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"Together, We Achieve the China Dream": Constructing Affective Chinese Nationalities in the Film *My People, My Country*

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Abstract

National blockbusters, such as *My People, My Country* (MPMC; 我和我的祖国, *wo he wode zuguo*), have gained a prominent position in contemporary Chinese nationalist propaganda. Based on a multi-modal discourse analysis approach, this paper will examine how narratives of "my country" and "my people" are affectively constructed through multi-modal resources in the MPMC to shape a unified Chinese national identity while consolidating the Chinese Communist Party's ruling legitimacy in the face of increasingly diverse challenges. Findings show three discursive strategies, involving interrelated affects: (1) selective and pride-based mythmaking of the glorious past; (2) conveying happiness through appropriation of (sub)popular culture; and (3) mobilising nostalgia by invoking cultural memories. To grasp possible effects of these affective strategies, we circulated questionnaires to twenty-five Chinese diasporas. Their answers suggest that, although these strategies evoke nationalist emotions, questions are also raised concerning conflicting interests between the collective and the individual, as well as the potential risks of affective nationalism.

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Introduction

Since President Xi Jinping's rise to power, Chinese nationalist propaganda has reached new heights, both in terms of variety and intensity. Among the many propaganda tools used, films play a crucial role. Statistics show that from 2013 to 2017, the box office receipts of China's mainstream films increased more than thirteen times, from 640 million to 8.48 billion Chinese yuan (*People's Daily*, 2018). According to Maoyan's (2023) real-time box office report, of the twenty highest-grossing films in China as of January 2023, more than half can be classified as main melody films – those that invigorate national spirit and national pride (Zhang, 2017), such as *Wolf Warrior II*, *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, *Wandering Earth*, *My People, My Country* (MPMC), and My People, My Homeland, to name a few. Their high box office, although partly resulting from the limited access to foreign films, as well as overall relatively high rating (7.5 out of ten) on Douban (豆瓣, *douban*) – the most trusted film and music reviewing website in China, testify to the Chinese state party's attention and efforts exerted in propagating official Chinese nationalism through films.

Of these national blockbusters, the present study focuses on MPMC to analyse the emotional narrative strategies. MPMC is of seminal importance, and an examination of this film can offer new insights into the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) political communication strategies. Released in October 2019, the national blockbuster MPMC, was to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Immediately, it became a hit and evoked strong emotional responses from both domestic Chinese citizens and Chinese diasporas (*Xinhua Net*, 2019). At the same time, it was also released overseas in over forty countries. As a dedication film (献礼片, *xianli pian*), MPMC is a typical main melody film, "extolling the virtues of the state, military and the Communist Party of China" (Teo, 2019: 321). Audience reactions confirm the effectiveness of these pride-based nationalist narratives. The audience who went to the film was reported to have strong emotions, such as excitement, pride, and laughing with tears. The phenomenal emotional responses from both audiences abroad and at home form a sharp contrast with the blockbuster's predecessors, such as *Founding of a Republic* (2009), *Beginning of The Great Revival* (2011), and *Great Campaign with One Hundred Regiments* (2015), which were poorly reviewed by the Chinese audience. Encouraged by the popularity among the local audience and Chinese diaspora, the state subsequently released another two sequels for the ensuing Chinese national holidays, *My People, My Homeland* (2020) and *My Country, My Parents* (2021). Its wide viewership, the strong emotions evoked, and the launch of sequels makes MPMC an interesting case for Chinese political communication scholars to look into the affective strategies employed.

Studies on MPMC treat the national blockbuster mainly in terms of the spectatorship (Yan, 2022), ideological messages (Sun and Yan, 2019; Li, 2020), and narrative perspective (Zhong and Zhang, 2020), rather than focusing on the role of emotions in constituting the new Chinese nationalism. While on the other hand, China's emotional work has continuously attracted academic discussions. Focusing on the national blockbuster *Wolf Warrior II*, Shi and Liu (2019: 1) argue the psychological dimension is a core element in the formation of Chinese national identities and especially, pride "constitutes the most essential emotional element in the formation of contemporary Chinese nationalism." Zou (2020) has also identified the prioritising role of emotionality in the party's soft propaganda of digital content. Xi's choice of the language of dreams as a political slogan "also points to an important shift—a recognition that the Party must return to arousing and inspiring emotions and using them as part of its political strategy" (Brown, 2022: 451).

This paper thus joins efforts to examine Chinese national identities from an affective perspective. By situating the film within Xi's China Dream discourse, we will analyse what and how feelings are constructed through selective memories and how they work in the formation of new national Chinese subjectivities. More specifically, we will examine how the narratives of "my country" and "my people" are affectively constructed through multi-modal resources in the MPMC to shape a unified Chinese national identity while consolidating the CCP's ruling legitimacy in the face of increasingly diverse challenges. Oral and written language is by no means the only or main way to disseminate CCP political messages. For example, in reviewing the visual means used by the party for photojournalism, TV news, animated cartoons, and online promotional videos, Chang and Ren (2018) found a "visual turn" in the CCP's propaganda since the Eighteenth National Congress in 2012. As the CCP uses increasingly diverse forms and genres of resources to convey political messages, it is equally, if not more, important to pay attention to the use of multi-modal resources used in the formation of affective Chinese nationalities. Therefore, in order to catch up with the trend and redress the text-centred research focus, we consider the visual and audio resources used in the top-down history-making process of the CCP to form new Chinese subjectivities.

