

# Reconstructing Chinese Nationalism and National Identity in Digital Popular Culture: A Case Study of My People My Country

**Abstract:** In this paper, we focus on investigating the discursive strategies appropriated and the new connotations of Chinese nationalism and national identity advocated in the recent Chinese national blockbuster *My People My Country* (MPMC). Relying on political discourse analysis as the research framework, we find that Chinese nationalism and national identity propagated in current age have shifted from traditional victimization and humiliation towards pride and happiness. To effectively propagate these new connotations, Chinese intellectuals draw on a myriad of acoustic and visual resources and disseminate political ideologies from two perspectives: propagating through emotionalization and entertaining through commercialization. Specifically, MPMC makers incorporate multimodal semiosis to construct an imagined Chinese national identity and achieve emotional mobilization. The presence of different entertaining elements de-politicizes the ideological persuasion and enhances propaganda effects.

**Key words:** Chinese nationalism, Chinese national identity, *My People My Country*, imagined community, entertainment

**关键词：**中国民族主义，中国民族身份，《我和我的祖国》，想象共同体，娱乐

## 1. Introduction

In October 2019, Chinese government issued a propaganda film *My People, My Country* (wo he wo de zu guo, henceforth MPMC) to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The movie comprises 7 vignettes, each of which features on a specific historical moment since 1949 when China was founded, and is directed by an individual director. It immediately became a hit and evoked strong emotions among both domestic Chinese citizens and Chinese diasporas overseas. The real time report by Maoyan (2020) indicated that MPMC is ranked in the top ten of highest-grossing films in mainland China. Meanwhile it was also released in overseas markets in over 40 countries in Asia, north America, Europe, Africa and Australia. Audience who went to the movie widely shared their

excitement and pride (Wang et al, 2019). Seeing its tremendous success, we could not help wondering why does this propaganda film cause such huge sensations in pan-Chinese community? What messages are sent through the movie? What constitutes “My People, My Country?” How is the new Chinese—the imagined community, being imagined by Chinese politicians and elite intellectuals? What actual effects does it have on audience? These questions are closely related to Chinese national identity and answers to them are integral to better understand how Chinese Communist Party (CCP) draws on digital popular culture as its new means of political propaganda and what new meanings of Chinese nationalism embodies in the current era when China is evolving into the second largest economy but faces ever severe challenges such as by China-US trade war and Hongkong unrest.

Bearing these questions in mind, we are interested in the discursive strategies employed by Chinese elites and in the specific connotations of Chinese national identity and nationalism in the age globalization. Inspired by the three-stages analysis for multimodal political discourse (Machin & Leeuwen, 2016), we accordingly fulfill our research goals at three different levels. First, in terms of the signifier—the audible or visible evidence, we pay close attention to specific discursive strategies and multimodal resources MPMC producers employed. Second, concerning the signified—the meaning, we take into intertextualities (Wodak et al., 2009) when interpreting semiosis that convey ideological implications, i.e., Chinese nationalism and national identity in our case. Third, we also accommodate the wider significance of discursive acts in MPMC by situating our analyses in the overall history and contemporary trends of Chinese nationalism and national identity.

While performing three-stage discourse analyses, we also conducted a small scale survey among 25 Chinese who study or work in Belgium and organized a focus group meeting. Specifically, surveys with 5 open questions were administered to research participants immediately after watching the film to ensure they still had fresh memories of the film, which is helpful for gathering rich data. The questions are designed to investigate participants’ feelings of this movie as well as which stories they liked/disliked the most. Reasons for their choices are also recorded. Afterwards, we organized a group discussion encouraging informants to share their thoughts and comments in more details. The whole discussion process was audio recorded. Two research assistants (one is PhD candidate of political communication studies and the other one is a PhD specialized in discourse analysis) were present during the focus group meeting to help note down key acts they observed. Incorporating survey and group

discussion into political discourse analysis permits us to investigate more than discursive strategies in propagandas; it encourages researchers to consider “the reception and recontextualization” (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 3; Chilton & Schaeffner, 1997) of discursive acts in MPMC.

It merits mentioning that here we choose MPMC as our study case because case study as a research approach enables researchers to generate in-depth and multi-faceted analyses on certain social phenomena (Crowe, et al., 2011), i.e., Chinese neo-nationalism and the way Chinese being imagined by intellectual elites, in this case. MPMC is chosen as the research subject out of two considerations. First, it surprises us that as an official political propaganda movie, it receives enthusiastic responses from both domestic Chinese as well as Chinese diasporas overseas (Yurou, 2019). Second, MPMC, despite being one movie, comprises of 7 different episodes, making it a rich data source for abundant analyses and convincing findings to be made.

