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My People, My Country: A Chinese ‘main-melody’ omnibus film and its spectatorship

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ABSTRACT

My People, My Country (2019) is a Chinese multidirector omnibus film made to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China. It has served as a winning model, emulated by two sequels: *My People, My Homeland* (2020) and *My Country, My Parents* (2021), constituting a ‘national day’ trilogy. This article takes the film as a case study to explore the spectatorship of the new type of Chinese ‘main-melody’ films, based on omnibus film theories and the auteur approach. It examines the focal film's spectatorship from two dimensions: horizontal connections (i.e. how one episode connects with another) and vertical connections (i.e. how each episode is distinguished from the others), both of which are firmly based on the film's omnibus structure. It argues that, as processes of discovery and establishing links that would otherwise remain unnoticed, the two types of connections constitute a source of pleasure for the audience. As a ‘main-melody’ film, political ideologies may infiltrate the audience while it is engaged in entertainment, particularly by the increasing number of cinephile audiences in contemporary China.

KEYWORDS

My People; My Country;
Chinese ‘main-melody’
film; omnibus film;
spectatorship

Introduction

In 2019, *Wohe wode zuguo* [*My People, My Country*] (hereafter, *MPMC*), a feature-length film made to celebrate the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s seventieth anniversary, was released in mainland China and achieved critical and commercial success. On Douban, a famous film-reviewing website in China, the film's rating (involving more than one million viewers) is 7.6, a relatively high score. According to figures from www.1905.com, the official website of the film channel of China Central Television, its box-office receipts were over RMB 2.8 billion within a month of its release. The film is a ‘main-melody’ film (*Zhuxuanlü dianying*), more specifically, a ‘dedication movie’ (*Xianli pian*) made for the occasion of the National Day (October 1), ‘intent on reinstalling a correct political ideology and nationalistic pride in the population’ (Zhang 2004, 240). However, among the film comments and reviews on Chinese film-reviewing websites, most were not related to the ideological content but were largely shaped by the film's special form. It is a multidirector, omnibus film ‘constituted as a combination of episodes, each singly authored yet connected to others in contiguity to

form a whole' (Betz 2009, 179). Taking the top 100 'hottest' short comments on Douban as an example, only 31% are positive or negative comments on the film's ideological implications, while the rest are dominated by comments based on the film's omnibus structure, including the ranking of its seven episodes (53%), seeking connections between the episodes (10%), commenting on individual directors' characteristics (18%), and expressing preference or dislike for certain actors (14%).¹ Mtime, another major film-reviewing website in China, manifests a similar pattern.

Existing scholarship on the film has been preoccupied with the film's ideological message (e.g. Sun and Yan 2019; Yin 2019; Li 2020), which cannot explain the diversity described above in the Chinese audience's reception of the film. While the ranking of episodes and performance evaluation is rather subjective, personal, and even polarised, the neutral, rational, and intellectual commentaries on the horizontal connections of the episodes and each director's distinctive styles deserve serious exploration. The present study is an effort in this direction. It draws on omnibus film theories and the auteur approach to examine the film's spectatorship from two dimensions: horizontal connections (i.e. how one episode connects with another) and vertical connections (i.e. how each episode is distinguished from the others). It argues that as processes of discovery, the two dimensions of connections constitute a source of pleasure for the audience. As a 'main-melody' film, political ideologies may infiltrate the audience while it is engaged in entertainment, particularly by the increasing number of cinephile audiences in contemporary China.

The significance of this study lies in its introduction of underappreciated omnibus film theories into the examination of a special type of spectatorship concerning a 'main-melody' film. It also contributes to the literature of cinematic spectatorship due to its focus on omnibus film spectatorship in the Chinese context. The detailed analysis of the episodes offers a glimpse of the characteristics of some of the most active and talented filmmakers in contemporary China. The study also reveals the active engagement of Chinese cinephile audiences with these directors' works and assesses the omnibus film as a new strategy for Chinese 'main-melody' films in the new century.

