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**Digital Popular Culture as A Way to Promote Chinese National Identity in the Post-socialist Era:  
A Case Study of *My People, My Country*** ✓✓

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## **Digital Popular Culture as A Way to Promote Chinese National Identity in the Post-socialist Era: A Case Study of *My People, My Country***

Haiyan Huang, Ellen Van Praet

### **Abstract**

The recent Chinese national blockbuster *My People, My Country* (MPMC), a tribute to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of People's Republic of China, has sparked wide scale emotional responses in pan-Chinese sphere. Intrigued by why MPMC as a propaganda film is so successful, we focus on addressing three specific questions: **a)** Why is MPMC such a sensation among Chinese? **b)** What discursive strategies are used in promoting nationalism? And **c)** What are the effects of these discursive strategies? Relying on the political discourse approach, we find that MPMC situates itself on a spectrum of two poles—propaganda and entertainment. That is, MPMC draws on a myriad of audio-visual strategies including national flags and anthems, household music and a variety of dialects. It is by means of these shared cultural memories that MPMC construct their Chinese national identities and legitimize the leadership of Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While endeavoring to build the imagined community, MPMC makers also adopt a set of commercial elements to ensure its profitability and enhance propagandistic effects. By conducting a small-scale (25 samples) questionnaire survey, we find that the audience is particularly touched by cultural elements that they share affinity and familiarity with but are dissatisfied with hefty themes and illogical storyline displayed by certain episodes in MPMC. In summary, in the post-socialist era, Chinese government consciously and strategically draws on popular culture, such as films, to promote a strong national identity and de-politicize its ideological promotion through commercialization.

**Key Words:** digital popular culture, national identity, Chinese propaganda film, collective memories

### **1. Introduction**

Popular culture, such as films, music and books, not only entertains people but also represents an agent for disseminating political messages and forming “imagined communities” (Anderson, 2006), such as nations—the most common form of an “imagined community” (Nash & Scott, 2008; Herman & Chomsky, 2010). That is, political elite manage to embed their ideologies into cultural products, through which the populace is educated and indoctrinated. Further, thanks to the advancement of digital technologies, mass media such as TV series and films leads to “affective alliance” (Grossberg, 1997, p.44) based on shared feelings and stimulate “a de-contextualized sense of community, inviting audiences to share in the experience of a fictive

participatory ‘we’” (Finlayson, 2008, p.290). As nationalism upsurges in today’s era, it is thus important to investigate how digitalized popular culture is used to fulfill political functions and promote imagined national communities.

Films, one type of digitalized popular media product, has been an important arena to send political sentiments and promote political beliefs. The British government was 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 fulfill political missions (Giesen, 2008; Smith & Lasswell, 2005; Imesch, Schade & Sieber, 2016). The movies produced demonize their enemies, glorify the cause of waging the war. 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.

Over the past decade, Chinese film industry has experienced a brisk growth, making China the fastest growing film market in the world. It is expected that China will be the largest country in terms of box office revenue and audience number by 2020 (Strong revenue growth continues in China's cinema market, 2019). Echoing this ever-increasing popularity of films among Chinese, China’s central government has started to produce mainstream films as official propaganda sites to promote social rules or extoll the achievement of Chinese Communist Party. For instance, *Founding of a Republic* (2009), *Beginning of the Great Revival* (2011) and *My People My Country* (2019, MPMC hereafter) are representative mainstream blockbusters in post-socialist China (Veg, 2012; Cai, 2016). Among those national blockbusters, MPMC distinguishes itself from other mainstream movies: it evoked strong emotional responses in both domestic and overseas Chinese diasporas and made itself one of the top ten highest-grossing films in mainland China (Overall Ranking of Box Office in Mainland China, 2019). Intrigued by why MPMC as a propaganda film is so successful, we will particularly focus on analyzing the discursive strategies employed in MPMC and their effects in promoting nationalism among audience.