## **2. Key Concepts**

### **2.1 Nationalism and National Identity**

National identity bases itself on the notion of “nation”, which, according to Anderson (2006) is “an imagined political community” (p.6). Group members of a particular imagined community share a common “we-feeling” and possess a strong sense of belonging. National identity thus can be defined as “that aspect of individuals’ self-image that is tied to their nation, together with the value and emotional significance that attach to the membership in the national community” (Gries, 2004, p.9). People who identify themselves of a national collectivity share common or similar beliefs, emotional attitudes and behavioral dispositions (Wodak et al., 2009). Scholars (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Cai, 2016) maintain that the advent of print and communication technology capitalism promotes the formation of national identity as they provide platforms for easily communicating common experience—the core element of national identity, with audience. Being a concept closely associated with national identity, nationalism is “the whole process of the growth of nations and nation states, sentiments of attachment to and pride in the nation, an ideology and language (or discourse) extolling the nation, and a movement with national aspirations and goals” (Snyder, 2003, p. 12). Snyder (2003) puts forward that nationalism presents itself in different forms across different areas, namely fissiparous nationalism in Europe, black nationalism in Africa, anti-colonialism in Asia,

politico-religious nationalism in the Middle East, popular nationalism in Latin America, melting-pot nationalism in the US, messianic nationalism in the former Soviet Union.

When it comes to Chinese nationalism and national identity, scholars (Fitzgerald, 1995; Gries, 2004; Gries et al., 2011) maintain that Chinese self-perception is heavily influenced by western colonialism and Japanese imperialism in the 20th century. Chinese vision of the “Century of Humiliation” makes aggrievance the integral part of Chinese nationalism (Gries, 2004; Barmé, 2009; Gries et al., 2011; He, 2018). Such “aggrieved nationalism” plays a critical role in historical Chinese revolutions by acting as a moving force (Wright, 1968; Townsend, 1992). In modern era, Chinese national identity and Chinese nationalism remain an outstanding feature of Chinese politics and society and fulfills various political functions, such as uniting the nation, and redirecting internal dissatisfaction to “to feign power in the diplomatic world” (Zhao, 2005, p. 76; Cai, 2016). Realizing the powerful role of Chinese nationalism and national identity, CCP has been attaching great importance on maintaining its tight grips on strengthening both ideologies by strengthening patriotic education of youth (Fairbrother, 2004), implementing strict censorship guidance (Shambaugh, 2017) on cultural artefacts and explicitly propagating through cultural means (Mittler, 2008). In particular, since the new millennium, the Chinese government has tapped into multimodal resources (Machin & Leeuwen, 2016) in its political communication and expanded propaganda sites to multiple platforms, such as CCTV Moon Festival Gala, Spring Festival Gala, mainstream films (zhuxuanlv dianying), cross-talks, TV drama series and among others (Veg, 2012; Ma, 2014; Cai, 2016; Shi & Liu, 2019; Wang, 2019).

## **2.2 Propaganda Films**

Films have been an important arena to send political sentiments and promote political beliefs. The British government is the among the first nations that realized and started to capitalize on the power of film during World War I when millions of British soldiers were dragged into the war and the UK was plagued with wide-spread dissident sentiments domestic (Reeves, 1983). The movies produced then were factual movies about the real experience of soldiers. British politicians expected to shape public opinions and win public support for the involvement in the war through cinemas. Nazi Germany during World War II and Soviet also extensively used feature movies, melodramas and newsreels to demonize their enemies, and/or glorify the cause of waging the war (Giesen, 2008; Smith & Lasswell, 2005; Imesch, Schade & Sieber, 2016). Interestingly, after the war, themes of German films changed to the re-construction of Germany

and extolment of the sacrifices, suggesting that at different times, films fulfill different ideological promotions (Wang, 2019). Besides those official and institutionalized political propaganda films, Hollywood movies, which have long been regarded the embodiment of commercial entertainment also carry political functions such as sending “propagandistic, historically-misleading or politically misleading” messages (Giglio, 2010, p.12). The typically repeating themes— “the triumph of good over evil, the responsibility of authority figures, the celebration of middle-class home life...” (Combs, 2013, p.10), and linear narratives allow Hollywood movies bring realistic experience and evoke intense emotions among audience, making themselves an ideal instrument for political propaganda.