Second, we also address the audience reactions to the party-state's affective attempts at persuasion. As argued by Wodak (2009: 3), the political is

> far broader than that in common usage, and not only concentrates on the language of the powerful elites, but also includes discursive acts which […] involve power or its inverse, resistance […] in many different contexts, including non-official and informal ones.

The inclusion of audience emotional responses is important in that it recognises nationalism is more than a process of construction and that the actual effect on audience uptake is an integral part of the nationalist agenda. By including audience's reactions, we are better able to locate the emotional power and dilemmas in CCP's nationalism promotion through affects.

The paper starts with a brief review of the transformations as well as continuities of the state party's propaganda under Xi's leadership to provide an overall political background

for the official propaganda MPMC. In particular, we zoom in on the political slogan of China Dream that conflates "the language of fact and feeling" (Brown, 2022: 445). The methodology section outlines the research methods used and elaborates on our survey of the reception of the film. The analysis pays specific attention to three affective strategies used in the film: selective and pride-based mythmaking of the glorious past, conveying happiness through appropriation of popular culture and subcultures, and mobilising nostalgia by invoking personal cultural memories. While discussing these discursive affective strategies, we also reflect on their (in)credibility and the emotional dilemma of the political discourse of the China Dream.

Propaganda in Xi's Leadership

The Chinese government has long recognised the importance of gaining public consent and uses cultural means to convey hegemonic political messages. Cultural institutions such as films, exhibitions, theatrical performances, TV dramas and documentaries, etc., have been widely used for ideological campaigns (Cao et al., 2020; Ma, 2014). Despite the efforts made, CCP communications have been accused of being cumbersome and rigid, tending to use dismissive and formulaic language that appears aloof and ossified not only to the masses, but also to inner-party cadres (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018; Marinelli, 2018). For example, *Founding of a Republic* (2009), a tribute film to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, and *Beginning of The Great Revival* (2011), which celebrates the CCP's ninetieth anniversary, were criticised for their lack of consistent storylines (*China Time*, 2011) and tedious plots, such as the post made a netizen named Kuzimama (库兹妈妈, 2020). To avoid direct bad reviews, the film does not show or allow any rating and comments on Douban. Such controlling measures show that the political establishment is very concerned about negative comments and the growing gap between the official discourse and the people. As early as 2005, Liu Yunshan (2005), then director of the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee, noted young generation's disinterest in political news, and speeches by political leaders. The same concern was echoed in 2015 by Li Keyong, then deputy director of Xinhua's All-Media Service, who said in an interview, "it is difficult for young people to accept abstract political themes … they want fun, they want joy" (*Associate Press*, 2016).

This heightening awareness among officials of the undesirable propaganda effects underscores Chinese officials' aspiration to enhance nationalist sentiments among Chinese young people. Especially, Xi's leadership has witnessed stylistic diversification and content modernisation of the propaganda systems. For example, the Ministry of Education (*Xinhua Net*, 2016) has issued documents urging Chinese government agencies to use new media technologies for patriotic education. It is common for official CCP communications agencies such as *People's Daily* and *Xinhua Net* to have accounts on social media or platforms of user-generated content. Meanwhile, the CCP has used a variety of new media genres for its propaganda, such as animated politics and rapping music videos, to effectively convey political

messages. In 2013, the official institution "Studio on the Way to Rejuvenation" (复兴路上工作室, *fuxinglu shang gongzuoshi*) was established to promote the "new type mainstream media" promoted by Xi (Qin, 2019). Since its establishment, the studio has produced numerous political cartoons to celebrate the CCP's achievements. One of them, "The Thirteen What," composed of a group of cartoon characters singing the praises of China's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, attracted the attention of several Western mainstream media outlets, such as *The New York Times* (Forsythe, 2015) and *The Atlantic* (Fallows, 2015) that credited it for guiding the digital transformation of CCP propaganda. Also, as argued by Lams and Zhou (2023), bottom-up participation in nationalism is evident in youth-appealing memes produced by young female fans of pop stars (饭圈女孩, *fanquan nuhai*). For example, it has been alleged that the "little pink" community (小粉红, *xiao fenhong*) inspired the state to reappropriate visual images to idolise the Chinese nation, a claim that stigmatises Chinese women (Fang and Repnikova, 2018).

Alongside the changes enabled by new media technologies, new discursive resources have also emerged. The CCP's official top-down communication in the Xi era is characterised by a pragmatic nationalism that emphasises people's livelihood (民生, *minsheng*) (Cao, 2014). Soft propaganda processes containing more subtle ideological information, such as artistic works, entertaining and depoliticised commercial elements, gaming and a storytelling strategy, were also employed (Brown, 2021a; Ma, 2014; Nie, 2013). The stylistic shifts can also be found in Xi's political speeches. Unlike Hu Jintao, who rarely shared anything personal, Xi often shares stories about himself when he served in the Northwest countryside and tends to use more emotional registers than Hu (Brown, 2021b). On Chinese social media, images often appear of Xi as a "family man" who cares for and loves his wife, Peng Liyuan, and an ordinary person waiting in line at a local restaurant, carrying his own tray and eating steamed buns, like so many of the Chinese citizens he governs.