The article proceeds in five sections. In section one we will review concepts of nation and national identity, as well as the propaganda films in China. Section two reports research questions and methods used. Section three analyzes the contents and discursive strategies identified in MPMC. Effects of these strategies will also be investigated. In section five, we will discuss the findings from the analysis and consider them in the overall socio-political context of China, by which we aim to identify the pattern of propaganda discourses in post-socialist and post-reform China. The article concludes by summarizing the discursive strategies adopted in the mainstream film MPMC and the effectiveness of these strategies.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Nation and National Identity**

National identity bases itself on the notion of “nation”, which, according to Anderson (2006) is “an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p.6). In this imagined community, group members share a common “we-feeling” and possess a strong sense of belonging. They also believe in the uniqueness of their nation and uphold intranational uniformity while overlooking intranational differences, a demonstration of “narcissism of small difference” (Freud, 1930, p.243). Based on these conceptualizations, Gries (2004) defines national identity 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” (p.9).

According to Wodak and colleagues (2009), national identity is a product of discourse and is socially and discursively constructed, rather than being static. Anderson (2006) asserts that at very early stage the nation is perceived through languages and that the print capitalism, such as newspapers and novels, “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (p. 40). In other words, the emergence of printing technique contributes to forming new imagined communities. Similarly, other forms of electronic capitalism have similar or even more powerful effects in creating mass-mediated solidarity. For instance, digitalized mass media, such as films, music and televisions draw on the powerful effects of audio and visual media and disseminate cultural representations and meanings (Cai, 2016) to “a collective past, a collective present and future, a common culture, a common territory, and a homo nationalis” (Wodak, et al., 2009, p.4). When appreciating these digital cultural products, audience more often than not develop emotional identifications with characters in the films and further have a virtual feeling of a national belonging, both of which contribute to the construction of national identity. Moreover, as mass media is predominately operated at trans-national level, images and sounds can reach deterritorialized viewers (Appadurai, 1996) and immigrant diasporas. Presented with familiar culture landscape, immigrants are able to stay close touch with their national community and maintain their national identities.

### 2.3 Mainstream Films in China

Mass media propaganda has been a long-established practice for Chinese government. For instance, in China, there have been several official news outlets (e.g., *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *China Youth Daily*) owned or sponsored by the government. These platforms are believed as official agents for disseminating political ideologies (Stockmann, 2010). In the past decade, the popularization of televisions makes tv drama series, sketch comedies, Spring Festival Gala and Moon Festival Gala ideal arenas for political propaganda (Shirk, 2011; Cai, 2016; Wang, 2019). These cultural products not only are to entertain audience but also fulfill a myriad of political functions, including complimenting the achievements attained by CCP, legitimizing the effectiveness of CCP's leadership, and extolling the well-being of Chinese people (Cai, 2016). Among them, Spring Festival Gala is Chinese State's first successful experiment of 'indoctrination'— conveying ideological messages while being entertaining (Feng, 2016; Sun, 2007).

Since the new millennium, films have evolved into one of the most popular media among young Chinese (Leung & Lee, 2019). In the post-socialist era, Chinese films consist of three types, including propaganda, commercial and independent art movie. Indie movies are produced by independent directors and involve sensitive political topics. Usually they are popular in international markets but banned in domestic China. For instance, the recent Chinese film *My Son, So Long*, winning Golden Bear Award in Germany, is an example indie movie in that it critically probes into the tragical consequence of one-child policy. As for commercial movie, they are produced initially to cater to Chinese's entertainment needs during Spring Festival and to make profit without involving sensitive political topics (Veg, 2012). Examples of commercial movies include *Crazy Stone* (2006), *Mermaid* (2017), *Pegasus* (2019) and among others. When it comes to propaganda movie, scholars (e.g., Shirk, 2011; Cai, 2016) find that propaganda movies in China have demonstrated a shift from Soviet model to the recent Hollywood style. At the initial stage, 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 attracts wide-spread criticisms from both movie directors and movie goers. For instance, Jin Xie, a privileged veteran director in the early 1980s pointed out that

*[In the socialist works] characters are too often stereotypes and the plots are formulas . . . [In the United States] I saw several films which I thought were heavily political, but the difference is in how the political message was being conveyed, explicitly or implicitly. I think you should hide the political message behind rich portrayals of characters and an interesting story. The political message should be wrapped up. (cited from Silbergeld 1999, 196)*