Chinese propaganda films, also known as main melody films (*zhuxuanlv dianying*), refer to those films that explicitly propagate CCP’s leadership, and have undergone different stages. Initially, Chinese propaganda films (from 1949 to 1978) are under heavy influence of other communist propaganda systems and as a consequence, movies produced were highly centralized and institutionalized in publicizing party policies and coercing people toward the socialist cause (Yin, 1998). Such blunt ideologies promotion incurs wide-spread criticisms from both movie directors and movie goers. Therefore, Chinese film producers started to draw on theories from other field such as political public relations, modern communication and persuasion techniques in Western democracies (Brady, 2010; Wang, 2019). Features of commercial blockbusters from Hollywood, such as visual and narrative effects, as well as entertaining forms and elements are incorporated in modern Chinese propaganda films (Veg, 2012; Ma, 2014). This strategic shift from explicit propaganda to an integration of sophisticated political persuasion is further fueled by economic marketization. Ever since 1979 when market economy was introduced to China, film industry is also subject to the influence of marketization. Propaganda movies, therefore, have to make a compromise between being a political propaganda and a profitable cultural product (Cai, 2016; Wang, 2019). It is against this social background that commercialization and entertainment started to play an increasingly important role in mainstream movies (Shambaugh, 2017). Mainstream movies in the post-socialist era are more creatively plotted and political ideologies are more sophisticatedly transmitted. Such a shift in movie styles not only satisfies the need of audience in consumerism society but also entails a change in propagandistic strategy: from direct propaganda to ideological persuasion.

After familiarizing these core concepts related to China nationalism and national identity, as well as the development trend of Chinese propaganda films, in the following section we will proceed to data analyses, under the guidance of PDA. Specifically, corresponding to the three-stage approach proposed by Machin and Leeuwen (2016) and three dimensions advocated by Wudak and her colleagues (2019), our data analyses covers three aspects too, namely, contents, strategies, and ideologies hidden in discursive acts. By using PDA to implement these analyses, we aim to reveal the mechanism for constructing national identity (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002; Wodak et al., 2009; Leith, 2012) and to unmask Chinese ideological persuasions (i.e., Chinese nationalism and national identity) hidden in the multimodal semiosis of MPMC, thereby identifying the links between various resources used in MPMC and broader socio-political context under which the film is produced.

### **3. Analyses and Results**

#### **3.1 Contents**

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, MPMC consists of 7 stories, covering 7 monumental moments in Chinese history. In the first segment under the name *The Eve*, the storyline unfolds along how an engineer Zhiyuan Lin, acted by Bo Huang, managed to set up an automatic device for hoisting the Chinese national flag in the founding ceremony. The second story, *Passing By*, records the successful detonation of China's first atomic bomb from the perspective of a researcher who participated in the glorious project of testing atomic bombs and sacrificed his life for the work. Directed by Zheng Xu, *The Champion*, revolves around how a kid devoted himself in helping his neighbors to watch a smoothly live broadcasting of China women volleyball won the golden medal in 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Following temporal sequence, the fourth story zooms in on the backstage stories of Hongkong Handover Ceremony in 1997 from the perspective of a flag guard. Similar to the episode *The Champion*, *Hello Beijing* in general develops in a light and fun mood. It is about a taxi driver who gave away his treasured ticket to the opening ceremony of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to a boy from Sichuan whose father died in Wenchuan earthquake but had participated in the stadium construction when he was alive. The *Guiding Star* revolves around how a homeless brother from Inner Mongolia Municipality received generous help from their village leader and eventually witnessed the landing of Shenzhou 11 spacecraft. The last story focuses on a tomboy female pilot who is excellent at her work and sacrifices herself by giving a performing chance to her teammate in the Military Parade of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War in 2015.

The events included in MPMC are of landmark significance to China. For instance, the opening story featuring the founding of the PRC highlights China's origin as a new nation-state. Such an emphasis on the national origin constitutes one aspect of a narration or a nation and awakens national identity (Hall, 1996). The successful detonation of the first atomic bomb signifies China's arrival in the world stage (Barmé, 2009) while the 2018 Beijing Olympic Games epitomize China's globalization (Giulianotti, 2015). The rest stories are of similar importance in displaying China's soft power in military technology, competitive sports and people's wellbeing (Hou, 2019). Such selective assembling and reporting of the articulable and visible represents the characteristic of propaganda (Stockmann, 2010).