Although the present-day CCP's nationalist propaganda is not a complete departure from practices under the previous Chinese leadership in terms of ideational messages, it is especially the style and the context that make for the difference. Therefore, in the next section, we will investigate Xi's political slogan "China Dream" to describe the socio-political context within which affective Chinese nationalities are formed. Attending to the shifting context thus can offer us insights into the challenges perceived by the Chinese government and possible new turns in its propaganda.

The Affective Political Discourse of China Dream

After decades of economic development since the reform and opening up in 1978, material conditions in China have improved, leading to more complex social structures and increased individualism among the younger generation. Overall, the Chinese population is more atomised than before. This diverse and complex composition is also reflected in the individual narratives of the MPMC, as we will discuss later in this article. Faced with the need to reconcile individualism and collective nationalism, Chinese political

communication has revised its old propaganda style and adopted new strategies to address potential societal tensions and new state-society dynamics. As Brown (2022: 450) notes, the major challenge for Xi and his colleagues is to "find the best language to encourage, and exploit, this pride, and to allow Chinese people to feel rather than just know about their country's achievements."

In a 2015 speech, Xi went on to say that "the China Dream is the people's dream." Connecting the nation and the people in a common dream is a powerful rhetorical strategy in Xi's speeches (Lams, 2023). While the people may feel addressed as individuals who can pursue their own dreams, the meaning of "people" (人民, *renming*) is primarily to be understood in a collective sense. And even if Chinese citizens understand the "people's dream" as alluding to their individual dreams, the individualism granted to them is conditional, since it should be controllable by the party-state, as embodied by the character of Leng Feng in *Wolf Warrior II*. Despite his pronounced individualism, Leng's pursuit of individual development is subordinated to his sentimental attachment to a Chinese national identity, that is, he prioritises his mission to protect Chinese citizens. Thus, the seemingly individualistic China Dream is essentially collectivised in the sense that the dream of the individual is subordinate to the collective dream of national integrity and strength.

Trying to reconcile individualism and collectivist nationalism, the China Dream constitutes a highly affective endeavour. The option of the "dream" not only inculcates people with the way how to think, but also guides them "how they feel" (Brown, 2022: 438). Although such a strategy of emotional governance has been a continuous strategy by the CCP, it took on a non-salient role in the Wen and Hu eras (Brown, 2021b). Since Xi's accession to power, emotional mobilisation is again elevated to a high level, in different forms and with new content, that is, the emphasis on national pride and collective happiness stemming from the realisation of the China Dream. The sentiments promoted in earlier official Chinese propaganda once were characterised by humiliation resent and anger generated by depicting the failures of modern China. The depiction of invasion by Western imperialists in modern history used to be a common theme in both TV dramas and films (Callahan, 2015). Formerly, when positive emotions such as pride and hope were part of the official discourse, like at the time of the Hong Kong handover in the 1990s, these emotions were dialectically produced with an emphasis on recovery from past mistakes, past humiliation, and future-oriented aspirations of Chinese politicians. In Xi's era, as China has made significant socioeconomic and military progress over the past seven decades since the founding of the PRC, the Xi leadership views contemporary China as a dream fulfilled, inviting "far bolder thoughts and emotions" (Brown, 2022: 439). History based on humiliation is rewritten and replaced with pride, happiness, excitement, and sometimes nostalgia (Brown, 2022; Carrai, 2021). Meanwhile, ordinary Chinese citizens' desires and efforts are taking on a central role in Chinese political propaganda, which is different from the Maoist emotional work that emphasised the collective and state-oriented efforts. Emotional mobilisation in Xi's leadership thus adopts a humanistic approach (Xie and Zhou, 2021).

Theoretical and Methodological Observations

Given the complexity of the dialectical relationship between discourse and social reality, in that discourse both constitutes and is constituted by social reality, there have been different strands within critical discourse studies. There are different approaches in which researchers focus on different aspects of their relationship, from a stronger focus on the macro-level of social structures to the micro-level of linguistic expressions. Despite this diversity, they share key research questions about the way the social world, including its subjects and objects, is represented and how truth claims are created. Wang (2017) categorises the representations of social practices into three types, namely thematic, evaluative, and cultural. Among them, the thematic representation is concerned with what political ideologies and policies are represented, which is helpful to expose the new emotional registers associated with the China Dream, that is, the concrete characterisation of the China Dream in MPMC.

So far, scholars have identified various components in the narratives of the China Dream, such as the chosenness–myths–trauma (CMT) complex (Wang, 2018). The dream has been described as a revised version of past sentiments, such as trauma, glory, and amnesia (Carrai, 2021). "The past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs, 1992: 40). MPMC is a top-down historymaking purposefully (re)constructed to serve present needs when the overall context has shifted significantly in contemporary Mainland China. The questions then arise as to how this historiography is constructed to serve the present, and how this is achieved via multi-modal discursive strategies? In exploring the answers to these questions from an emotional dimension, we foreground the role of emotions in constituting national identities and apply the Foucauldian approach to discourse to examine the hegemony of the CCP in constituting particular truth regimes.

