



Phenomenon, Cause and Change—Analysis of the Factors Affecting the Successes, Failures and Improvements of Chinese Main Melody Films

Kun Qian

Master of Arts in Creative and Media Industries (MA), Lingnan University, Hong Kong, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Kun Qian, Master of Arts in Creative and Media Industries (MA), Lingnan University, Hong Kong, China.

Email: kunqian@ln.hk

Abstract

Since the beginning of the new century, the Chinese film industry has presented a situation where a hundred flowers are blooming. Among them, the film market with the theme of “main melody” has made great progress. After a brief overview of the development stage of Chinese theme movies, the author briefly analyzes several important factors that affect the development of Chinese theme movies. The article starts from three aspects: the ideology of a specific period, the change of the narrative angle of the characters in the film, and the cultural tendency of the connotation of the work. With reference to the phenomena, causes and changes generally presented in the main theme film performance of the new period, it discusses some of the author’s opinion. Sharing and arguing about the need to give full play to the core values of society in the application of creative ideas, about the need to abandon rigid and simple imitation in the expression of aesthetic tendencies and about the need to pursue higher cultural qualities in media creation.

Keywords

Main Melody, Film, Policy

In the history of Chinese film, the concept of “main melody” was established in 1987, but this does not mean that there were no main melody films before 1987 (Chang & Chang, 2019). On the contrary, after the founding of New China, the element of “main melody” has been developing along with the development of the Chinese film industry and has played a pivotal role. Today, main melody films have become an important part of the Chinese film industry, and with the development of the industry, the commercialization of main melody films have become the new trend now. These changes on the one hand have led to an increasingly broad definition of main melody films, and on the other hand have led to an increasing variety of film and television expressions of main melody films. In this article, I define main melody films as “films that fully reflect and promote mainstream values and express the truth, goodness and beauty of human beings,” such as those related to current affairs, such as *The Founding of a Republic*, *Beginning of The Great Revival* and *The Sacrifice*, including those with heavy commercial connotations, such as *The Wandering Earth* and *Wolf Warrior 2*, etc. These films can be included in the category of main melody films. In this article, we use some of the more representative works of these films to conduct some rough research and discussion on the use of the constituent elements of these films.

1. Main melody films and ideological influences

The clarification of the concept of “main melody” in 1987 was a milestone in the development of main melody cinema. While it set the banner for the creation of this genre, enriched its ideology, and clarified its direction, it also

made it more susceptible to ideological influence. The beginnings of Chinese main melody cinema can be traced back to Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Symposium on Literature and Art" during the Yan'an period in 1942, in which he clearly stated the need to "seek the correct development of revolutionary literature and art and seek better assistance from revolutionary literature and art to other revolutionary work, to defeat the enemies of our nation and complete the task of national liberation". Literature and art should be used "as a powerful weapon to unite the people, to educate them, to combat the enemy and to destroy them." (Mao, 1951) Since then, the question of "what to write about?" and "who to write about?" and "about whom?" and "Why?" "How to write?" It has had a profound impact on the Chinese literary and artistic scene up to the present day, and has of course directly influenced the formation and development of Chinese main melody cinema in a rigid framework. This is a good reason Chinese ideology is so linked to main melody cinema, and this also brings about the phenomenon of a single, narrow expression of the creator's creative vision. Of course, the relationship between this demand for political correctness and the creation of film and television productions has been dynamic and evolving throughout the different historical periods. For example, from the "overthrow of one class by another" films of the New Democracy period, such as *The Red Sun* and *The Tempest (Bao Feng Zhou Yu)*, to the "continuing revolutionary theory" of the 1950s and 1960s during the early stages of socialist construction, such as the "Model Opera". The ideology of main melody film creation has changed with the development of history, reflecting the distinctive ideological evolution with the times (Ying, 2020).

What is particularly noteworthy is that the political themes of each era have a series of values advocated in tandem with them. On closer analysis, the politicised will is a high degree of condensation of ideas about governance at all stages of society's development, and the core values it advocates tend to be more conceptually leading for the creators. Writers and artists can find a clearer way to avoid over-political preachiness by finding the specific content of the values advocated in each era in the political terminology of some political backgrounds. For example, under the political doctrine of "continuing the revolution" there is the value of "being red and professional", under the political doctrine of "four insurances" there is the value of "five preachings, four beauties and three loves", under the political doctrine of "liberalization and criticism" there is the value of "eight honors and eight shames", and under the political doctrine of "great national rejuvenation" are the values of "socialist core values" and so on. So, starting from the concept of values and their positive extension, it is easier for the creators to find a smooth path in line with the laws of narrative development in the science of human history. Political consciousness is a highly centralized national will, while values are the concrete measures in the process of implementing and promoting these national wills among the people. For the more emotive literary creations, the latter are more likely to gain the value recognition of the grounded masses than the two, and therefore provide a broader scope for imagination with literary creations. Otherwise, if one pursues political correctness at the level of highly concentrated abstract political concepts, it is easy for writers and performers to be bound by their personal and incomplete "political understanding", leading main melody films to a dead end. The lack of awareness of ideological leadership in several main melody films, such as *The Opium Wars* and *The Founding Ceremony (Kai Guo Da Dian)*, has led to a biased understanding of the political atmosphere of their films, which has led to a lack of understanding of the "historical truth" and "nationalism" of the films. This has led to some awkwardness in the film's interpretation of the issues of "historical truth" and "nationalism" (Mao, 2009).