## **3.2 Strategies**

### **3.2.1 Propagating through Emotionalization.**

The most prominent feature of MPMC is its emotional mobilization of audience through constructing shared past (Cai, 2016; Yurou, 2019). Emotions are closely related to constructing nationalism and national identity (Demertzis, 2013; Heaney, 2013). Nationalist frequently demonstrates hate and anger towards the outside group but show strong support, affection and love to the in-groups (Scheff, 2019). Scholars researching the relationship between emotions and politics suggest that emotions play an integral role in developing "symbols and myths that socially create identities of people" (Kassab, 2016; p.7). In MPMC, both acoustic and visual resources are drawn on to construct a shared history. Such large presence of common memories evokes a myriad of emotions from audience who reported that they felt "proud", "touched", "nostalgic", "amazed", and among others.

*Background music and dialogue.* The employment of household music as well as a wide range of dialects comprises the most prominent discursive strategy for constructing Chinese national identity. The movie MPMC is based on a song under the same title *My People My Country* which was released in 1985 to celebrate the achievements of the ruling of Central Communist Party (Han, 2019). This music is taught repeatedly to Chinese students at primary and secondary school and at university years from 1990 till now. In a news report by New York Times, Lu Yingxin a Chinese stated that she had been singing the theme song "*My People, My Country*" over weeks since she watched the movie (Li, 2019). Lu's experience is an explicit evidence of the power of familiar elements. Originally the music was sung by Guyi Li, who is a famous Chinese vocalist. In this movie, Faye Wong was invited to perform this song in a breezy version, a typical style of hers (Fung, 2009). It is believed by some Chinese film

commentators (e.g., Zhang, 2019; Chen, 2019) that Wong's relaxed and feathery rendition forms a contrast with the passionate and forceful singing by Li. They further contend that Wong's version creates proximity among audience: her soft singing is the way ordinary people would sing by themselves in daily life—relaxing and breezy. In this way, the movie MPMC successfully evokes the shared memories of all Chinese people and at the same time shortens the distance between the nation and audiences.

Apart from this theme song, Chinese national anthem appears several times in the movie too, such as during the national founding ceremony in *The Eve* and in the handover ceremony of Hongkong. *Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China*, another “red song” that most Chinese grow up with is used as the background music too in the scene of the *Passing By* when the crowd celebrates the successful detonation of the atomic bomb. Another familiar background music is *Pearl of Orient* (dongfangzhizhu) by Tayu Lo, a singer from Taiwan. The name *Peal of Orient* refers to Hongkong to implicate its attractiveness. The music appears in the handover ceremony in *Going Home* when British national flag is replaced by Chinese national flag. The application of those familiar songs undoubtedly sparks strong emotions, such as nostalgia among audience, thereby helping “create and solidify a fund of shared memories and a sense of ‘who we are’” (Nashi & Scott, 2008, p. 309; Mattern, 1998). When their thoughts on which scene left them the deepest impression, one research participant in the question survey that “The minute the melody of *Pearl of Orient*, I can't help having tears.” This emotional and nostalgia response proves the effectiveness of CCP's endeavor in constructing the shared past and strengthening Chinese national identity.

Apart from the wide application of familiar music, another distinct cultural element capitalized on is various dialects spoken by multiple characters in different stories. According to *The Overview of Chinese Language and Characters* (2019) issued by the Ministry of Education, Chinese dialects comprise 10 types, including Mandarin, Jin, Wu, Hui, Min, Cantonese, Hakka, Gan and Pinghua Tuhua. Under each type it includes a set of sub-dialects. For instance, Mandarin, also termed as Northern dialect by some scholars (e.g., Yuan, 1983), has the highest number of speakers and subsumes eight varieties, including north-east dialect, Beijing dialect, Jilu dialect, Jiaoliao dialect, Zhongyuan dialect, Lanyin dialect, Jianghuai dialect and South-west dialect. In the movie, northern dialect is most frequently spoken as well.

Specifically, in *The Eve* the protagonist Zhiyuan Lin and his wife speak all their lines in a Nanjing dialect (a branch of Northern dialect), or a dialect from northern Jiangsu Province generally speaking. In the same story, typical Beijing dialect and accent appear too when an unknown character ensures the safety of climbing the flagpole. Northern dialect is also spoken in later story, like in *Hello Beijing*, *Going Home* and *Shooting Stars*. The main character in *Hello Beijing* is a local from Beijing, and he talks in a typical Beijing way—rather laidback, and with strong Beijing accent. The boy in *Hello Beijing* speaks Sichuan dialect, which is also considered as a branch of northern dialect (Ramsey, 1989). In *Going Home*, the captain for training the flag bearer also speaks Jilu dialect with his superiors and subordinates. *Shooting Stars* is based in Inner Mongolia where Shenzhou 11 landed and accordingly, both communication between the two brothers as well as the narratives by the younger brother proceeds in Jin dialect. In *The Champion* where the story is based in Shanghai, Wu dialect is present throughout the story when the neighbours watch the volleyball competition. Yue dialect, also widely known as Cantonese, is present in the movie too, that is, in the story *Going Home*, the watch repairer and his wife as well as members in Hong Kong army speak Cantonese. As for Xiang dialect, it appears when Chairman Mao announced the founding of People's Republic of China. Putonghua, the official communication language that originate from Mandarin, is used across whole 7 stories.