We use a multi-modal approach to discourse analysis to uncover which and how emotions are constructed in MPMC in the formation of new Chinese subjectivities. According to Blommaert (2005: 3), "discourse … all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and developments of use." This means that in addition to language, there are a variety of "different materials and 'meaning resources' that people use to create and distribute meaning signs" such as "[i]mage, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack, and 3D objects" (Jancsary et al., 2016: 182). In this article, we address not only the linguistic features, but also the audio and visual elements used in MPMC. As we will show later, both the visual images, the soundtrack, and the dialects spoken by the characters are important strategies for arousing the audience's emotional response.

The analysis was operationalised as follows. While watching the episodes multiple times, we traced textual instances of affective language and other sociolinguistic properties of discursive engagement with the public, such as the use of dialects. Additionally, while paying special attention to the auditory and visual effects, we mapped every signal of emotional involvement. Given the importance of triangulation in qualitative research, we also distributed a small-scale questionnaire during the film screening and

organised a focus group meeting with twenty-five Chinese diasporas. The questionnaire contained five open-ended questions and was administered to the research participants immediately after the film screening to ensure that they still had fresh memories. The questions were designed to elicit participants' feelings about the film, and to find out which stories they liked or disliked the most and the reasons why. We then organised a group discussion in which informants could elaborate on their thoughts. The inclusion of questionnaires and group discussion in a political discourse analysis allows us not only to examine discursive strategies in propaganda, but also to consider "the reception and recontextualization" (Wodak, 2009: 3) of a nationalist discourse articulated in the film MPMC.

Analysis

Following the emotional observation by Brown (2021b; 2022), Carrai (2021), and Shi and Liu (2019), we also note three distinct strands of emotion either embodied in or evoked by MPMC. The three main affective strategies we found are: (1) selective and pride-based mythmaking of past glories, (2) conveying happiness through appropriation of popular culture and subcultures, and (3) mobilising nostalgia by invoking personal cultural memories. The common denominator of the seven vignettes in MPMC is the focus on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in various fields such as sports, poverty alleviation, national sovereignty, military strength, and space technology. These pride-oriented narratives outweigh the old nationalist discourse of humiliation and suggest a new emotional connotation of official Chinese nationalism. Second, compared with previous mainstream films, MPMC incorporates more (sub)popular cultural elements to increase its appeal to young Chinese. The inclusion of depoliticised (sub)pop culture undoubtedly arouses audience enjoyment which in turn is a part of the Chinese Dream. What seems to be a depoliticised approach is in fact part of the nationalist agenda and in essence utterly political.

The following sections start with outlining the storylines in the MPMC's nine episodes and then take a deeper look at each of the three strategies. The film consists of seven stories covering seven key moments in Chinese history, and each episode was shot by a different director, making the film an omnibus. The first segment, called *The Eve*, tells how engineer Lin Zhiyuan, played by Huang Bo, succeeded in developing an automatic device for raising the Chinese national flag at the PRC founding ceremony in 1949. The second story, *Passing By*, depicts the successful detonation of China's first atomic bomb in 1964 from the perspective of a researcher who participated in the atomic bomb testing project and sacrificed his life for it. The fleeting and departing relationship between him and his fiancée is highlighted. *The Champion*, directed by Xu Zheng, revolves around how Dongdong, a boy, helps his neighbours watch the live broadcast of the Chinese women's volleyball team winning the gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. The fourth story, *Going Home*, follows the chronological sequence and focuses on the behind-the-scenes stories of the 1997 Hong Kong handover ceremony from the perspective of a flag guard. The fifth episode, *Hello Beijing*, which echoes the

light and fun mood of *The Champion*, is about a cab driver who gives away his treasured ticket to the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics to a boy from Sichuan whose father was involved in the construction of the stadium but died in the Wenchuan earthquake. The sixth story, *The Guiding Star*, shows how two homeless brothers from Inner Mongolia received generous help from their village chief and eventually witnessed the landing of the Shenzhou 11 spacecraft in 2016. The final story, *One for All*, is about a tomboy female pilot who is excellent at her job and sacrifices herself by giving her teammate an opportunity to perform at the military parade celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the victory in the Second Sino–Japanese War in 2015.

Selective and Pride-Based Mythmaking of Glorious Past

The events that occur in MPMC are crucial to modern China. For example, the opening story, which depicts the founding of the PRC, emphasises the emergence of China as a new nation-state. The reference to the noun phrase "My Country," included in the name of the film, is the PRC, which was founded by the CCP in 1949. More importantly, the birth of the PRC dates back to "twenty-eight years of revolution and 20 million deaths," as Lin Zhiyuan recounts in the first story. This historical reference closely links the birth of the PRC to 1921, when the CCP was founded. In this way, this episode constructs the CCP as the guardian of the national interest and the founder of modern China, thereby equating the party with the country and further reinforcing the legitimacy of the CCP's political leadership. Such emphasis on national origin also represents an aspect of nationalism and serves to arouse national identity (Hall, 1996). The successful detonation of the first atomic bomb, as recounted in the second story, signifies China's arrival on the world stage (Barmé, 2009), while the 2008 Beijing Olympics epitomises China's globalisation (Giulianotti, 2015) and embodies China's soft power. The other stories are of similar historical significance and show China's rising power in the fields of military technology, competitive sports, and its victory over foreign powers.