Omnibus film spectatorship and Chinese cinephile audiences

Many film critics of omnibus films have noted a type of 'scorecard' or 'mental notes' taken by moviegoers who, upon viewing an omnibus film, will often 'rate the success of specific episodes according to the logic and language of relationality and rank' (Diffrient 2005, 26). However, this is not all that the omnibus film can bring to the audience. Scholarship has paid attention to a tension between two directions in the viewing experience of an omnibus film, which is 'a departure from the classical model of film viewing' (Deshpande 2010, 87). Although the experience resembles 'an exercise in discontinuous viewing', which is 'more in tune with the dispersed texts of media, the Internet and television' (87), Deshpande warned that episodes in an omnibus film 'make a collective statement' (87) and the 'unity in dispersion' is the most 'valued' quality of this genre (87). Similarly, Diffrient emphasised the unique characteristic of 'spectators feeling spent from having witnessed so many emotionally moving stories' (2012, 114). 'Interstitial breaks' between episodes create alienating effects, making the audience aware of 'their status as distant observers' (119). However, due to the 'seriality' of the omnibus form, the audience is 'conditioned' to 'expect certain narrative outcomes' from each episode (Diffrient 2014, 73), thereby demanding 'both a

micro-perspectival and macro-perspectival position, that is, attention to an individual episode's 'cinematic artistry' and 'distinction' and its integration into the whole feature's 'systematic seriality' (Diffrient 2014, 87). This idea is reminiscent of Betz's earlier standpoint that a critic of an omnibus film should place all constituting episodes within 'inter-textual' terms, considering each contributor's 'stylistic and thematic continuity' as well as each episode's status as 'one part of a larger vision' (2009, 229).

This study explores both directions. The 'horizontal connections' echo Diffrient's 'geographical' approach to seeking shared meanings among episodes, while 'vertical connections' respond to Diffrient's 'geological' means of 'plunging into [the] profundity' of each episode (2012, 122). Seeking connections in the two directions can spontaneously arise in the viewing process of Chinese cinephile audiences who are 'self-educated' film critics (Zhou 2021) and bring them pleasure due to a sense of discovery and revelation.

Cinephilia is traditionally related to the 'golden age' of moviegoing habits practised by French film critics like Truffaut, Godard, and Rohmer in the 1950s and 1960s (Czach 2010, 139). These film critics expressed their 'primary (though not exclusive)' obsession with Hollywood cinema 'in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*' and proposed a 'policy of auteurism' (*politique des auteurs*) (Keathley 2006, 3), to establish both 'the primacy of the film-maker-director' and 'the creation of a new "perfect" audience' (De Valck and Hagener 2005, 11). They distinguish between 'those who can recognize certain distinctions [of certain auteurs] – namely the cinephiles – and those who cannot' (12) and represent an 'elitist' mode of film reception (11). However, cinephilia can also refer to the more 'universal phenomenon that the film experience evokes particular sensations of intense pleasure resulting in a strongly felt connection with the cinema, often described as a relation of love' (11). The famous claim of Sontag (1996) about the death of cinephilia is essentially a lament on 'the death of big screen' because the classic or 'first-generation, pretelevisional cinephilia' in France had been transformed into worldwide 'contemporary forms of cinephilia', with easy access to 'DVD collecting and digital downloads' (Czach 2010, 140). Far from being dead, De Valck and Hagener (2005, 12–13) argue that cinephilia is actively practised by 'a new generation of equally devoted cinephiles who display and develop new modes of engagement with the over-abundance of cinematic material widely available through advanced technology'.

In general, cinephiles in the digital age cultivate their 'cinematographic pleasure' by obtaining 'easier access both to past films and to information on their authors and actors' in digital formats (Jullier and Leveratto 2012, 143). They draw on 'various frameworks to assess the quality of films' and then select what to watch and re-watch to develop their 'cinematographic taste' (143). They also engage in virtual discussions with 'both initiated and uninitiated strangers' on either 'a specific movie' or 'cinema as a whole' to improve their critical skills (143). Though there is tension between amateur cinephiliac reviews and professional criticism, De Valck argues that cinephilia promotes the latter by 'underscoring its value and invoking the existence of a dedicated audience of readers', while professional criticism should also be 'informed' by 'a spirit of' cinephilia (2010, 135). Chinese cinephiles follow a similar pattern in their development as in the rest of the world, except that their interest in film has been largely facilitated in the past or at present by the availability of pirated DVDs and *ziyuan* – digitalised films or videos on the Chinese Internet for illicit sharing (Chen 2021). In this essay, film reviewers on Douban are taken as representatives of China's cinephile audiences, while the author's analysis of *MPMC* is more theoretically based.

