), (2) *Pine Gap* series (2018), (3) *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* series (2019), (4) *Abominable* (2019), (5) *Uncharted* (2022), and (6) *Barbie* (2023). These include brief information on each film, how the Nine-Dash Line is depicted, countries that respond, and their responses.

The following table shows the findings of how the Nine-Dash Line is depicted and the countries that respond:

Table 1. First Findings

Cinemas	Depiction	Countries
<i>Crazy Rich Asians</i> (2018)	On a map on a designer bag	Vietnam
<i>Pine Gap</i> series (2018)	On satellite images on the wide screen of the defense facility	Vietnam, the Philippines
<i>Put Your Head on My Shoulder</i> series (2019)	On a map of a forecast news on television	Vietnam
<i>Abominable</i> (2019)	On a map commonly sold in China	Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia
<i>Uncharted</i> (2022)	On a visualized trip over the globe	Vietnam, the Philippines
<i>Barbie</i> (2023)	On a child-like crayon drawing of the world map	Vietnam

The following table shows the findings of the responses of each country to scrutinizing or banning the cinemas due to the depictions of the Nine-Dash Line:

Table 2. Second Findings

Countries/ Cinemas	Vietnam	The Philippines	Malaysia
<i>Crazy Rich Asians</i> (2018)	Cut	-	-
<i>Pine Gap</i> series (2018)	Removed Entirely	Removed Partly*	-
<i>Put Your Head on My Shoulder</i> series (2019)	Removed Entirely	-	-
<i>Abominable</i> (2019)	Banned	Banned	Banned**
<i>Uncharted</i> (2022)	Banned	Banned	-
<i>Barbie</i> (2023)	Banned	- (Debated)	-

Only episodes of which the scenes depicting Nine-Dash Line

** After the refusal by the production company to cut the scene depicting the Nine-Dash Line

Crazy Rich Asians (2018)

Brief information: *Crazy Rich Asians* is a 2018 American romantic comedy-drama film directed by Jon M. Chu. It is based on the 2013 novel of the same title by Kevin Kwan. The film follows a Chinese-American economics professor Rachel Chu (Constance Wu) who travels to Singapore for the wedding of her boyfriend Nick Young's (Henry Golding) best friend Colin Khoo (Chris Pang). She meets Nick's family only to be surprised to discover they are among the richest in Singapore. Their love story turns into a potential conflict because of their class difference, for which Nick has tried to hide his actual wealth status from Rachel. Moreover, Nick is expected to stay in Singapore with their family to run his family's corporation, whereas Rachel loves her job as a professor in New York.

Figure 3.1



Source: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), 32:40

How the Nine-Dash Line is depicted: The film briefly features a map of the world showing the disputed South China Sea islands under Beijing's control. The controversial map is displayed on an expensive designer bag of all things.

Countries to respond: Vietnam.

The responses: The second-long clip was cut from the film's screenings in Vietnam. While the Nine-Dash Line did not actually appear on the bag, the Vietnamese censorship council claimed that a number of their islands were incorrectly shown under Beijing's control (Ichimura, 2022).

Pine Gap series (2018)

Brief information: *Pine Gap* is an Australian international political thriller television series that was released on Netflix and broadcast on ABC in 2018. The six-episode series is written and created by Greg Haddrick and Felicity Packard with Mat King directing all six episodes. The series was produced by Screen Time. The story revolves around the operations and the lives of personnel at the real-life Australian and American intelligence facility of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap (JDFPG) in the southwest of the town of Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia. It features an ensemble cast of Parker Sawyers as Gus Thomson, American mission director at Pine Gap, Jacqueline McKenzie as Kath Sinclair, Australian deputy chief of the facility, Steve Toussaint as

Ethan James, American chief of the facility, Lewis Fitz-Gerald as Rudi Fox, the American chief of intelligence operations, and Jason Chong as Zhou Lin, the executive for the Chinese state-owned mining company Shonguran. The TV series incorporates some geopolitical elements in its plot within a broader context of regional tensions, intelligence operations, and espionage.

