

How the National Flag, As a Cultural Symbol, is Used to Evoke Emotion in Chinese Main Melody Films

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Abstract

Main melody films have been a vital part of China's film genre map. A widespread understanding of main melody films is that they are films that can express the mainstream political culture, show the spirit of the nation and the times, and reflect the country's dominant ideology (Xue, 2020; People's Daily, 2017). Ideology refers to a collection of ideas, including common perceptions of things, beliefs, assumptions, and views of oneself (Martin, 2003). In more than thirty years of development, main melody films have made many adjustments on how to reach a larger audience and make the audience accept the ideas conveyed by the film more effectively. Evoking emotions through cultural symbols has been treated as a common technique, and the national flag is one of the most often used cultural symbols in this type of film. This paper analyzes the value and applications of the national flag as a cultural symbol in Chinese main melody films from the perspective of creation. It argues that the national flag, as a cultural symbol, can help main melody films to evoke emotions effectively with its close connection to people's everyday memories. It will first discuss the transformation needs of current Chinese main melody films, then analyze why the national flag can effectively arouse the audience's emotions, and finally list three common ways of using the national flag in main melody films by taking specific films as examples.

Keywords

Chinese Main Melody Films; National Flag; Audience; Cultural Symbols.

1. The Significance of Chinese Main Melody Films and the Challenges They Currently Face

Main theme films in China developed from patriotic films (Xie, 2020), and they are usually instructed and distributed by official government departments. In 1987, the China Film Administration proposed "Promoting the main theme and advocating diversity" (Liao, 2019), advocating film practitioners to create films and television works that promote positive ideas and have educational significance. The Founding Ceremony of PRC (Li & Xiao, 1989) is regarded as the beginning landmark of Chinese main melody films.

The film is a modern art form that can represent and reflect reality through realistic visual and audio effects (Bordwell et al., 2020). Compared with written text and radio, the form of the film can immerse the audience to a more considerable extent in the diegesis depicted in the film by manipulating the visual and auditory effects. With the increasing social influence of film and television over decades (Xue, 2020), main melody films and television works have become increasingly significant for promoting dominant ideologies. The representations in film and television works could affect people's rational cognition and emotional orientation towards real life. Representation here refers to the "way in which someone or something is portrayed or depicted in media" (Danesi, 2009).

From a domestic perspective, main melody films aim to promote people's understanding and recognition of the country's current core values and positions and to enhance the audience's sense of national identity by evoking collective memory. Audiences are expected to draw inspiration from the historical events represented in the films and gain energy from the stories of famous people (Liu & Huang, 2021). Different historical periods have corresponding demands for main melody films. For example, at the beginning of China's reform and opening up, by telling the story of a real-life figure, the film *Jiao Yulu* (Wang, 1990) inspired the young generation of that time to devote themselves to nation-building despite the hardship. From a foreign perspective, the film effectively presents the country's image to other countries and improves its cultural soft power (Ding & Cai, 2021). Excellent films with a wide distribution range can help a country hold the right to shape its international image. Stories told by people who have witnessed them are not necessarily more truthful or objective, but culturally, they may reduce misunderstandings and stereotypes. In general, main melody films help the country to present itself and explain itself to the audience they reach.

Films have artistic and commodity attributes. As economic globalization continues to develop, many excellent foreign films have flooded into China's film market (Nakajima, 2016). The themes of films tend to be diversified, and people have more options to choose from (Xue, 2020). Regarding the artistic attributes of films, the images of the characters in main melody films often have the problem of being flat and lacking individuality, which is rooted in the expression form of Chinese traditional drama (Liao, 2019). However, Chinese audiences' tastes of theatrical works had a tendency of shifting from traditional aesthetics to dialectical aesthetics in the past few decades (Liao, 2019). They increasingly appreciate the multi-faceted nature of characters shown in films. As main melody films had not responded to the changing aesthetic orientation of the audience, they gradually lost their appeal to the audience. Considering films as commodities, the box office is the most direct feedback of their commercial values. In the last three decades, most of the themes of main melody films were serious and cliched, and their lines mainly were political and didactic, which could not meet people's entertainment needs during their free time (Qin & Yang, 2014). Therefore, the audience would not favor them, and the box office tended to be low. As main melody films did not reach the audience, they neither achieved their social benefits nor brought economic benefits.

