

# Expression of Hong Kong Directors in the Chinese Main-Melody Film: The Artistic Propaganda

Xin Lu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Canvard College, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Xin Lu, Canvard College, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing, China.

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## Abstract

By analysing the main-melody film works of Hong Kong directors and the understandings and attitudes of audiences in both mainland China and Hong Kong toward these films, it is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the particularity of Hong Kong people's national identity. This would provide a significant opportunity to advance the understanding of Hong Kong's status and value in contemporary China and the world. Furthermore, this study will offer some critical insights into the distribution of Hong Kong films in mainland China.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong directors, Chinese main-melody film, propaganda

## 1. Introduction

Since the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, Hong Kong directors have started to appear in the Chinese (mainland) film market. In the last decade, in particular, Hong Kong directors have participated in and produced a series of mainstream Chinese films, standing in a new historical dimension and conveying their own insights into the new mainstream filmmaking with a contemporary artistic perspective. The "main-melody" film is a unique definition and classification label for the Chinese film market, mainly based on the theme of patriotism. This study will analyse the artistic expressions of Hong Kong directors in Chinese "main-melody" films, particularly by comparing the differences between Hong Kong and mainland directors' "main-melody" films. This proposed research will discuss Hong Kong directors' imagination of mainland China and Hong Kong and analyse the uniqueness of Hong Kong residents' Chinese identity. This research will categorise Chinese main-melody films made by Hong Kong directors since 1997 and select one film in each category that has been popular in the market to analyse. The methods of video analysis and semi-structured interview will be employed as the primary research methods. Symbolic interactionism theories will be applied as the theoretical framework to examine the symbols and meanings embedded in the film to better understand Hong Kong directors' Chinese identity expression and construction processes.

Hong Kong films have always played an essential and unique role in the Chinese film market. However, with the recent downturn of Hong Kong cinema and the rise of the mainland Chinese film market, Hong Kong cinema faces a degree of dilemma. In response, the active acceptance of the mainland film market has become one of the options for Hong Kong film practitioners. As a result of this trend, not only are a large number of Hong Kong films being produced in mainland China, but also a growing number of Hong Kong film professionals are converging there (Pang, 2010). As a highly globalised region, Hong Kong has a mature economic market, while at the same time, it connects the developing economy of a post-socialist China. Therefore, as Pang (2002) suggests, the special global-national position of Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kong film professionals may be a useful facility through which China re-creates and maintains its ideological control.

In the Chinese film industry, this type of film, which aims at ideological control, is known as main-melody films. In contrast to the traditional socialist cinema, the recent main-melody films have been progressively commercialised and marketised, reconstructing socialist cinema with Hollywoodised creative strategies, through which they have been gradually transformed from direct political propaganda to ideological guidance (Yu, 2013; Ma, 2014). In recent years, Hong Kong directors have also started to make Chinese main-melody films. However, these main-melody films made by Hong Kong directors have not been analysed in-depth, particularly in terms of the directors' Hong Kong-Chinese identity. Moreover, the audience attitudes and understanding of these Hong Kong directors' main-melody films and the impact of these films on audiences have not been systematically

analysed. This proposed research attempts to fill this research gap.

In contemporary society, the media plays a vital role in people's lives and is seen as an opportunity for self-expression and self-development (Manago, 2015). And, in the meantime, people give meaning to their social experiences through their interaction with the media, as these experiences shape their value orientations and identity development (Velez and Spencer, 2018). While social media is usually seen as a key media platform in contemporary society that provides people spaces and tools to develop their self-identity and self-expression, other forms of media, such as film, deliver more messages from others and may reach a wider audience.

The literature on films has examined several significant impacts of films on individuals; to date, several studies have highlighted the critical role of film in shaping national identity through the transmission of cultural and political values (Williams, 2002). As Anderson (1983) argues, the emergence of the concept of nation and the construction of national identity is primarily socially constructed rather than innate, with individuals linked by the shared identity they share and formed the imagined communities in which the media mainly extends and reinforces this imagined connection. Nationalism is a somewhat widely used term in disciplines of humanities and social sciences; nevertheless, it remains a contested concept across different fields. In general, nationalism can broadly be defined as a shared identity that creates cohesion in society and supports the nation and state (Woods and Dickson, 2017). This study will attempt to analyse the expressions of Hong Kong directors in Chinese main-melody films and the audiences' understanding of these expressions from the perspective of nationalism.

As an artistic expression in film, various types of symbols are commonly used by directors. In order to better explain and understand these symbols, the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 1969) will be employed in this proposed study. As a cultural symbol, and at the same time a collection of cultural symbols, main-melody films are used to convey and construct nationalism. Symbolic interactionism, as a theory that analysing symbols and the embedded meanings in interpersonal interactions, can effectively support the analysis of this study. Symbolic interactionism suggests three premises: first, "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them"; second, "[t]he meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows"; and last but not least, "these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer, 1969). This research will start with the analysis of the ways in which Hong Kong directors give main-melody film social and cultural meanings and investigate the relationship between main-melody films and audiences' national identity construction.