Figure 3.2



Source: *Pine Gap* (2018), Episode 2, 14:06

Figure 3.3



Source: *Pine Gap* (2018), Episode 3, 53:09

How the Nine-Dash Line is depicted: The TV series briefly shows maps with the Nine-Dash Line in the second and third episode. The TV series touches upon the Nine-Dash Line issue as a part of its exploration of regional tensions and security challenges. However, it is both in the contexts of maritime claims in the region, in which the characters criticize China's claim over the waters in on-screen dialogue. The second episode tells that China claims the Ratu, a Malaysian survey ship, has crossed into Chinese territory in the South China Sea. The President of the United States supports Malaysia's right to freedom of navigation, angering China. Australia takes a more neutral side. The episode features the map depicting the Nine-Dash Line on the screens of a control room at the spy base. It is explained that the Ratu is not in Chinese territory, but in a "disputed territory claimed by China since 1948". The characters criticize China's claim over the South China Sea, stating that "according to China, it has been theirs since 3000 BC" and "China went to sleep for 100 years". They also refer to China's loss in the 2016 *Philippines v. China* court case. Chinese fighter jets are heading to the Ratu as the ship comes closer to the disputed Fiery Cross Reef, on which China built a naval base. The tensions between China and the United States worsen because China disable the Ratu with an EMP bomb. The United States maintains a position that the Ratu is in international water, in accordance with the law of the sea; whereas according to China, the ship is in Chinese territory. Similarly, the third episode tells that the President of the United States ordered USS Bartlett to undertake a freedom of navigation voyage through the South China Sea, which is going to pass inside the Nine-Dash Line, asking the Pine Gap to monitor all Chinese Navy movements.

Countries to respond: Vietnam and the Philippines.

The responses: In 2021, the TV series was removed from the content streamed by Netflix in Vietnam, following an order from the country's Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information (Pearson, 2021). The authority later released a statement that Netflix had angered and hurt the feelings of the entire people of Vietnam (Martinus, 2021; Pearson, 2021). Following Vietnam's measure, in November 2021, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board of the Philippines ordered Netflix to remove the episodes that featured the Nine-Dash Line, deeming it "unfit for public exhibition" after the country's Department of Foreign Affairs issued a complaint calling the line "illegal" and a "violation of Philippine sovereignty" (Ramos, 2021).

Put Your Head on My Shoulder series (2019)

Brief information: *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* (Chinese: 致我们暖暖的小时光; pinyin: *Zhi wo men nuan nuan de xiao shi guang*) is a Chinese television series airing from April until May 2019. It is based on the novel of the same name by Zhao Qianqian. The series follows Si Tu Mo (Xing Fei), an accounting student who wants to enter an advertising company and move into an apartment owned by Gu Wei Yi's (Lin Yi) mother. Unbeknown to both, their mothers were classmates who thought their two children would make a good match and set them up. Before their parents know it, the matched Si Tu Mo and Gu Wei Yi begin to fall in love.

Figure 3.4



Source: *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* (2018), Episode 9

How the Nine-Dash Line is depicted: The TV series briefly shows a map with the Nine-Dash Line in the ninth episode. The map is featured in China's weather forecast on CCTV-13. The Nine-Dash Line flashes on screen for roughly one second and is hard to make out. As a side note, CCTV (China Central Television) is a national television broadcaster of China, established as a propaganda outlet in 1958. CCTV-13 is a part of CCTV networks that serves as a 24-hour news channel. It is the biggest news channel in mainland China.

Countries to respond: Vietnam.

The responses: In August 2019, Vietnam successfully called for the TV series to be removed from Netflix for a second-long, blurry depiction of the dashes (Gotinga, 2021). The country's Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information released a statement that Netflix had angered and hurt the feelings of the entire people of Vietnam (Martinus, 2021; Pearson, 2021).

***Abominable* (2019)**

Brief information: *Abominable* is a 2019 computer-animated fantasy adventure film produced by DreamWorks Animation and Pearl Studio, directed by Jill Culton and co-directed by Todd Wilderman. The film follows the journey of a teenage girl named Yi (Chloe Bennet), who discovers a young Yeti on the rooftop of her apartment building in Shanghai. Yi names this magical creature Everest. Together with her friends, Jin (Tenzing Norgay Trainor) and Peng (Tsai Chin), Yi embarks on an epic adventure to help Everest (Joseph Izzo) return to his family in the Himalayas. During their quest, they have to be faster than the wealthy man Burnish (Eddie Izzard) who wants to capture Everest for his own purpose, and the fake zoologist who works with Burnish, Dr. Zara (Sarah Paulson).