The employment of different dialects unquestionably works well in building a sense of diversity and inclusion. Audience who speak any one of the dialects in MPMC senses affinity. Responses from the questionnaire indicate that those dialects did bring nostalgic and homesick sentiments to the audience. For instance, one participant specifically writes that “although the dialect doesn't really sound authentic to me, I am still very touched when hearing them speaking my dialect. I am very homesick now.”

*Images.* Apart from the audial strategies, another distinctive characteristic of films that contributes to the powerful effect in conveying ideas and emotions is visual images (Chapman, 2000, Yu, 2008). Visual techniques such as featuring gun battles and explosion provide audience with vivid depictions of stories and allow them to empathize the experience of characters in the movie, which helps to evoke emotions (Wang, 2019). In MPMC there is a myriad of images featuring the grand scenarios of historical events, such as the military parade in Zhurihe, the explosion of the first atomic bomb and Hongkong police changing their badges after the handover ceremony, all of which are meaningful historical events only to Chinese

people who either grew up hearing about the news of them or learnt them from history books. Research participants indicate that these images left them with deep impressions, and they are very “touched” or “excited” to see them. One participant wrote that “I couldn’t help having tears the minute I saw Hongkong police changed their badges.” Such strong emotion is not a coincidence. Rather, it is a uproot of historical education either formally or informally. That is, the return of Hongkong has been an important part in Chinese history books and is regarded as a forward step towards China’s national unification, according to Chinese history book for junior high school students (The Return of Hongkong and Macau, 2018).



Image 1: Scene of atomic bomb denotation in *Passing By*



Image 2: Scene of Hongkong Army changing their hat badge in *Going Home*

In addition to those grand scenes, the constant re-appearance of Chinese national flags greatly contributes to constructing national identity too. Even in the three-minute trailer, the flag appeared 22 times at least. National flag, like national anthem, represents a crucial cultural vehicle that “captures collective values and sentiments” (Kemmelmeyer & Winter, 2008, p.806) and contributes to constructing national identities and maintaining national unity (Kolstø, 2006; Cerulo, 1993). The strong unifying power of national flags lies in the fact that they indicate a nation’s history and remind one’s membership of a particular group.

The specific semiotic meaning of national flags depends on the context. In MPMC, flags are used for fulfilling various political purposes too. For instance, the first story *The Eve* revolves around issues in making the first official Chinese flag and in hoisting it automatically. The red, a colour that is often associated with China, is omnipresent through the whole story—when calling for citizens to contribute all red cloth they have, repeated rehearsals of flag hoisting, and most important, on PRC’s founding ceremony. The nation flag here is strongly associated with national unity. Likewise, in *Going Home*, unsurprisingly the red flag appeared several times too especially during the handover ceremony when British flag was taken down, highlighting the difference of in-group and outgroup and thereby strengthening Chinese national identity and in-group solidarity. The presence of Chinese red flag can easily be found in other episodes as well: in *Passing By*, the screen is filled with red national flags when the crowd hears and celebrate the news that China successfully detonated its first atomic bomb (see Image 3 below); in *The Champion*, the screen is fully covered with a massive piece of the red flag when the little boy wants to give up holding the antenna and when Chinese female volleyball team won their first golden Olympic medal. In the first instance, the red flag is an embodiment of national pride. The same emotional sentiment is sent in *Hello Beijing* in which red flags appear during the Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony. Red flag in the second scenario is a suggestion of personal sacrifice and a loyalty to the CCP: subordinate personal interests to those of the general public, Dongdong’s neighbors in this case.

The repeated appearance of Chinese national flags is not futile work. Audience who participated in our survey were aware of Chinese national flags. During the movie screening, the projector malfunctioned and failed to present red colour. Everything red was shown vintage purple. After the movie, multiple viewers asked if there was a technological glitch as they were confused seeing Chinese national flags were not in red but vintage purple. This question suggests that flags as an important national symbol, draw people’s attention and contribute to identity construction.