Thus, movie producers started to draw on theories from other field such as political public relations, modern communication and persuasion techniques Western democracies (Brady, 2008; Wang, 2019) and utilize Hollywoodized style by integrating

“popular drama’s entertaining forms and elements” (Ma, 2014, p.528). This strategic shift from blunt propaganda to an integration of sophisticated political persuasion is further fueled by economic marketization. That is, ever since 1979 when market economy was introduced to China, film industry is also subject to the influence of marketization. Propaganda movies, also known as mainstream or main melody movies, 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, 2007). Mainstream movie in the pos-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 (ibid).

### **3. Research Questions and Method**

Based on previous research concerning propaganda movies and the distinctive success featured with MPMC, we will specifically look into three questions.

RQ1: Why is MPMC such a sensation among Chinese diasporas?

RQ2: What discursive strategies are employed to construct national identities?

RQ3: How effective are the strategies adopted?

We will use Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) in answering the first two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). PDA is chosen as the analytical framework because it is believed that political discourses tend to follow a certain distinct strategies and structures (van Dijk, 1997). In order to assess the effectiveness of the strategies employed to construct national identities (RQ3), We conducted a small-scale (25 samples) questionnaire survey among Chinese diasporas in Belgium to understand their feelings towards and comments on the movie. The questionnaire consists of 5 open questions investigating the participants’ feelings of this movie as well as which stories they liked/disliked the most. Reasons for their choices are also recorded.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 About the Movie**

Before delving into discourse strategies employed in the movie, it is important to introduce the stories in MPMC beforehand. MPMC is made to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of PRC. There are 7 vignettes in the film, each of which features on a specific historical moment since 1949 when China was founded, and each episode is directed by an individual director. 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 unfolds 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 70<sup>th</sup> 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 founding of the People's Republic of China undoubtedly is a significant event for people of Chinese origins. 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).

#### **4.2 Themes and Structures**

As a propaganda movie, MPMC not only embodies a myriad of diversities but witnesses highly consistent themes across the seven episodes, namely sacrifice and happiness. In the first story, *The Eve*, the protagonist faces great difficulties in ensuring a smooth functioning of the flag hoisting, including unavailability of the anthem, lack of cloth for making the flag, and the breaking down of flag fixture on the flagpole. He thus 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. Personal sacrifice is the most outstanding theme in *Passing By* too, that is, the main character left his fiancée in the beginning and even sacrificed his life to the atomic bomb research and test. The sadness can be felt through the whole story but there is still happiness presented. For instance, there is one scene when the detonation went successfully, many people waved Chinese flags and shouted 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. He could not help crying in reading the news headline "China's first successful detonation of atomic bomb." In *the Champion*, the happiness overwhelms 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 in watching the volleyball competition comes 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. 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 being touched. The fifth story, *Hello Beijing* is very similar to *The Champion* in terms of light and joyful atmosphere. The happiness is omnipresent, such as the moment when the protagonist won the ceremony entrance ticket and when the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympic Games was held with fireworks exploding in the sky. 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 of 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 and sacrifice too, despite its excessively romantic plots. Director Li devoted his life in relieving poverty. 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. 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, had an opportunity to perform but decided to give it to her team member. Apart from this obvious sacrifice, there were some minor sacrifices she has 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. However, her sacrifice of a relationship is rewarded with outstanding pilot skills. And her decision of giving up her performing opportunity to her team member was saluted by her male pilot colleagues, which can be interpreted as a respect. 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 sacrifice and at the same time present the happiness and excitement of the people from the protagonist's perspective.

With regard to the distinctive themes displayed in the movie, research participants did not show particular sensitiveness towards them and the ones that sensed those themes were less supportive. For instance, in the questionnaire, one audience wrote that “The themes are cliché and dramatic. I don’t get touched by these hefty ideas easily.” As for the story structures, audience showed more approving attitudes. For instance, they specifically pointed out that they were impressed by *Hello Beijing*, in which the director skillfully juxtaposed Beijing Olympic Games and Wenchuan earthquake. Opposite to the appraisals received by *Hello Beijing*, *Shooting Stars* was widely criticized for the awkwardness in combining the story of poverty-relief and Shenzhou landing.