Figure 3.5



Source: *Abominable* (2019), 00:10:13

How the Nine-Dash Line is depicted: Yi collects money from her various part-time jobs, such as walking dogs, babysitting, and cleaning restaurants. She saves money so one day she can afford to travel through China with her family. On her apartment rooftop camp, she makes a plan of what her journey would be, by drawing trip paths across China on a map of Asia. It shows various destinations that she intends to go to, including Buddha statues in Sichuan, the Gobi Desert, the Yellow River, and the Himalayas (which later are fulfilled by her and her friends' journey with Everest). In the scene, it is shown briefly that the map she draws on features the Nine-Dash Line. However, the film was simply depicting maps as sold in China.

Countries to respond: Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

The responses: The film was banned in Vietnam on October 14, 2019, ten days after its release, due to the appearance of the Nine-Dash Line in the scene (Nguyen, 2019). The Philippines and Malaysia also reacted negatively to this scene. Filipino lawyer Jay Batongbacal requested that the film be banned, while the Philippines' Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin Jr. thought it was better to cut the scene in question (PNA, 2019; Ritter Jr., 2019). On October 17, Malaysia ordered the scene be cut from the film through its film censorship board. However, after Universal refused to make the censor cut, the film was banned entirely in Malaysia (Ananthalakshmi, 2019). The following day, the Philippines' Movie and Television Review and Classification Board followed suit, also banning the film (AFP, 2019).

Uncharted (2022)

Brief information: *Uncharted* is a 2022 action-adventure film produced by Columbia Pictures, directed by Ruben Fleischer. The film is based on the popular video game franchise of the same name. It follows the protagonist Nathan Drake (Tom Holland) as he embarks on a daring quest after being recruited by Victor Sullivan (Mark Wahlberg), who previously worked with Nathan's brother Sam Drake (Rudy Pankow), in a race against corrupt billionaire Santiago Moncada (Antonio Banderas), mercenary leader Jo Braddock (Tati Gabrielle), and Chloe Frazer (Sophia Ali) to locate the legendary treasure from the Magellan expedition in the shipwrecks which is hidden in the Philippines.

Figure 3.6



Source: *Uncharted* (2022), 01:10:16

How the Nine-Dash Line is depicted: Nathan and Chloe find a map indicating the treasure is in the Philippines after unlocking a secret passage. Chloe betrays Nathan and leaves to take the map to Moncada. Moncada, Chloe, and Braddock's team depart in a cargo plane to find the treasure following the hint in the map. The film visualizes the team's travel from Barcelona, where they found the map, to the Philippines, on the island of Kiamba, where the supposed treasure is located, by the cargo plane flying over the globe. In the scene, it is briefly shown that the visualized globe features the Nine-Dash Line. The Nine-Dash Line is shown when the plane is flying from the Indochinese Peninsula to the Philippines before the plane lands on the island.

Countries to respond: Vietnam and the Philippines.

The responses: On March 12, 2022, the Vietnam Film Authority banned the film from distribution in the country for containing "illegal images" of the Nine-Dash Line (Mai, 2022). The film was due to hit Vietnamese theaters on March 18. On April 27, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board of the Philippines followed the suit after a request by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to ban the film's release, stating that the scenes featuring the Nine-Dash Line were "contrary to national interest" (Viray, 2022; Ramos, 2022).

Barbie (2023)

Brief information: *Barbie* is a 2023 fantasy comedy film directed by Greta Gerwig. Featuring the iconic Barbie fashion dolls by Mattel, it is the first live-action Barbie film after numerous computer-animated films and specials. The film follows the titular character Barbie (Margot Robbie) and her boyfriend Ken (Ryan Gosling) on a journey of self-discovery following an existential crisis after Barbie, who resides in the Barbieland, experiences malfunction because of her real-world owner Gloria (America Ferrera). Barbie and Ken embark on an expedition to the real world to meet Gloria and her daughter Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt) in order to repair Barbie's worsening condition, while Barbie and Ken are both being tracked down by the CEO of Mattel (Will Ferrell) after learning their presence in the real world.