Horizontal connections

Diffrient perceives episodes within a feature-length omnibus film as ‘discrete yet thematically linked’ (2012, 120) and concurs with Yip (2004, 56) that the omnibus form is flexible enough to liberate filmmakers from the ‘formula films’ of established cinema and affords each director ‘the freedom to develop his own individual style within each short segment’. However, the ‘stylistic innovation’ of each contributor is subordinate to the film’s ‘thematic reverberations’ and ‘imaging of common concerns’ (Diffrient 2014, 87). These ‘transauthorial resonances and thematic echoes’ (72) or ‘sonic and visual flourishes’ bring a ‘unified appearance’ to an omnibus film (Diffrient 2005, 26); the ‘thematic and visual repetitions’ establish ‘order’, offset ‘chaos’, and erase the ‘difference’ that is intrinsic to the form (2014, 81).

Despite the tension between the parts and the whole, meaning must be ‘read across the entirety’ of an omnibus film as a ‘unified entity’ (Betz 2009, 228). Betz highlights the importance of a ‘synchronic principle or theme’ that pulls an omnibus film together with ‘diachronic relations of its episodes’ (185). Likewise, Deshpande asserts that each contributing director of an omnibus film ‘enters into a conversation with others’; they must consider how their treatment of a certain theme or topic can ‘merge with others’ so that the audience can ‘confront’ them ‘together’ (2010, 80).

MPMC comprises seven episodes, each focusing on a key moment in the PRC’s history. The episodes are arranged chronologically, each constituting a part of the nation’s history. Other horizontal resonances also coordinate the film into a coherent entity: its political message is mainly realised through each episode’s subject matter and horizontal linkages. Douban user Tang Xiaobao (30 September 2019 – the commentary date, the same below) similarly noticed this. They admitted that they were not originally fond of ‘dedication movies’, but after watching the film, they realised that ‘the real significance of the film lies in its seriality’.

First, each episode includes a prologue that features an act of inscribing. The specific writing tool, paper fibre, and calligraphy style differ according to the episode’s time and characters; this recurring act sends a message that *MPMC* is a historical record. These prologues serve as ‘transport’; they ‘smooth out the narrative “bumps”’ (Diffrient 2012, 126) and transform the otherwise discrete events into a consistent flow.

Thematically, most episodes feature ordinary people with weaknesses: an acrophobic engineer, a reticent low-rank researcher, a child with a secret love, and so on. Nevertheless, these people manifest heroism, patriotism, collectivism, and altruism at a critical moment for the nation or other people’s lives. Such a ‘thematic consensus’ helps transform *MPMC* from a “hodgepodge” cacophony of the omnibus form into a unified composite’ (Diffrient 2014, 87). They also render *MPMC* a departure from traditional ‘main-melody’ films that extoll the heroic deeds of acclaimed role models, such as *Jiao Yulu* (1990), *Kong Fansen* (1996), and *Meng Erdong* (2009) (Yin 2019). Douban user Ying Zhi (28 September 2019) stated that they ‘almost forgot the film was a “main-melody” film when the stories of small characters unfolded one by one’. However, there is an exception: the episode ‘Baizhou liuxing’ [The Guiding Star] depicts a perfect image of a Party cadre – a member of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in charge of poverty relief work. This probably leads to the predominant negative comments it receives on Douban. Despite this exception, *MPMC* exemplifies ‘re-politicisation after depoliticisation’ and caters to a new generation of Chinese audiences with no collective living experience of the Mao era (Li 2020). As

Douban user Hezi Getu (30 September 2019) put it, ‘I am a pitifully post-2000s generation, not born yet or too small to witness big events, but I am lucky enough to watch this film when I am about to enter adulthood. I feel more attachment to my country due to this film than any textbook’. To them, socialist ideologies should be conveyed imperceptibly and unobtrusively.

Most episodes in *MPMC* also contain scenes that place leading characters in the foreground of a frame with a collective image of people as a backdrop. This cinematic treatment epitomises the dialectics between the personal and the collective, as the film’s title indicates. With frequent slow motion and non-diegetic music, these scenes prompt the audience’s emotional identification with characters, people, and the nation, rendering these episodes ‘deeply redolent of one another’ (Diffrient 2014, 86). Douban user Kong Li (5 October 2019) felt the impact of such resonance and the aforementioned dialectics, stating ‘although small and low-rank, the protagonists in *MPMC* are indeed remote from my life due to their professions’. What really touched them were those Beijing locals donating rare metals in ‘Qianye’ [The Eve], crowds gathering on the street to celebrate China’s first atomic bomb explosion in ‘Xiangyu’ [Passing By], Shanghai dwellers watching a live volleyball match on television in an alley in ‘Duoguan’ [The Champion], and street peddlers putting aside their business to chase a ‘robber’ in ‘Beijing nihao’ [Hello Beijing].