### **4.3 Shared Memories**

As indicated in Anderson’s (2006) conceptualization of a nation, the identification with a specific nation is achieved by shared memories. National identity and collective historical past are intertwined as the former is sustained by remembering (Smith, 1999) while the latter is selectively presented to serve the purpose of constructing different identities. To be more specific, national identities, similar to other group identities, are forged by evoking people of their shared cultural and historical traditions, such as mother tongues, mythological past, shared ethnic histories and memories, “symbols of earlier generations of the mass of the chosen population” (Smith, 1999, p. 193). Such proximity between national identity and shared memories is more distinctive in the Eastern model which holds that nations are established by incorporating different ethnic communities (Kohn, 1962; Smith, 1986). The unification of nations relies on the same ancestry and cultural traditions and symbolisms. Here, the cultural memories are dynamic and subjective, which means that intelligentsia are able to recount the stories in a purposeful way. In other words, communal past can be selectively presented to construct different identities and fulfil a set of other political ends, such as strengthening shared solidarity (Belasco, 1983; Hunt & Benford, 2004) and legitimize leadership (Veg, 2012). In MPMC, the most distinctive characteristic featured with it is its wide adoption of shared memories by presenting them in the forms of audio, and images.

#### **4.3.1 Sound**

Apart from promoting personal sacrifice with happiness, MPMC employed a myriad of audial techniques to ensure better propaganda effects. The most prominent cultural content used in the movie is the recurring background music that is familiar to Chinese diasporas both domestic and overseas. The movie MPMC is based on a song under the same title *My People My Country* 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. 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. 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 an individual. 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. *No Communist Party, No 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. The application of those familiar songs undoubtedly sparks nostalgia and strong emotions among audience, which “helps create and solidify a fund of shared memories and a sense of ‘who we are’” (Nashi & Scott, 2008, p. 309; Mattern, 1998). Feedback from research participants corroborates the effectiveness of this strategy: responses indicate that the moment they hear those music pieces they cannot help having tears.

Apart from the wide application of familiar music, another distinct cultural element capitalized on is dialects frequently spoken by multiple characters in different stories. According to Yuan (1983), there are seven Chinese dialects classifications, including Northern, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Hakka, Yue and Mandarin. In the movie, northern dialect is most frequently spoken. Specifically, in *The Eve* the protagonist Zhiyuan Lin and his wife speak all their lines in northern dialect. 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, he talks in a typical Beijing way—rather laidback, and with strong Beijing accent. The boy 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 northern 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 are undertaken in Inner Mongolia 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 Yue. As for Xiang dialect, it appears when Chairman Mao announced the founding of People’s Republic of China. Mandarin is standard spoken Chinese and is used across whole 7 stories. If characters do not speak any dialects, they speak Mandarin. 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 make them nostalgic and homesick. For instance, one participant specifically writes that “although the protagonists don’t speak authentic dialects, I am still very touched when hearing them speaking my dialect. I am very homesick now.”

### 4.3.2 Images

Apart from the auidial 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 emotion from audience (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. In the questionnaire, participants of the movie screening 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: Hongkong Army changing their hat badge in *Going Home*, MPMC



Image 2: Screenshot of atomic bomb denotation in *Passing By*, MPMC

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 minutes 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. Very interestingly, the first story *The Eve* in MPMC 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. Nation flag here is strongly associated with national unity. Likewise, in *Coming Home*, unsurprisingly the red flag appeared several times too especially during the handover ceremony, highlighting the importance of national unity. 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; 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. Red flag in the first scenario is a suggestion of personal sacrifice: subordinate personal interests to those of the general public, Dongdong’s neighbours in this case. In the second scenario, 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.



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

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.