The previous status of main melody films calls for a transformation. Improving the quality to meet the audience's expectations and emotional demands is an effective means of increasing the market appeal of films (Liu & Huang, 2021). Since the 21st century, two apparent attempts have been made at the creation stage of Chinese main melody films. The first is to cast a large number of young actors who have a regular fan base, as in the case of commemorative tribute films such as *The Founding of the Republic* (Han & Huang, 2009) and *Beginning of the Great Revival* (Han & Huang, 2011). These main melody films capitalized on the commercial attributes of the actors, allowing for a guaranteed box office and effectively expanding the reach of the film. However, this approach often sacrifices the artistic value of the film. Introducing too many characters in a limited time means that most characters cannot be shown in depth (Xue, 2020). At the same time, many of the actors do not fit their roles. The watching experience becomes a process of "counting the stars". The audience's attention is distracted by identifying the actors, making it difficult for them to immerse themselves in the plot, and therefore unable to empathize with the work. As a result, this approach has fallen out of favor with the public in recent years. Another attempt is the episodic films like *My People, My Country* (Chen, et al., 2019) and *My People, My Homeland* (Ning et al., 2020). This type of film is able to accommodate more stories within a limited duration and have the opportunity to tell the stories of ordinary people while conforming to the requirements of the theme, connecting personal dreams and emotions with the fate of the country (Zhao, 2020). Compared with macro narratives, the ordinary characters in this type of film make the audience feel less distant and easier to empathize with

(Liu & Huang, 2021). Although the episodic films also suffer from criticism as causing aesthetic fatigue, they have implications for main melody films to reach audiences, namely by presenting things from the everyday lives to open up the emotional channel between the audience and the characters.

2. The Value of the National Flag as a Cultural Symbol in Chinese Main Melody Films

One of the essential tasks of Chinese main melody films is to enhance the domestic audience's sense of national identity. National identity means that individuals subjectively consider themselves to be part of the national community (Xue, 2020). The sense of identity is not innate to citizens but needs to be purposefully constructed. Anderson (1985) has defined the nation as an "imagined community." The media is an essential approach for people to feel oneness among other community members (Anderson, 1985). Main melody films aim to associate the representations of the country with positive emotions so that audiences would continue to have a positive impression of their national identity and then be willing to cater to that identity actively. Through films, dominant values and ideologies are also reinforced in people's minds, becoming natural, correct, and unquestionable.

In order to make the audience follow the narrative closely and receive the ideas that the film is trying to convey, films often firstly establish an emotional bond between the audience and the characters. Visual symbols are efficient means of conveying information and inducing emotions (Markham, 2017). A symbol is "something that stands for something else in a conventional way" (Danesi, 2009, p. 281). The signifier means the physical structure of a sign, while the signified means the ideas and the actual object that the sign stands for (Danesi, 2009; Markham, 2017). When people see a visual symbol, they would think of its relatively fixed signified along with memories and emotions associated with it. In the long term, the connection between the symbol and emotions deepens as people continue to engage this symbol in their daily lives. Reflexive emotional responses triggered by the sight of symbols may occur (Muszynski et al., 2021). The national flag is a cultural symbol often used in Chinese main melody films. It has a relatively fixed meaning, and it is also a familiar object in life. It symbolizes the country and national identity, representing a country's political characteristics and historical and cultural traditions through certain styles, colors, and patterns (Becker et al., 2017). It is also a cultural symbol with specific connotations, which connects the experience and memory of a cultural group (Xue, 2020).

People's constant contact with the national flag in their daily life makes the flag symbol also carries people's experiences and emotions. The following paragraph will briefly analyze the common emotions associated with the flag and the meanings people make from it, taking three scenarios: ceremonies, competitions, and product packaging as examples.

Firstly, with the need for patriotic education and deepening national identity, students in China must participate in a weekly flag-raising ceremony from primary school onwards. All participants of this collective activity are expected to show their respect to the national flag, watch it being raised, and sing the national anthem. The flag-raising ceremony gives the participants a sense that the flag and the country it represents are solemn and cannot be desecrated. People who have participated in this activity since childhood would think they are born with this identity like those who have the same experience. They are bonded with each other through this ceremony. Secondly, the flag is often used as a symbol to represent the players in international competitions. For instance, in the Olympics, athletes often point to the flag or put the flag over their shoulders when they win. As the spectators rejoice in their country's athletes' success, they would also feel proud to share their identity with the glorified people. Thirdly, many products people see in their daily lives are also marked with the flag

symbol on the packaging. When people are shopping for food in a supermarket in a foreign country, the moment they see their country's flag on the packaging, they would have an emotional connection with the products through a shared identity. People would naturally assume that it should be more acceptable and familiar to them. If people from other countries also show appreciation of the product, people would be happy and further deepen their trust and love for the products made in their countries.

The long-term daily experience involving the national flag makes specific thoughts and emotions associated with the flag symbol more and more closely. The connection of a symbol and memories can transcend time and space, affecting each other among the group members and even passing from generation to generation (Finell, 2018). People's contact with the national flag in their everyday life makes the symbol represent not only an abstract concept of the country but also concrete experiences and emotions. When the viewer sees the national flag in a film, the associated memories and emotions can be quickly evoked.

3. The Ways that the National Flag Symbol is Used in Main Melody Films

Main melody films often use flag symbols to quickly evoke relevant memories and prompt the audience to react emotionally to the plot in which the flags are located. The flag symbols in different conditions can evoke different memories, thus helping the film to accomplish the corresponding emotional expression. Since Chinese cinema entered the period of commercial cinema in 2002, the demand for the influence of main melody films has become higher (Zhang, 2020). Film creators have been exploring how to use national flag symbols to express emotions. There have already been some fixed patterns in use. This paper identifies three common patterns:

- (1) using the national flag as an object to be protected
- (2) using the national flag as motivation in times of struggle
- (3) using the national flag as a clue of the background of identity

The following text will use different main melody films to illustrate how the national flag is used for emotional expression in main melody films combined with the three kinds of everyday experiences related to the national flag mentioned in the previous section.