With the social development of the last two decades of this century, a systematic programme for a new era of socialist construction has been formed. For example, "putting the people at the center", "telling the Chinese story", "cultivating and practicing socialist values" and "building a community of human destiny" has pointed to a broad direction for the creation of main melody films, and films such as *Wolf Warrior 2*, *The Sacrifice* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are films based on these platforms and have achieved greater success to a certain extent. *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* have been among the top five box office figures in Chinese box office history. However, even though some of these films have had spectacular box office figures, this does not conceal the differences that exist within the films themselves in terms of awareness. For example, the positioning of the creation of a "community of human destiny" contributed to the success of *Wolf Warriors 2* and *Operation Mekong* in terms of counter-terrorism themes (Ying Xie, 2021), but there were also those who felt that *Wolf Warriors 2* had been "over-exerted", which made the experience of watching it less enjoyable. Although *The Sacrifice* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are also successful films, due to the lack of high-level cognition of historical facts, the understanding level of "telling a good Chinese story" on the basis of human nature, civilization, axioms and other concepts failed to meet the psychological expectations of the audience, and to a certain extent lost the qualification to go global.

The strong and rigid ideological construction required in main melody films is the pillar framework of main melody films, and film creators should be fully aware of the importance of the ideological position in such films. They should be good at finding human values and digging deeper into their ideological connotations that are most suitable for the development of human civilization. Only by understanding this can our film and television creators understand, comprehend, and apply the guiding and benchmarking role of the national ideology, create innovative and excellent works that are in line with the national will, parallel to the ruling ideology, and even forward-looking, thus achieving the goal of opening horizons to create main melody works that are more in line with the needs of the image of a great nation.

2. Main theme films and the construction of narrative strategies

With the development of China's film industry and the borrowing of Western films, main melody films, which are limited in subject matter, have developed their narrative techniques and expressions accordingly. The first is the upgrading of the narrative perspective of the target character. To a certain extent, the individual point of view narrative approach seems to have undergone a "return": the individual point of view narrative approach in *The Battle of the Tunnels* (*Di Dao Zhan*), to the group or omniscient point of view narrative approach in *Decisive Engagement* (*Da Jue Zhan*) and *The Founding Ceremony*, and then to the individual point of view narrative approach in *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. The "return" to the personal narrative technique of *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (Yu, 2013).

In fact, this "return" is more of a formal one, and from the point of view of the film's creative intent, the narrative approach from the individual's point of view is also different. For example, in both *The Battle of the Tunnels* (*Di Dao Zhan*) and *Wolf Warrior 2*, there is a clear main point of view, the protagonist, and the audience follows the plot from the perspective of a single individual. They are in fact "symbols" of a collective consciousness, all the main characters had to be "positive", because in the main melody films of this period, the protagonists actually represented a collective, which could be the masses or the soldiers who were dedicated to the people. But in either case, their image had to be positive, and perfect, and even if they were not perfect at the beginning, they could become perfect, because in addition to their main melody character, the films of this period also have a strong educational function.

In the case of *Wolf Warriors 2* and *The Sacrifice*, on the other hand, the protagonists will be shaped into flesh-and-blood characters with their own personalities, and in their stories the audience will be able to see the "arc" that the characters bring with them, and see a more vivid human being. For example, the scene in *Wolf Warriors 2* where a beautiful woman is hugged after the battle is influenced by Hollywood films. The narrative style of personalized point of view has thus been upgraded; secondly, the succession and experimentation of multiple narrative styles are frequently seen on screen. Films such as *The Founding of a Republic* inherited the omniscient point of view narrative mode, as this time was more inclined to choose historical subjects for processing and creation, and the use of the omniscient point of view allowed for a more comprehensive representation of the development of events, showing the whole picture of events and presenting the film in a stable procedural mode. On the other hand, the main melody films of the *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Sacrifice* genres seek to achieve a magnificent transformation, which on the one hand can be said to be the result of the commercialization of main melody films, and on the other hand is actually the result of the influence of western film narratives on narrative techniques and means of expression.

From the phenomenon of the "return" of these expressions, it is important to identify the gains and losses, rather than simply affirming them as a "return". It is only through a rational analysis of the new expressions that we can make the most of our strengths and avoid our weaknesses that we can contribute to the healthy development of our career. Otherwise, some of the problems that exist in many films will not be easily taken into account.