The soundtracks also display dialectics of individuality-collectivism. The film begins with Wang Fei (also known as Faye Wong)’s rendition of the title song and ends with university students and other Chinese people singing. Other recurring elements include documentary footage of historical events presented throughout the film. Mandarin is often combined with multiple dialects, highlighting the diversity within the unity of the Chinese people. The repeated act of pressing a button or ringing a bell occurs at a critical moment in the first three episodes and the fifth: by Chairman Mao at the founding ceremony, staff in a research lab, the child protagonist holding a present for his love, and a restaurant owner at a birthday party, respectively. Diffrient calls this ‘harmonic reverberation’, enabling these episodes to speak ‘like a series of echoes that bounce off of one another’ (2014, 87).

Finally, there are interesting crossovers among actors and directors. Huang Bo, the lead actor of ‘The Eve’, initiated his acting career with Guan Hu, the director of this episode and a key member of the Sixth-Generation filmmakers. Huang is also a consistent collaborator of Ning Hao, who directs ‘Hello Beijing’. Huang’s performance partner in most of Ning’s films is Xu Zheng, who is the director of ‘The Champion’. Ning and Xu co-produced the debut feature of Wen Muye, who directed ‘Huhang’ [One for All]. Zhang Yibai, the director of ‘Passing By’, is famous for his urban romances, and so is Xue Xiaolu, who directed ‘Huigui’ [Going Home]. The most senior member, Chen Kaige, created ‘The Guiding Star’ and is also the film’s general director. Both he and *MPMC*’s producer, Huang Jianxin, are members of the Fifth-Generation filmmakers. To a large extent, they are, in the words of Douban user Xiadian de yanse (28 September 2019), ‘a collection of top-tier directors and performers’, constituting a ‘dream team’ of Chinese cinema.

Moreover, *MPMC*’s contributors are what Chen (2020) calls ‘auteurs within the system’: their films exhibit consistent and distinctive characteristics, and they do not offend Chinese film censorship, at least not in the last decade.² They avoid politically sensitive materials and even occasionally address ‘main-melody’ themes (e.g. socialism, patriotism, and collectivism) explicitly in their films, for example, Guan’s *Zaijian, women de 1948/Children of the Crusade* (1999) and Ning’s *Huangjin dajie an/Guns and Roses* (2012). They are clear that

a confrontation with censorship is not wise, and taking on a ‘main-melody’ project at times to align with the Chinese state helps improve their legitimacy. However, they are also attentive to the status of being an auteur. As the following analyses demonstrate, their episodes manifest their distinctive styles. When tension arises between certain subject matters assigned to them and their own expertise and preference, as in the case of Wen Muye below, we also see compromise and negotiation in operation.

Vertical connections

Given the importance of the ‘micro-perspectival’ position (Diffrient 2014) and ‘inter-textual’ terms (Betz 2009), an ‘auteurist approach’ in the evaluation of an omnibus film is imperative (Betz 2009, 224). However, while horizontal connections are largely exclusive to omnibus films, vertical connections based on auteur theory have been practised in film studies since the French New Wave, despite their controversy. In an omnibus film, vertical connections are begun and concluded multiple times; thus, the process of ‘discovery’ as a source of cinematic pleasure (Sarris [1962] 2009, 454) multiplies. Moreover, it is during the process of one episode succeeding another that a given episode and its director’s distinctive characteristics impact the audience the most.