Image 3: Scene of Chinese national flags in the national founding ceremony, *the Eve*

### 3.3 Commercializing through Entertainment

Exhibiting commercial features through entertainment explains why MPMC receives popularity among Chinese. Such entertainment is materialized through two ways. First, MPMC used a star-studded cast—a number of A-list prominent actors, actresses, singers, directors as well as some young and good-looking popular stars. For instance, leading stars of MPMC include You Ge, Bo Huang, Yi Zhang and Suxi Ren, all of whom are widely regarded as veteran performers and have high skills in acting in Chinese film industry. In the questionnaire, there are several responses complimenting the “good performance” of the actors mentioned afore. Faye Wong, a Hongkong singer who originally comes from Beijing and has been regarded as one of the most popular female singers among Chinese diasporas was invited to re-perform the theme song. Haoran Liu, Yuchang Peng and Yilong Zhu are newly emerging actors and especially popular among young girls for their attractive appearances. The participation of these celebrities exerts advertising effects on audiences (Knoll & Matthes, 2017) and thus guarantee artefacts’ profitability and potentially expand the scope of audience. Besides these commercial effects, hiring those celebrities also enhance the communication effectiveness (Basil, 1996).

Second, MPMC producers scheme several entertaining plots to attract audience’s attention and make the movie watching experience more enjoyable. For instance, in *One for All*, there is one scene in which the pilot and her boyfriend eat together. The boyfriend, who is dwarfed by his heroic and competitive girlfriend, complained that “you fly airplanes in the sky every day, but I...” The later part of the sentence is not finished but, in the theater, there was laughter bursting out. Movie viewers assumed the unfinished sentence would go as “I shoot airplanes everyday”

which is a euphemism for masturbation in Chinese. Such humor is compatible with propaganda and even beneficial to ideological promotion as amusing and entertaining elements in propagandistic artefacts dilutes and de-politicize the propagandistic value, and thus makes the ideological persuasion more hidden and acceptable (Cai, 2016). In history, the depoliticizing function of entertainment in political propaganda was also recognized by National Socialist German who widely drew on “German humor” in different cultural products in theater, cinema and print to foster social integration (Maziger, 2015). Participants in the focus group meeting mentioned that *The Champion* and *Hello Beijing* are among their favorite episodes because of the light mood and fun plots. The experience of “laughter in tears” is rare and enjoyable in watching mainstream films.

### **3.4 New Connotations of Chinese Nationalism and National Identity**

Although MPMC contains stories of 7 totally different topics, we sense highly consistent themes across the seven episodes, namely sacrifice, pride and happiness. In the first story, *The Eve*, the protagonist Lin faces great difficulties in ensuring a smooth functioning of the flag hoisting. There was no proper version of anthem that can be played for rehearsal. Neither did he can he find suitable cloth for making Chinese flags. The flag fixture on the flagpole broke down hours before the founding ceremony was inaugurated. To solve all these issues, Lin devotes himself completely to his work. His sacrifice is underscored by the appearance of his wife, who sent over his favorite snack Rolling Donkey and narrated “Lin hasn’t been home for a month.” Such devotion is rewarded with the well-functioning of flag hoisting in the nation ceremony day. The first story ends with a scene in which Lin jumps high (see Image 4 below), an indication of his joy.

Personal sacrifice is the most outstanding theme in *Passing By* too, that is, the main character left his fiancée in the beginning and even died for the atomic bomb research and test. The sadness can be felt through the whole story but there is still happiness presented. For instance, in one scene in which the detonation went successfully, many people waved Chinese flags and shout excitedly “China detonated the first atomic bomb!”. The protagonist, although extremely weak physically, was so surprised and happy to hear the news that he struggled to stand up and get off the bus to join the crowd to fetch a newspaper. Reading the news headline “China’s first successful detonation of atomic bomb”, he could not help having tears, which can be interpreted as satisfaction and pride.

In *The Champion*, the happiness and price overwhelm sacrifice but still, both are closely intertwined. The happiness is seen in multiple scenes: when community neighbors were watching the Chinese volleyball winning the first prize, and when the protagonist met Mei in 2016 in a live broadcasting room and when Chinese volleyball team won the first prize again in Rio Olympic Games. However, at the same time audience can realize that the joy of watching the volleyball competition came at an expense. The protagonist, little boy Dongdong, gave up bidding a farewell and confessing his love to the girl he had crush on. In the fourth story *Going Home*, orienting towards the exact time of handing over Hongkong back to China, the camera unfolds along two lines: one about the life of a watch fixer and the other one about the preparation work especially the endless rehearsals of the flagbearer, Zhutao, who practiced hoisting the flags wherever he is, even in his dorm, an explicit sacrifice of personal wellbeing for the benefits of the Party. The climax of this story arrived when Hongkong army changed their hat badge and the fireworks set off across whole Hongkong. Seeing the stunning view and remembering his hard life of migrating from mainland to Hongkong, the watch fixer shed tears for excitement and pride.