Figure 3.7



Source: *Barbie* (2023)

How the Nine-Dash Line is depicted: On a night, Barbie develops bad breath, cellulite, and flat feet, all of which disrupt her usual routines. Weird Barbie, an outcast due to her disfigurement, tells Barbie she must go out from Barbieland and find the child playing with her in the real world to cure her afflictions. Weird Barbie shows the map of the 'real world' that Barbie would go through to find the child. Several media outlets pointed to the curved dashed line alongside "Asia" in the scene, claiming it represented the Nine-Dash Line. The *Los Angeles Times* described the particular image as a "map of 'the real world' [which] looks as if it's been drawn in crayon by a child" with a line of dashes "alongside the coast of what should be China". With the rising concerns over the alleged appearance of the Nine-Dash Line, on July 6, 2023, the film's distributor, Warner Bros. refuted these claims by issuing a statement explaining that the map in the concerned image is a "child-like crayon drawing", with the dashed lines depicting Barbie's journey from Barbie Land to the real world and was "not intended to make any type of statement" (Donnelly, 2023; Broadway, 2023).

Countries to respond: Vietnam and the Philippines.

The responses: On 3 July 2023, Vietnam banned the film, alleging that scenes in the film display the Nine-Dash Line map over the South China Sea (Reuters, 2023). The *Tiền Phong* reported that the Nine-Dash Line appears multiple times in the film (AFP, 2023). Vietnamese newspaper *Tuổi Trẻ* quoted Vi Kiến Thành, head of the Department of Cinema, as announcing that Barbie would be banned in Vietnam because it contained "the offending image of the Nine-Dash Line." The film was originally scheduled to be released in Vietnam on July 21.

When news of Vietnam's ban reached the Philippines, Senator Francis Tolentino, vice chairman of the Philippine Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, told CNN Philippines that Barbie may also be banned in the

country because it "denigrates" Filipino sovereignty (Brzeski, 2023). Senator Jinggoy Estrada called for the film to be banned over the alleged inclusion of the Nine-Dash Line. However, opposition senator Risa Hontiveros quipped "The movie is fiction, and so is the Nine-Dash Line", and suggested adding a disclaimer to the film instead of banning its release (Cayabyab, 2023). Senator Robin Padilla, chairman of the Senate mass media committee, suggested that the film producers must edit out references to the Nine-Dash Line or risk the film being banned.

On July 11, the Philippines' Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) concluded that there was "no basis" for banning the film as the map was simply "cartoonish" and that there was no clear nor outright depiction of the Nine-Dash Line, as the line in the film was "not U-Shaped" and had "eight dots or dashes" instead of nine (Abarca, 2023). The board gave the film a PG rating and allowed it to be screened in the country. However, they requested Warner Bros. to "blur the controversial lines to avoid further misinterpretations" (Bacelonia, 2023; Garner, 2023). Senator Tolentino said that he respected the MTRCB's decision, but expressed his dismay at it emerging a day before the seventh anniversary of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that declared the Nine-Dash Line had no legal basis on July 12, 2016 (Cayabyab, 2023). The film was released in the Philippines on July 19, 2023.

Conclusion

The Nine-Dash Line has been a significant geopolitical flashpoint, leading to territorial disputes between China and neighboring countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Cinemas such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Pine Gap* series (2018), *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* series (2019), *Abominable* (2019), *Uncharted* (2022), and *Barbie* (2023) have faced scrutiny and censorship in certain countries due to the depictions of the Nine-Dash Line controversy. This is seen as a promotion of China's controversial territorial claim in the South China Sea region. Affected countries respond to the cinematic depictions through public statements and diplomatic protests, raising objections to the cinemas' contents to seek support for their territorial claims and address concerns about the films' implications for their countries. These cases highlight the complex interplay between fictional media like films or cinemas and geopolitical issues. These show that cinemas that touch on sensitive geopolitical issues, in this case the Nine-Dash Line, can have numerous impacts on other countries involved in the particular issue, such as censorship measures and diplomatic tensions, as governments seek to protect their countries' best national interests and assert their stances on the dispute.

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