First, the national flag can be set as an item that needs to be protected. This setting could often be seen in war films. The flag is a symbol of national identity. National identity is associative and exclusive (Butz, 2009), which means that we need to identify what we are by recognizing what we are not. In war films, people are often distinguished by national identity, presenting a dichotomy. Flags serve to identify territory and are often used to express a group's collective will and response to an outside group (Becker et al., 2017). The fall of one side's flag in war marks the capture of the land by the other side. This connotation is why in films about war themes, soldiers often sacrifice their lives to protect the national flag from being knocked down. For example, in *Mao Zedong 1949* (Huang & Ning, 2019), the film's emotional climax is the scene in which soldiers defend the flagpole with their bodies despite gunfire. This kind of scenario could remind the audiences of their individual attitudes towards the flag and their experiences of participating in flag-raising in their daily lives. When they see the flag that they always admire being tainted and damaged, they would naturally feel a sense of resentment and frustration. In this case, the soldiers in the film do what the audience might want to do: guard the flag as it represents national dignity. Having a similar emotional impulse allows them to take on the role of the soldiers and generate similar emotions. While after they empathize with the character through the flag, when the audience realizes that the soldiers have done what they might not have done in that situation, for example, sacrifice for their country despite everything, they would feel more touched and shocked.

The second pattern of showing the national flags is to regard it as a symbol of responsibility and honor to motivate the protagonists. This pattern is often seen in films with the theme of growth, such as competition and extreme sports. Most growth-themed films have a five-part Freytag's pyramid structure: introduction, development, climax, problem resolution, and ending (Cormick, 2019). The flag mostly appears in the plot's climax and end parts, acting as an inspirational motivation or a sign of glory after the final success. In the film *Leap* (Chen, 2020), when the female volleyball players reach their limits in the competition, the camera keeps switching between images of the match and the image of the national flag, expressing that the athletes regard national honor as an essential motivation for fighting on the court. In the film *The Climbers* (2019), the climbing team eventually reached the summit of Mount Everest and planted the national flag on the summit to show that they had succeeded on behalf of the country in a task that seemed impossible under the conditions of that time. The key points that touch audiences in these two films are rooted in the desire to bring honor to the country. In their daily lives, the audience might have watched some international competitions. There are often flags shown on the screen. When a competitor from their country wins, they will share in the pride as they share the same identity. While in the cinema, when the audience immerses themselves in the journey by following the constructed narration, they are expected to recall their experience and have an even stronger emotional reaction to the national flag. This sense of achievement and joy could make the audience feel proud of their national identity.

A final familiar pattern of using national flags is using it to provide some background information. The designs of national flags are often simple and abstract (Becker et al., 2017), and the flag is used on the package of many objects that people can see in their daily lives. Therefore, the use of flags to provide supporting information can be seen in films on various subjects. For example, suppose a national flag is shown on a character's belongings. In that case, the audience could make assumptions about this character based on their pre-existing knowledge and experiences, such as possible appearance, personality traits, behavioral logic, cultural values. Although using symbols to attach labels on people and objects has been criticized for reinforcing stereotypes (Vaughan & Hogg, 2017), yet with its effectiveness, it is still prevalent in contemporary films. If an object shown in the film has the flag of the audience's country on it, the audience would feel emotionally closer to that object. This effect is similar to the experience of seeing a product with one's country's flag on it in a supermarket. In Chinese main melody films, the national flag often appears on some high-tech products. This usage both distinguishes different countries and expresses the filmmakers' confidence in the country's technological prowess. Taking *The Wandering Earth* (Guo, 2019) as an example, there is a conversation between a Chinese astronaut and a Russian astronaut in the film. After the Russian cosmonaut talked about his country's brilliant achievements in aerospace, the Chinese cosmonaut says, "I agree," and opens the door of the spaceship with a Chinese national flag on it. This clip shows the efficiency and obscurity of using a visual symbol to express meanings. Instead of having the actor directly say how China has made rapid progress in aerospace, the message the film wants to send is conveyed to the audience through national flag symbols without being too blunt and brutal.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper discusses the value of the national flag as a common symbol used in Chinese main melody films and how it is used. Chinese thematic films undertake the task of strengthening national identity at home and showing national image abroad. The national flag, a cultural symbol, can quickly arouse the audience's feelings towards the country by mobilizing their daily memories in the film so that the audience can empathize with the characters in the film and better accept the ideas the film wants to convey. The exploration of cinematic

expressions is never-ending. As the main melody films are gradually developing into a representative film genre in China nowadays, how to better use cultural symbols for emotional expression is worth further study by the creators of main melody films.

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