For example, the three-line narrative in *The Sacrifice* was inspired by Quentin's *Pulp Fiction*, but the difference between the two is too great: in Quentin's *Pulp Fiction*, the next chapter of the story answers the questions left over from the previous one and raises new ones at the same time, the chapters are tightly connected and closely paced. In *The Sacrifice*, the "multi-line narrative" becomes a repetitive representation of the same event from different perspectives, with the previous chapter almost becoming a mini-loop to the next one. I can understand the director's motive for such a design. Perhaps he wanted to highlight the intensity of the battle and the bravery of the warriors on both sides through multiple narratives, but such a crude and repetitive narrative design becomes a burden for the audience, and the result is not worth the cost.

Moreover, this kind of multi-perspective narrative is not suitable for a main melody film set in a war context. In Akira Kurosawa's *in the Woods*, for example, when multiple people interpret an event from their own perspectives, each of them more or less embellishes their own actions, and the result is that no one can find out the real cause of the samurai's death, and the truth is hidden. The use of such a multi-perspective narrative in main melody war films, on the other hand, is likely to cause audible confusion for the audience: soldiers on both sides are fighting for their country, neither soldier is right, it is the war that is wrong, transforming the war between man and man into a struggle between mankind and war, dissolving not only the purpose of the war, but also the choice to fight. It is anachronistic to turn a main melody film into a reflective piece of wounded literature.

3. Main melody and the cultural quality of the film

The intention of main melody films often carries a very strong sense of purpose, which is also determined by their cinematic nature. This kind of purposefulness is more difficult to manage, and the ability to discover a story and find a subject with a distinctive theme reflects to a certain extent the strong resource deployment and filming strength of the unique system. For example, the filming of *The Sacrifice* took only three months, and although the finished product is a little unfortunate, it is very well done in terms of the visual and linguistic aspects. At the same time, success stories such as *Operation Mekong* and *Wolf Warriors 2*, for example, are examples of the success of the socialist film system with Chinese characteristics. From this perspective, whatever high standards we demand of main melody films are not excessive; without such high standards, main melody films would not be able to assume a mainstream role in film culture.

At the same time, it is precisely because of the policy of main melody cinema to push the content of films to keep up with the characteristics of the times that the creators of main melody films, too often, are too purposeful to grasp the distance between the film and the audience. Even though China's box office charts are now full of billion-dollar high grossing films, high box office does not mean high quality. Once the meaning and humanistic sentiment of the film itself is ignored, then main melody films are particularly likely to fall into a superficial and crude rut, which will seriously damage the requirement of main melody films to help advance world civilization. The brilliantly colored scenes deployed, the neatly dressed people, and the solemn and uniform war preparations embodied in films such as *The Founding Ceremony* (*Kai Guo Da Dian*) and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* certainly have the changing aesthetic needs of the audience of the times, but the excessive fashionable pursuit reveals the superficiality and pallor of the creative team in terms of cultural cultivation, and the sense of historical incongruity seriously affects the authenticity of major events. In *Sanwan Reorganization*, due to the creators' lack of basic cultural cultivation and emotional identification, and their lack of basic knowledge of the special significance of the "branch built on the company", this film, which could have reflected the fundamental transformation of the Chinese army, was made in a haphazard manner due to the scripting and filming, and the mediocre taste of the film. The bridge that the volunteer soldiers use their bodies to build at the end of *The Sacrifice*, for example, shows the bravery and fearlessness of the soldiers by deifying them so that they can do what flesh and blood cannot do. The inclusion of such exaggerated narrative sequences in a realistic film will, without exception, degrade the experience. It is also inappropriate to falsify history for the sake of the overall structure of the film, as this not only reduces the credibility of the realistic film, but also makes it difficult for the film to have a global quality.

In addition, the integration of commercialism has added vitality to the production and promotion of main melody films, bringing life to them to avoid the traditional constraints of being preachy and pretentious. However, the influx of capital and the greed for profit have also brought about the fatal wound of "fast food culture" in commercial films. The freshness of style and interesting interpretations driven by commercial interests can undoubtedly add to the audience's interest, but a little carelessness or substandard expressions, a lack of essential grasp of the connotations of major events, or an excessive demand for "stars" and "face painting", can also easily overwhelm the traditional culture. It is also quite easy to turn a heavy main melody into a boring entertainment gag, and it will be more difficult for main melody films to achieve world-facing glory.

Throughout its century-long history, no matter which period or process exists in main melody cinema, its core ideas and techniques are inseparable from the background understanding of the mainstream ideology of each period and the upgrading of its expression methods. The objective effect of this is that it can either facilitate or limit the functional composition of the film. In the wave of cultural confidence building for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is already an imperative requirement to give full play to the advantages of discernment, strive to build on the strengths and avoid the weaknesses, achieve quality improvement and iteration, and do a good job in the grand narratives and lofty intentions of main melody films.

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