## **2. Research Design**

### *2.1 Research Strategy and Sampling Method*

To explore Hong Kong directors' expressions in Chinese main-melody films and audiences' understandings of these films, considering that everyone's understanding of film is different, a qualitative research approach will be more appropriate. Qualitative methods are widely used to explore individuals' attitudes, understandings, and detailed practice, allowing for understandings and implications to be investigated in detail in concrete social contexts (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, qualitative methods can be helpful in identifying and characterising the expressions of Hong Kong directors in Chinese main-melody films and the understandings of audiences, thus getting a deeper understanding of the representative films and individualised cases of interviewees. More specifically, research methods of video analysis (including text analysis) of selected films and semi-structured face-to-face interviews will be employed by this study.

In order to get a solid understanding of the proposed study theme and give full play to the individual initiative for the participants in the research (Maxwell and Reybold, 2015), grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013) will be used during the period of data collection and analysis. Accordingly, this research will be conducted in line with the inductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2010). In other words, I will not set any hypotheses, assumptions, or theories before the stage of data collection. The choice of such a research strategy is mainly due to two reasons. First, it could avoid prejudice of the researcher, therefore getting as much objective data as possible to evaluate the Hong Kong directors' expressions in Chinese main-melody films. Second, because studies on Hong Kong directors' Chinese main-melody films are relatively rare, especially in the English academia, previous empirical research and theories are still inadequate to support the hypothesis or assumption of this proposed study. Hence, instead of proposing and verifying hypotheses, I will establish descriptions of characteristics and patterns of Hong Kong directors' expressions and audiences understandings, generating concepts and theories through collected data and repeated analysis.

A purposive sampling strategy will be used for this research. The purposive sampling strategy will allow

researchers to maximise the diversity of the participants and data relevant to the research questions. In addition, such a strategy would be helpful to generalise the sample and findings of the study compared to convenience sampling. Doing so will also reduce the limitations and drawbacks of the sampling method, such as the limitation of homogenous participants. Therefore, I will select participants strictly according to the participant recruitment requirements.

Before video analysis and semi-structured interviews, I will first comprehensively collate Chinese main-melody films produced by Hong Kong directors, further categorising them according to their specific film genres. Afterwards, I will select one of the most popular films in each category according to the box office for specific video analysis.

For semi-structured interviews, I will recruit 30 participants to investigate their attitudes and understandings of Hong Kong directors' expressions in main-melody films and the influences of these films in their national identity construction and maintenance. The interviewees will be divided into two groups, including a group of 15 mainland Chinese audiences and 15 Hong Kong audiences. I will control the proportion of different types of participants of this research, including their ages, genders, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic backgrounds. In general, the sampling principle is trying to achieve a balanced population rather than focusing on a single constituency within the group. Therefore, it is supposed that a generalised finding could be found.

### 2.2 Video Analysis and Semi-structured Interviews

I will first choose one film in each category for analysis according to film classification. A series of video analyses will be conducted to scrutinise the contents of the film, generating a connection between the film contents and directors' meaning expression. Content analysis is the process of "summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented" (Neuendorf, 2002). In addition, in order to better understand and analyse the expression of Hong Kong directors in main-melody films, I will also analyse the history and current situation of Chinese main-melody films, as well as the Hong Kong-Mainland China film relationships, to provide more and detailed background support for video analysis.

Furthermore, thirty semi-structured interviews will be conducted during six months. The interviewees will consist of two different groups of film audiences—mainland Chinese audiences and Hong Kong audiences. As Chinese main-melody films are rarely screened in Hong Kong, I will invite Hong Kong participants who have not seen these films to watch a main-melody film by a Hong Kong director and investigate their opinions. I will use various recruitment methods to access potential interviewees, such as posting interviewee recruitment information on social media platforms. The interview will be designed to examine how audiences in different regions (mainland China-Hong Kong) perceive the main-melody film works of Hong Kong directors and the impact of these films on them. Due to the different viewing backgrounds of the audiences, the interviews will be designed separately for these two groups. For the mainland Chinese audiences, the interview will focus on exploring their understandings of the main-melody films of Hong Kong directors, especially in comparison with the work of mainland directors' works. This can help the researcher analyse the different ways in which Hong Kong directors and Chinese directors convey their national identity in main-melody films. For Hong Kong audiences, I will focus on exploring their acceptance of these films and the factors that influence their acceptance. The estimated time for each interview will be one hour.

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