Through these linear narratives of individual events, the film transforms "the fluidity of social processes into essentialist and natural conditions," creating "a mystifying effect on the various meanings of political and socio-historical reality" (Lams, 2019: 449). Take, for example, the episode of *Going Home*. The handover of Hong Kong is portrayed as an event that is expected by everyone involved, from the army of the PRC, the Hong Kong local army, to the Hong Kong residents. In the film, Sister Lian, the wife of the watch repairman and also the Madam of the Hong Kong Army, smiles brightly as she tells a customer, "the Hand-over ceremony, it's a big deal," indicating her support for the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty. Concerns and uncertainties about Hong Kong's future are absent. Similarly, in the story *Hello Beijing*, the cab driver gives the boy his ticket when he learns that the boy's father died in the Wenchuan earthquake. At the end of the film, MPMC shows the firefighters who participated in the rescue operations after the Wenchuan earthquake singing the theme song "My People My Country." Thus, the earthquake is not portrayed as a disaster, but as an event through which "my country" (China) becomes strong and united, and "my people" (Chinese) are portrayed

as friendly, loving, and supportive of each other. Queries aboutany form of human agency or responsibility for this disaster are missing. Media reports and investigations by experts, as well as suspicions that substandard architecture played a major role in the earthquake, have been censored and silenced. By side-lining the hardships and potential corruption that could challenge the regime, MPMC selectively constructs the story of the Wenchuan earthquake as a unifying force and proof of "Chinese power" to promote "a sense of cohesiveness" among all Chinese and create a "mythically" unifying national identity" (Lams, 2019: 453).

One feature that distinguishes the mythmaking strategy from that of earlier official discourses is the overall focus on pride, which effectively overshadows the often-cited victim narrative. In MPMC, the seven enumerated events represent the achievements that have been made since the founding of the PRC. The way pride is highlighted in each story provides a sharp contrast to the narratives of humiliation that are at the core of earlier official Chinese nationalism (Gries, 2004; Ma, 2014). Traditionally, Chinese propaganda discourse appeals to national pride and constructs a shared identity by utilising the painful history of the past. However, as reflected in the MPMC, nationalism under Xi shifts from discourses of imperialism and colonialism suffered in both pre-modern and modern China to narratives of achievement under CCP leadership. These pride-oriented representations have given Chinese nationalism a new connotation and currently form the core of the party-state's propaganda works. *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), for example, which topped the Chinese box office until the release of *The Battle of Changjin Lake* in October 2021 (Maoyan, 2022) is considered the latest incarnation of the China Dream and strongly promotes national pride in being Chinese (Shi and 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." In MPMC, the stories unanimously focus on discussing China's domestic achievements in various fields since the founding of the PRC, without portraying foreign countries as the hostile Other. This self-gaze also demonstrates self-confidence and pride cultivated by Chinese political elites in the contemporary era.

Quite interestingly, in view of the fact that the grand topics chosen in each episode are the mainstay of official propaganda narratives and are usually framed as indisputable truths, MPMC innovatively shifts the conventional top-down perspective in Chinese propaganda films to ordinary Chinese people-based narratives. The film echoes the official proposition that the China Dream is actually the Chinese people's dream, as emphasised by Xi. Take the episode *Passing By*, which revolves around the topic of China's first atomic bomb, for example. Instead of focusing on grand and hefty discussions or the high-level politicians' decisions, the episode zooms in on human interest features, such as the engineer's love story and his patriotic death. By taking the perspectives of different individuals as the protagonists, MPMC promotes multiple nationalisms that span across a variety of fields and represents the CCP's effort to "rebalance the relationship between the goals of the party-state and those of the individuals" (Gallelli, 2019: 8). Such historiography of ordinary people proves effective in arousing proud Chinese subjectivities in the spectators. In the group discussion, when

asked which vignette, they liked best, several participants mentioned that they were proud to be Chinese. Responses included,

> I am proud of the improvement and power of my country. China is changing and so are we. I hope foreign friends can see the change and rise.

> The founding of the country, the atomic bombing, the volleyball championship, the return of Hong Kong, the Olympic Games and the military parade show well the 70-year history of the People's Republic of China, they are all very vivid and real.

These reactions show the crucial role that emotions play in constituting the "we" of Chinese nationality. In other words, those who share the feelings co-construct a sense of shared Chinese identity. When the film ends, the strong emotions remain. This shared sentiment of pride constitutes an important element of the collective identity of being Chinese. The echo of pride in the audience indicates that the linear history presented in MPMC is taken as a truthful representation of facts.

However, the emotional response is also contingent. Promoting the grand narratives through individual accounts also reveals the tensions between the individual and the collective. Although, in each episode of the film, happiness and pride are emphasised from the grand perspective of being a Chinese, personal sorrow and sacrifices permeate the film as well. We find that not all target audiences in our research are convinced. The achievements are not gratuitous, but constructed with the emotions of personal suffering and sacrifice. For example, in *Passing By*, the protagonist Gao Yuan laid down his life for atomic bomb research, and in the story *The Champion* with pronounced happiness, joy, and laughter, even a young boy like Dongdong is expected to make a sacrifice. Dongdong gave up the opportunity to say goodbye and confess his love to the girl he was in love with. This tension is also clearly perceived by the interview participants. Although several of them stated that they are proud to be Chinese after seeing China's various achievements, the perpetual ideology of personal sacrifice is less palatable. One study participant specifically stated, "to be honest, I don't really like the idea of too much self-sacrifice. I have never been impressed by that kind of narrative."