#### 4.4 Entertainment

Being entertaining is another reason why MPMC achieves the expansive success among Chinese. Such entertainment is attained through two ways. Firstly, MPMC hired 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). Secondly, MPMC producers scheme several funny 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, complains 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. Realizing the benign role of entertainment in political propaganda, National Socialist German widely draws on "German humor" in different cultural products in theater, cinema and print to foster social integration (Maziger, 2015). Incorporating amusing and entertaining elements in propagandistic artefacts proves an effective strategy as the humor dilutes and de-politicize the propagandistic value, which makes the ideological persuasion more acceptable. In the questionnaire administered, research participants suggested that *The Champion* and *Hello Beijing* are among their favorite episodes because of their light mood created. Audience specifically mentioned their experience of "laughter in tears".

#### 5. Discussion

Through the above analysis we can conclude that the most distinctive feature of MPMC lie in the fact that as a typical mainstream film, it situates itself within a spectrum of two poles—propaganda and 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, 2006). 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 constructing national identity and fostering 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). Despite the unsatisfactory effects in promoting sacrifice and happiness, MPMC proves a successful propaganda movie in the sense that it evokes strong emotional response from Chinese audience and construct Chinese national identities by drawing on collective memories.

When it comes to discursive strategies employed, we rely on PDA approach and find that MPMC producers draw on a myriad of discursive strategies to promote Chinese national identity while ensuring a profitable cultural product. Wodak and colleague (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 audio 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. In other words, 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. It is in the process of experiencing digitalized popular culture, consumers imagine a community they belong to, i.e., constructing their national identities (Street, 1997). Acknowledging the powerful function of digitalized popular culture in political communication, politicians and social elites increasingly capitalize on cultural artefacts, such as movies and music to exercise political power and accomplish various political purposes by sophisticatedly integrating their political ideologies in citizen's daily cultural consumptions. In the movie MPMC, CCP manages to remind Chinese diasporas of their national and cultural identity by awakening "the shared memories of Chinese people around the world" (Yurou, 2019). Our survey of Chinese suggests that common historical and cultural

experience are widely shared by Chinese. Research participants are deeply touched by the common history, as indicated by their feelings such as “nostalgic”, “homesick”, “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 displays a high degree of commercialization, including using A-list Chinese actors and director, hiring good-looking young actors, and incorporating Hollywoodized humorous plots. In the past, conventional mainstream movies have been criticized for their dull plots and haughty themes (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*, a tribute mainstream film for the 60<sup>th</sup> 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 reflected by the presence of newly arising young and good-looking stars, and Hollywoodized film strategies, as aforementioned. Research participants in the questionnaire report that they prefer light-mood episodes or stories whose protagonists are normal civilians to whom they can relate to. It thus can be concluded that commercialization depoliticizes didactic politicization and contributes to better propaganda effects. It is through the combination of manipulating common cultural history and utilizing entertainment strategies that MPMC brings both laughter and tears among audience.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we focus on investigating the discursive strategies appropriated in promoting a unified Chinese national identity in Pan-Chinese sphere. Specifically, we adopted a political discourse analysis approach to analyze the audio-visual strategies employed in the film and found that the recurring motives of national flags, household and emotional music and the variety of dialects are used to construct a unified Chinese national identity. It is by means of these strategies, which display shared cultural memories, that MPMC constructs an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983; Cai, 2016; Wodak, et al., 2009) in Pan-Chinese sphere and promotes nationalism in Chinese diasporas. While propagating political ideologies, MPMC makers also adopt a Hollywoodized movie style and hire celebrities with good reputations to cater to the audience’s taste and maintain an entertaining effect, both of which not only depoliticize the propagandist nature of the movie but also guarantee a profitable cultural product. As for the effects of MPMC in animating feelings and thoughts, we conducted a survey and find that audience is particularly touched by cultural elements that they share affinity and familiarity with. The survey also revealed that the participants are dissatisfied with some illogical plots as well as with the overromanticized theme of self-sacrifice. These research findings suggest that in the



post-socialist era, Chinese government consciously and strategically draws on popular culture, such as films, to promote a strong national identity by accommodating being propagandistic and entertaining simultaneously (Wang, 2019). Despite minor dissatisfaction, the incorporation of entertaining elements proves effective in disseminating political ideologies, as evidenced by the laughter and tears among audience.

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