Although well-known, the auteur approach is briefly reviewed here to reiterate the relationship between screenplays and directing as most episodes in *MPMC* were not written by their directors. Auteur theorists attribute significance to a film’s director rather than its scriptwriter and consider the former the auteur of the film. They also believe that a true auteur leaves distinctive ‘signatures’ on their films, regardless of differences in genre, subject matter, screenplay, cast and crew, or production conditions (Caughie 1981). An auteur’s signatures include ‘thematic preoccupations’, ‘recurring motifs and incidents’, and ‘visual style and tempo’ (Wollen [1969] 2009, 457). When faced with the same materials, an auteur can endow their work with a ‘soul’ so that it can be distinguished from other directors’ corpuses (Sarris [1962] 2009, 453). A director’s ‘source’, such as a screenplay, is only a ‘pretext’ according to Wollen ([1969] 2009); it ‘provides catalysts ... to produce a radically new work’ (466). Despite being under attack by semiotics and psychoanalyses in the 1970s, the auteur approach was revived in the 1990s (Naremore 1990), and ‘new auteurism’ (Wexman 2003; Gerstner and Staiger 2003) arose in the context of digital technology, which facilitated directors’ construction as auteurs and related to their heightened role as a marketing tool and brand name in the global film economy.

In the context of ‘new auteurism’, it is unsurprising that many episodes in contemporary omnibus films, if directed by an auteur, are often ‘repackaged’ as ‘shorts’, placed within the oeuvre of a given director instead of as a part of their original omnibus films (Betz 2009, 223). These segments are deemed more ‘particular to its author’s oeuvre’ than compatible with the rest of the omnibus film (226). This section takes a few episodes from *MPMC* as an example³ to illustrate the links between them and their directors’ oeuvres and how some cinephiles have already picked up certain connections. While cinephiles usually make comments immediately after watching the film, my analysis is based on the auteur approach, involving going over all of these directors’ previous films and relevant research. However, comments from cinephiles are also more or less dependent on their understanding of some of these directors’ earlier works.

'Passing By': Zhang's cinematic expression of love

Zhang Yibai often situates his love stories in a grey zone where love is hard to express (Wang 2015). This is sometimes due to a language barrier, as in his feature film *Ye Shanghai/The Longest Night in Shanghai* (2007) or his contribution to the omnibus film *Lianai ditu/About Love* (2005). In most cases, however, it is psychological. As a line in Zhang's *Cong nide quan shijie luguo/I Belonged to You* (2016) goes, 'Why is a normal love affair between two persons turned into a self-asserted love of a single person?' (*Haohao de aiqing zenme jiu biancheng le zizuo duoqing?*) The line is uttered by Yaoji while in a high fever; she has secretly fallen in love with her supervisor, Chen Mo, whose name means 'silence' in Chinese. In Zhang's debut film *Kaiwang chuntian de ditie/Spring Subway* (2002), one scene famously records female lead Xiaohui's reliance on a cockroach to decide whether she will start a conversation with her boyfriend Jianbin. Similarly, in 'Passing By', the love between the leading couple is hard to articulate. Despite her discomfort at his three-year disappearance, the female protagonist is obviously fond of the atomic bomb researcher. However, the man cannot defend himself due to the secrecy of his job – it is even more impossible for him to accept her love after his exposure to radiation. Douban user Kuang Yige (17 December 2019) noticed the issue of utterance in Zhang's episode. They sing high praise of the male lead's facial expressions with a mask on, claiming that 'he has delivered all his lines without words'.

What also impressed Kuang Yige was the female protagonist's 'mastery of verbal expressions'. Although Zhang's characters have difficulty in expressing their feelings, his films feature a paradoxical sensitivity to human voices. In *Spring Subway*, the characters rehearse conversations before mirrors or walls, confide to the camera, or speak their minds through voiceovers. In *I Belonged to You*, the voices of radio anchors reach their listeners across space in a pervasive way. Similarly, in 'Passing By', the female lead's monologue stands out: the director lets her recount her story instead of representing relevant scenes in flashbacks or recollection images. This allows the audience's visual attention to be fixed on the moment when the couple's encounter coincides with a national event. Concerning the latter, Zhang similarly situates a group of young characters passing 'Gaokao' (the college entrance examination) at the moment of China's successful bid for the Beijing Olympics, and a leading couple's breakup one year later against the background of China's defeat in the 2002 World Cup in his film *Congcong nianian/Fleet of Time* (2014).