Conveying Happiness Through Appropriation of Popular (Sub)Culture

In parallel with promoting proud sentiments, MPMC also actively draws on popular culture and subculture to convey a sense of happiness to viewers. First of all, the film embodies a distinctive depoliticised and entertaining mood that is an important reason for its popularity. The main actors of MPMC include Ge You, Huang Bo, Zhang Yi, and Ren Suxi, all of whom are veteran actors and actresses and have been praised in the Chinese film industry for their acting skills. Rising young stars with a large fan base such as Zhou Dongyu, Zhang Zifeng, Liu Haoran, Chen Feiyu, Zhu Yilong, Peng Yuchang, and Han Dongjun are also in the cast.

Take Zhu Yilong for example. Zhu graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 2009, but remained unknown until 2018, when he participated in a web series called *Guardian* (镇魂, *zhenhun*) and starred as Shen Wei. Adapted in 2018 from Priest's novel of the same name, the series tells the story of a detective and a professor (played by Zhu) who work together to investigate supernatural phenomena. The original is a danmei novel – "popular romance that portrays idealized homoerotic relationships between physically attractive male figures" (Feng, 2009: 2). Although the romantic relationship between the two male protagonists in the series was intentionally downplayed by the director, it stands out and ultimately contributes to its nationwide popularity (Hu and Ge, 2023). Statistics shows that by the end of the show was released, its official Sina Weibo account had one million followers and there were 2.7 billion views of its finale (Ng and Li, 2020). The success of the show and its main character, Zhu, is largely due to support from the *danmei* (耽美) subculture circle. The inclusion of Zhu in the MPMC lineup is powerful evidence that the CCP dynamically integrates online subcultures into its propaganda system.

Another trace of the incorporation of popular culture into CCP political communication can be found in the linguistic features of the film's script. There are several instances where roles in different episodes use expressions from the internet or popular culture. For example, in *Hello Beijing*, when the protagonist Zhang Beijing won the ticket to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, he said: *wai rui hai pi* (歪瑞嗨皮) and *niubai gelasi* (牛掰格拉斯) to express his mood of excitement. *Wai rui hai pi* is a transliteration of "very happy" in Chinese characters to mimic the sound of the English phrase as pronounced by Chinese speakers of English with a very strong Chinese accent, replacing the consonant "v" by "w" and the vowel in "happy" by a diphthong. This mimicking expression creates a humorous effect and is generally only used by young Chinese in their private lives, such as when chatting with friends or posting on social media. In this film, this funny expression fits very well with Zhang's image: the cab driver keeps embarrassing himself in front of his family and friends.

The Chinese subtitle *niubai gelasi* (牛掰格拉斯), which is translated into "so badass" in the English subtitle is made up of two parts, "niubai" and "gelasi". "Niubai" is a euphemism of *niubi* (牛逼). The literal meaning of *niubi* (牛逼) is the cow's vagina and figuratively means "badass," as the English translation of this line in the film shows. The same phrase appears in the episode *One for All*. When the protagonist Feng Xiaoran, a teenage girl, watched Shenzhou 11 landing, she shouted "niubai" (translated as "awesome" in the English subtitle). Her father immediately scolded her, "What did you just say?" to criticise the coarse language. The expression serves to depict a vivid image of Zhang and Feng: both are rather easy-going and carefree people. At the same time, it also serves to create an affinity with the young audience, who are the main consumers and also the main target audience for Chinese patriotic education. "Gelasi" comes from the online game World of Warcraft and is also a transliteration of the English name Gluth. In the game, Gluth is the third boss in the Abomination Wing of Naxxramas and has an insatiable appetite (Rokman, 2020). He can devour an entire army to heal his decaying body and grow new flesh. These characteristics make him a very powerful

character in the game and therefore gamers use Gluth to refer to fearsome and first-class people or phenomena. The use of this expression in the film is aimed at the audience that likes to play online games. In China, the online gaming industry has been growing in recent years, and by 2021, there are about 666 million online gamers, and over 80% of Generation Z plays mobile games (Beijing Youth, 2021). Such a large group of young people again overlaps with the target of CCP propaganda. By using the term "gelasi" as a communication strategy, the director of *Hello Beijing* expects to make the audience laugh while diluting the propaganda flavour.

This is not the first time the CCP has resorted to popular or internet-based expressions in its political communication. In Xi's New Year's speeches in 2015 and 2016, he used popular words and expressions such as *manpinde* (蛮拼的, spare no effort) and *dianzan* (点赞, thumbs up), *pengyouquan* (朋友圈, circle of friends), *shijie name da* (世界那么大, the world is so big), etc., to enhance the fun and appeal of official political discourse. Of these listed expressions, both *manpinde* and *shijie name da* were among the most popular internet slang in 2014 and 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2014, 2015). These expressions, which are popular among young people, are well suited to arouse their interest, as evidenced by the laughter of the young Chinese audience upon hearing *niubai gelasi* during the film screening. However, the strategy of increasing audience numbers through young and attractive actors and actresses who have a large fan base can be risky, as it can trigger fandom nationalism. According to Liu, fandom nationalism promotes "love for your nation, just like you love an idol" (Liu, 2019: 125). "Apply[ing] what they have learned from celebrity worship to their relationship with the nation," adherents of fandom nationalism view "the nation as a 'transitional object' between internal and external reality" in order to communicate with the outside world and create their own identity (Liu, 2019: 141). Thus, the real motivation behind their endorsement of the nation is self-expression, through which they gain social recognition, rather than a true love for their country (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2019).