The fifth story, *Hello Beijing* is very similar to *The Champion* in terms of light and joyful atmosphere. The protagonist was in great excitement and happiness when he won the ceremony entrance ticket. The proud emotion is particularly transmitted through the eyes of the protagonist when the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympic Games was held with fireworks exploding in the sky (see Image 5 below). Meanwhile, the director here skillfully incorporates deep sadness by referring to the little boy's father who had contributed to constructing the Bird Nest Stadium but died in the Wenchuan earthquake. Although the boy's father did not sacrifice his life directly to the nation, the fact that he left his hometown Sichuan, which is over 1500km from Beijing, as a migrant worker to work in Beijing was a huge sacrifice. The story *Shooting Star* is typically teemed with happiness, pride and sacrifice too, despite its excessively romantic plots. Director Li devoted his life in relieving poverty and protecting two young men. Even knowing himself severely sick, he decided not to receive treatment and even lied to the police to protect the two homeless brothers who has stolen his money that was supposed to be used for saving his life. In a similar structure to *Hello Beijing*, the director of this episode managed to bring up another parallel storyline—the successful landing of Shenzhou Spacecraft, which was an exciting news to the two young men. They raced their horses to the landing site and even volunteered to offer some help.

The last story, *One for All*, as indicated in the name, is associated with personal sacrifice. The competent pilot who believes she is the most qualified candidate for the aircraft performance was at first upset with the decision of using her as a backup. She later on, had an opportunity to perform but decided to give it to her team member. Apart from this obvious sacrifice, there were other sacrifices she had made for her work too. For instance, her fiancé complained that they did not have many chances to see each other in three years since she joined the army. Very interestingly, when it comes to the scene in which she shed tears while watching her crew members performing in the sky, the foreground figures were exciting crowds who hailed the impressive performance. In this way, the director manages to portray personal sacrifice and at the same time present the happiness and pride of the crowd seeing the grand view of helicopters flying over Tiananmen Square.

The three common themes identified here constitute the connotations of Chinese nationalism in the current era. Sacrifice has long been at the core of CCP's political ideological goals: subordinating personal well-being to the overall benefits of the Party (Cai, 2016; Wang, 2019). Individuals are encouraged to sacrifice themselves to demonstrate their loyalty and allegiance to the state. Such self-sacrifice constitutes the primary narratives and leitmotif of propaganda art works in the 1990s.

The emphases on happiness and pride, however, represent new China nationalism as opposed to traditional Chinese nationalism that is deeply shaped by its humiliation history and thus embodies victimhood (Gries, 2004; Gries et al., 2011; Ma, 2014). In recent years, Chinese intellectuals and elites have freed themselves from decades-long focus on humiliation and start to acknowledge the achievements China has attained. For instance, *Wolf Warrior II*, a movie made in 2017 and enjoying the highest box office in mainland China (Maoyan, 2020), is considered as the latest embodiment of Chinese Dream and heavily promotes national pride by being a Chinese (Shi & Liu, 2019), as evidenced by the line "When you encounter any dangers overseas, don't give up and remember that there is a powerful motherland behind you." When it comes to the effects of these ideologies propaganda, responses from the research participants show that witnessing the achievements China has made all along the way since its founding to the grand military parade in 2015, audience explicitly remarked their excitement and pride after seeing "various achievement China has made today". Therefore, it can be concluded that the new Chinese nationalism of pride and happiness is promoted rather successfully. However, the perennial ideology of personal sacrifice is less accepted by audience. One research participant

explicitly pointed out that “The theme are cliché and dramatic. I don’t get touched by these hefty ideas easily.”