A bus is also critical to 'Passing By', a restricted space that confines the couple and compels them to communicate, albeit one-sidedly. It is also an interior space subject to interruption and influences from the outside world. When the vehicle stops, the communication cuts off, and crowds of strangers separate the couple. The fact that 'Passing By' is chosen as the English title of the episode – in contrast to its Chinese title 'Xiangyu', which means 'encounter' – reveals the director's emphasis on these moments of interruption. The significance of the bus in this sense resonates with that of subways in *Spring Subway* and *I Belonged to You*. In the former, strangers become acquaintances with whom Jianbin can reveal his secret unemployment; in the latter, Yaoji asks Chen a series of questions about love disguised as role play. Off the subway, obstacles to communication resume and feelings must be shielded again. However, the couple's encounter on a bus rings a bell with Douban user Bafa Liya jiushen (30 September 2019) in another way. It reminds them of the moment when Wenhui and Yang Zheng meet for the first time in *Jiangan jinxing daodi/Cherish Our Love Forever* (1998) (television series) and then meet again twelve years later in *Jiangan jinxing daodi/Eternal Moment* (2010) (a film version), both directed by Zhang Yibai.

'The Guiding Star': Chen's landscape shots and metaphoric narrative

This episode tells a classic story of how two juvenile delinquents are inspired and transformed by a wise elder. Except for the aforementioned image of a Party cadre – the wise elder, Laoli, played by Fifth-Generation filmmaker Tian Zhuangzhuang – the episode is characterised by landscape shots and a metaphoric narrative that have been consistent with Chen Kaige's style since the mid-1980s. Chen's debut film *Huang tudi/Yellow Earth* (1984) is filled with landscape shots of northern Shaanxi and the Yellow River, symbolising China's backward cultural traditions suffocating its younger generation (Shen 2014). In *Haizi wang/King of the Children* (1987), an isolated school on a mountaintop exhibits a sense of detachment, while a Chinese character coined by temporary teacher Laogan implies what Chinese education lacks most: creativity and humanity (Zhang 2002). Chen's contribution to *Ten Minutes Older* (2002), a transnational omnibus film, deploys a metaphysical image of '100 Flowers' surrounding a *siheyuan* (a type of one-storey courtyard house made of brick and stone) to symbolise the Chinese cultural traditions that should be protected from modernisation.

Similarly, landscape shots are prominent in 'The Guiding Star' to signify China's expansive size and national power at the moment of welcoming returned astronauts. Moreover, when the two youngsters ride on horseback through the Gobi Desert towards the rising sun at the end of the episode, there is a sense of hope and redemption reminiscent of Hanhan's running against a crowd of local peasants who pray for rain at the end of *Yellow Earth* (Donald 2000). Douban user Kunlun youren yiqingyi (28 September 2019) seemed to be aware of Chen's trademark, claiming that Chen's episode is 'grand' and 'warm': 'the warmth of the story is set against the grandness of the landscape, demonstrating the director's superb control'.

With landscape shots imbued with symbolic meanings, Chen has proved his talent in 'showing' instead of 'telling' (Zhang 2004, 236). However, his much-denounced work *Wuji/The Promise* (2005) signalled a problematic shift. The film contains numerous mysterious lines, termed 'Shakespeare-style expressions' (Shen 2014). 'The Guiding Star' continues this problem: dialogue is used to convey metaphoric meanings but becomes incomprehensible to the audience; for example, 'How long do you think you can hold it up? It has to stand by itself, or it won't survive'⁴ (the young men being likened to lambs for a need of independence and accountability); 'Just like you two, they're coming home' (the young men's release from detention being taken as astronauts' return to the earth); 'Kids, that's your star. Chase it' (the astronauts being established as role models for the young men). In the milieu of a conversation, these lines sound strange and obscure. They are subject to a lukewarm reception by a generation of young Chinese audiences who prefer down-to-earth dialogue that resonates with their lives. Douban user Cha Hucha (30 September 2019) responded by claiming the second half of the episode 'a fable story' but pitied that it 'lacks an adequate setup of a fairy tale's atmosphere'. They thereby ranked the episode the poorest among all. User Si Xiangshi (28 September 2019) asserted that it is 'Chen's consistent style of insanity to juxtapose two unrelated events in a story, one big and one small'. In their eyes, 'the only thing that is worthy of praise is the story's set up in the borderland'. As a rare exception, user Da Qite (Grinch) (25 September 2019) expressed their appreciation of the Fifth-Generation directors' attachment to the land and their romantic sentiment, supporting the director's metaphoric treatment of images and languages.