Mobilising Nostalgia of the Past by Invoking Personal Cultural Memories

Another prominent feature of MPMC is the mobilisation of the audience's personal nostalgia through the use of household music and a variety of dialects to construct a shared but also individualised past (Cai, 2016). The film name MPMC is based on the song of the same name, 'My People, My Country', sung by Li Guyi, a famous Chinese singer, and released in 1985 to celebrate the country's achievements under the rule of the CCP. In this film, Faye Wong, widely regarded as a Chinese diva and known for her cool image, was invited to sing this song in her typical breezy manner (Fung, 2009). Some Chinese film commentators note that Wong's relaxed and feathery performance contrasts with Li's passionate and powerful singing (e.g. Zhang, 2019). They also feel that Wong's version creates proximity/affinity with the audience: her soft singing is like how ordinary people would sing in daily life – relaxed and breezy. By using this music as the theme song, MPMC seeks to evoke the common memories of all Chinese people. At the same time, it dilutes the political intention of this song and repackages itself as

modern and non-ideological thanks to the participation of star Faye Wong. Besides this title song, the Chinese national anthem also appears several times in the film, such as during the national founding ceremony in *The Eve* and at the Hong Kong handover ceremony. Similarly, "No Communist Party, No New China" (没有共产党就没有新中国, *meiyou gongchandang jiu meiyou xin zhongguo*), a red song that most Chinese grew up with, is used as background music in *Passing By* when the crowd celebrates the successful detonation of the atomic bomb. *Coming Home* features another red song 'Pearl of the Orient' (东方之珠, *dongfang zhizhu*) by Tayu Lo.

Since the founding of the PRC, red songs have been used as propaganda tools in both elementary and high schools (Li and Yan, 2019). Janata et al. (2007) noted that music plays an important role in evoking emotions due to "the idiosyncratic associations that people have formed between particular songs and events in the past" (Barrett et al., 2010: 401). The nostalgic feelings associated with music are, in turn, a means for propaganda communication and the successful ideological uptake (Grossberg, 2014; Ho, 2018). The use of these familiar songs in film undoubtedly elicits strong nostalgia and thus helps to create and "solidify a fund of shared memories and a sense of 'who we are'" (Nash and Scott, 2004: 309). In a *The New York Times* report (Yuan, 2019), Lu Yingxin explained that she had been singing the theme song 'My People, My Country' for weeks since she saw the film, which clearly shows the power of red songs. When we asked our interviewees for their general thoughts and comments on the film, one of them answered that "the theme music fits the film and is used really well. The background music of 'Pearl of the Orient' is also used very well." Another participant stated, "The moment I heard the melody of 'Pearl of the Orient,' I could not help but cry." These strong emotional reactions cannot be separated from past experiences. In other words, the songs evoke in these respondents' moving memories of the past when they heard those songs. The strong and long-lasting impact that the patriotic songs have left on the recipients proves the effectiveness of the CCP's efforts to construct a common past and strengthen Chinese national identity. Nationalism, then, is the lived experience and daily memories of individuals and groups (Liu, 2019).

In addition to the discursive resource of the red songs, MPMC also capitalises on various dialects in the different stories. According to the "Overview of Chinese Language and Characters" published by Ministry of Education (2017), Chinese dialects comprise ten types, including Mandarin (官话, *guanhua*), Jin (晋), Wu (吴), Hui (徽), Min (闽), Cantonese (粤, *yue*), Hakka (客家, *kejia*), Gan (赣), and Pinghua Tuhua (平话土话), with each type containing a number of sub-dialects. In the film, northern dialect is the most commonly spoken. In *The Eve*, the protagonist Lin Zhiyuan and his wife speak all their lines in a Nanjing dialect (a branch of the Northern dialect). The typical Beijing dialect also appears when an unfamiliar character provides security protections for Lin to climb up the flagpole. The northern dialect is also spoken in later stories, such as *Hello Beijing*, *Going Home*, and *Shooting Stars*. The main character in *Hello Beijing*, a Beijing native, speaks in a manner typical of Beijing – rather laidback, and with a strong Beijing accent. The boy Dongdong in the episode, speaks the Sichuan dialect – a branch of the Northern dialect (Ramsey, 1989). In *Going Home*, the captain in

charge of training the flag bearers speaks Jilu dialect (冀鲁) – a branch of Mandarin, with his superiors and subordinates. *Shooting Stars* is set in Inner Mongolia, where Shenzhou 11 has landed, and, not surprisingly, both the communication between the two brothers and the narration of the younger brother are in the Jin dialect. In *The Champion*, where the story is set in Shanghai, the Wu dialect is present throughout the story as the neighbours watch the volleyball competition. The Yue dialect, widely known as Cantonese, is found in the story *Going Home*, where the clock repairman and his wife, as well as members of the Hong Kong army, speak Cantonese. The Xiang (湘) dialect – a branch of Gan, emerges when Chairman Mao announces the founding of the PRC. Putonghua, the official language of communication that originates from Mandarin, is used in all seven stories.