Image 4: Scene of Lin jumping up in *The Eve*



Image 5: Scene of Zhang cheering in *Hello Beijing*

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

After analyzing the discursive acts and ideologies embedded in MPMC, we can conclude that Chinese nationalism and national identity propagated in current age have shifted from traditional victimization and humiliation towards pride and happiness. Eller (1999) maintain that national identity construction relies on the past—the collective memories. Chinese national identity is constructed through building a common past that suffered from invasions from the West and Japan as well as backward domestic economic status. Humiliation and aggrievance thus constitute the core theme of Chinese nationalism in the early modern period (Callahan, 2004; Wang, 2008; Gries et al., 2011). Chinese intellectuals present the aggrieved past in cultural products a victimization sentiments (Cai, 2016). However, such humiliation emphasis is in recede and new connotations of Chinese nationalism have emerged, as evidenced by the themes of recent propaganda films. For instance Shi and Liu (2019) researched nationalist feeling and imagination work embodied in *Wolf Warrior II* and found that national pride emerges as the new Chinese nationalism. In our study, we identified similar patterns. Through

purposefully selecting and recounting the achievements attained since 1949, MPMC advocates happiness and pride from the perspectives of normal civilians—the protagonists of different stories, which contributes to instill nationalism among audience.

To effectively disseminate these new connotations of Chinese nationalism and national identity, MPMC producers situates the film within a spectrum of two poles—propagating through emotionalization and commercializing through entertainment. The dilemma between political and commercial purposes arises from the socio-political context in China. On one hand, propaganda is the lifeline of communist party (Brady, 2010). Especially ever since President Xi Jinping assumed the power, Chinese government attaches great importance to the role of mass media in promoting positive ideological propaganda. In this study, the propagandistic purposes of MPMC mainly involve emotional mobilization through presenting audience with shared historical memories. In narrating the common past, MPMC constructs national identity and foster national unity among domestic and overseas Chinese diasporas. On the other hand, despite strong political control from the Central government, film industry in China is privatized, meaning they are profit driven and market oriented. Movie producers have to cater to their audiences' taste to ensure box office performance, which “legitimizes, and indeed valorizes, entertainment films with commercial value” (Zhu, 2003, p.1). As a result, films produced in the post- socialist era are a mixture of “an ideologically controlled mass culture” and “a market- driven popular culture” (Cai, 2016).

After identifying the two poles, we then went into more details to investigate specific discursive strategies MPMC makers adopted in fulfilling to promote Chinese national identity while ensuring a profitable cultural product. Wodak and colleagues (2009) posit that national identity is closely based on common experience while the construction of national identities heavily depends on print capitalism (e.g., newspapers and books) (Anderson, 2006) and images (Cai, 2016). Shot in a highly digitalized era, MPMC fully utilizes communication technologies by adopting both audio and visual elements, ranging from dialects, household music to images. These acoustic and visual contents represent the shared memories among Chinese citizens and diasporas and form the basis of Chinese identity. Such discursive strategy, namely relying on cultural representations to promote national identity features ever increasing importance in the globalization context. Appadurai (1996) highlights that migration and mass media have transformed the traditional national state and that nations have become the repository of

cultural representations. Large-scale migration has made citizenship de-territorized, which is further fostered by the trans-national spread of images and sounds. That is, the globalization of cultural products based on audio and visual forms present national diasporas with shared memories and thus enable them to construct their imagined national communities regardless of geological or temporal limits. Machin and Leeuwen (2016) suggested that multimodality constitutes one of the primary characteristic of modern political discourse. Our survey of Chinese suggests that common historical and cultural experience presented in both acoustic and visual forms are widely shared by Chinese. Research participants are deeply touched when they perceive shared memories, as indicated by their feelings such as “nostalgia”, “homesickness”, “tears”, and “excitement” and naturally develops a sense of belonging and a national identity—being Chinese.

Meanwhile, in order to accommodate the consumerism in Chinese society (Cai, 2016) and avoid rigid political propaganda, MPMC also incorporates a high degree of commercialization, including using A-list Chinese actors and director, hiring good-looking young actors, and adopting Hollywoodized humorous plots. In the past, conventional mainstream movies have been criticized for their dull plots and haughty themes (Shirk, 2012; Cai, 2016), and consequently the propagandistic effectiveness is undesirable. Films makers and Chinese government already realized those disadvantages and adopted some strategies to change the outdated formats and topics in mainstream films. For instance, in *Founding of a Republic* (2009), a tribute mainstream film for the 60th anniversary of the founding of People’s Republic of China, Mao is depicted as a sympathetic person instead of merely being a great politician (Veg, 2012). Compared to *Founding of a Republic*, MPMC is more commercialized and entertaining, as evidenced by its star-studded cast and Hollywoodized film strategies, as aforementioned. Research participants in the questionnaire report that they are impressed with the acting skills of A-list stars, such as Bo Huang and You Ge, and enjoy such “laughter with tears” experience. In this sense, commercialization contributes to better propaganda effects and depoliticizes didactic politicization.

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