Although earlier propaganda films also made this attempt, they were mainly limited to Mao's Xiang dialect (Veg, 2012). The inclusion of different types of dialects in MPMC creates a sense of realism in the audience, increases sympathy, and most importantly evokes nostalgia. From the responses to the questionnaire, these dialects bring about nostalgic feelings and homesickness in viewers. For example, one participant wrote, "Although the dialect does not really sound authentic to me, I am very touched when I hear them speak my dialect. I feel very homesick now." But this strategy may not be effective for every viewer, because many young Chinese speak only Mandarin, especially those growing up in cities. Rapid urbanisation is also forcing rural children to move to cities, significantly reducing the number of those who can speak dialects. Moreover, the fact that dialects and languages of other ethnic minorities are absent throughout the film also implicates that the Chinese nation is presented as the Han nation. The intended language diversity essentially comes down to Han centralism and further contributes to Han hegemony in Xi's authoritarian leadership.

Discussion and Conclusion

Inspired by the distinct emotional responses of audiences to the film MPMC, in this paper, we focus on exploring the affective construction of Chinese subjectivities in Xi's second term, by analysing the uses of multi-modal discourses, such as music and visuals, and the sociolinguistic strategy of employing various dialects. As a form of official propaganda, MPMC selectively constructs Chinese history as a linear and successful path of achievement, progress, and rejuvenation to inspire nationalistic feelings of pride, happiness as well as nostalgia. MPMC embodies the process of "achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalisation of the nation, and the people's happiness" (Callahan, 2015: 221). This focus on achievement reflects the political discourse of the China Dream, which aims to improve the material conditions of Chinese society and is also about awakening the Chinese spirit and an invincible national pride based on the glorified Chinese tradition. By telling stories along the theme of achievement, MPMC portrays the Chinese dream as fulfilled and gives new emotional registers to China's national subjectivities and identities (Brown, 2022). These new nationalist connotations contrast with earlier propaganda, which extensively invokes the humiliating past, and are

consistent with the themes of pride and happiness contained in MPMC's seven stories, as described above. This narrative of "a strong nation with happy citizens" forms the core of Chinese identity according to Chinese political and cultural elites. It is therefore not surprising that our study participants often express positive sentiments such as "proud of my nation," "confident," "rich country and strong nation," "proud to be a Chinese," "together we will achieve the China Dream," etc. Fanning nationalist sentiment serves to legitimise sustained CCP rule and the party is thereby constructed as the guardian of Chinese interests. Compared with earlier propaganda promoting the idea that the CCP will rejuvenate the Chinese nation, intended primarily for the Chinese people, the MPMC goes a step further: it confidently shows both the Chinese people and the world that the CCP has already made visible progress in modernising the Chinese nation in various fields, including military technology, competitive sports, and people's well-being (Hou, 2019).

However, the deeply affective nationalist discourse in MPMC is not without any underlying contradictions. The contingency of the China Dream narrative is worth a deeper discussion. As analysed above, such feelings as pride, happiness and nostalgia are accompanied by personal sacrifices made by the individual Chinese. The concomitance of happiness and sacrifice shows that while individual dreams are encouraged, the collective China Dream has a higher priority. When the two conflict, individuals are expected to sacrifice their personal gains for the sake of the nation. This inherent tension between the individual and collective dream is difficult to resolve. Although strategies such as embedding popular culture and emotional mobilisation help to disguise and blur the tension, the call for self-sacrifice is essentially a cliché and may be ineffective for Chinese youth who are being taught to be self-reliant and self-responsible in neo-socialist Chinese society (Hizi, 2019). Even for those who are touched by the stories, the question is to what extent they are willing to give up their benefits for the sake of the country, or whether their appreciation of self-sacrifice is based more on a romantic imagination.

If we compare MPMC with previous main melody films, we find that it distinguishes itself from its counterparts because of its strong appeal to sentiments of pride, happiness, and nostalgia in constructing Chinese national identities. The film's high box office and relatively high rating on Douban also attest to the success of playing up the emotions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that MPMC is beyond criticism. On Douban, its rating stands at 7.5, but this figure may not be trustworthy. There have been numerous reports that film ratings and reviews on Douban are subject to commercial manipulations, such as hiring people to post fake comments (Han, 2015). Feedback from our research participants includes both mild and harsh criticisms, such as "the consistency (of different stories) should be improved," "achievements in rights development should be included," "some plots are not reasonable and lack credibility," "too emotional and crafted, which spoils the film experience for me," "too many slogans and a lot of formalism," etc. These negative comments show some limitations of the emotional work done in MPMC. This does not mean the Chinese youth, critical of the government, does not display intimate feelings towards the nation (Fong, 2004). Critical attitudes do not exclude emotional engagement. In our analysis of MPMC, we also find that Chinese youth who have a deep attachment to the nation can also be critical of the values and

identity promoted in official propaganda. Laughter and tears are real emotional responses, but it begs the question to what extent the emotional appeal alone can be successfully mobilised in support of the party-state. Furthermore, what about the uncontrollability of public emotional response and the possibility of it backfiring in ways that the CCP's political leadership is challenged?

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