'One for All': Wen's chick flick and fantasy scene

Writer-director Wen Muye has displayed a consistent interest in serious social subjects. His only feature film, *Wo bushi yaoshen/Dying to Survive* (2018), focuses on leukaemia patients in China and the nation's medical reform, while his earlier short films touch upon the rural-urban divide (*Shitou/Stone*, 2010), empty-nest older adults (*Jinlan Guiqin*, 2011), ethnic youths' religious beliefs (*Douzheng/Battle*, 2012), and poverty, bereavement, and folk customs (*Anhun qu/Requiem*, 2014) (Fu 2019). Wen's participation in *MPMC* required compromise as it had to be uplifting in accordance with the film's celebratory tone. As the youngest of all the directors, he also likely faced a limited screenplay choice. In this context, his episode opens little for the audience to make connections with his oeuvre. Nonetheless, it resembles Wen's contribution to *Lianai zhong de chengshi/Cities in Love* (2015), an omnibus film belonging to the 'chick flick' genre (*Xiaoniu dianying*). It also contains a scene of surrealism that has characterised many of Wen's previous works (Fu 2019).

Specifically, 'One for All' foregrounds a team of attractive female pilots played by such popular young actors as Song Jia and Tong Liya. Among all episodes in *MPMC*, this one accords uppermost significance to female characters. Shots are generously devoted to the moment when the girls put on their aviation gear and military uniforms. When their male counterparts appear in a group, they pay a unanimous salute to the protagonist, who has just accomplished her mission as a backup and returned to base. However, one scene of the protagonist jumping off a chimney as a child is astonishing at first sight, but it resonates with Wen's previous treatments of a sick dog in *Stone* and a dead wife in *Requiem*. To convey a certain type of native land attachment, Wen miraculously revives a dying dog suffering from urinary obstruction when it is brought back to its demolished home near where it used to urinate under a tree. In *Requiem*, when the male lead returns from selling his wife's corpse to finance an urgent operation for his daughter, the director has the wife appear in front of him to indicate the man's affection for her. Similarly, the fantasy scene in 'One for All' not only wakens the protagonist from a coma but also manifests her deep-rooted aspiration to fly, which acts as a foil for the great sacrifice she has made for her team and the nation. Douban user Zian (30 September 2019) discovered another link. 'Deeply touched by a sense of tenderness underneath a facade of seriousness among air force soldiers,' they claimed that 'the episode is consistent with Wen's *Dying to Survive*'. Zian is likely referring to a type of universal softness in a stranger's heart that brings hope to the leukaemia patients in the latter.

Omnibus films as a new strategy for Chinese 'main-melody' films

This study proposes two dimensions of connections to examine the spectatorship of *MPMC*, based on the film's omnibus structure. Horizontally, the omnibus form allows the film's 'main-melody' elements to be reiterated as refrains in a melody, becoming reverberations to be picked up consciously or unconsciously by the audience. Simultaneously, viewers can entertain themselves by seeking shared features of other kinds. Vertically, most contributing directors are the backbones of contemporary Chinese cinema, and their episodes are closely related to their previous works. Thus, they bring the joy of discovery to cinephile audiences. As Sarris ([1962] 2009, 454) put it, the pleasure of 'auteur theory' is to find links that otherwise 'would have passed unnoticed' between scenes from an auteur's different works.

This type of spectatorship seems to favour omnibus films of national productions instead of transnational productions (such as *About Love* and *Ten Minutes Older*) because the audience must be familiar with their contributing directors to elicit associations of a certain scale and density. Similarly, the horizontal-vertical paradigm does not work fully with omnibus films promoting new directors; *Cities in Love* and many others in Taiwanese (Zheng 2014) and Hong Kong cinemas (River/Zxh1964 2004) are all of this type. In terms of employing established filmmakers for box-office returns in a national environment, *MPMC* is most similar to the omnibus films of the Republic of China era (Zhang 2013). In particular, *MPMC* resembles *Lianhua jiaoxiangqu/Symphony of Lianhua* (1937), a propaganda movie (*Xuanchuan pian*) decrying Japan's 1930s invasion of China. It seems that after disappearing from mainland cinema for over half a century, the omnibus film has made a comeback, reintroduced to revitalise Chinese 'main-melody' films.

In China, 'main-melody' films usually refer to those that use film as an art form to express the nation's mainstream ideologies (Rao and Lan 2019). The concept of 'main-melody' was first proposed in 1987 during a national filmmaking conference (Li 2020). It served two aims: one was to prepare for the upcoming 40th anniversary of the PRC, and the other was to counter the commercial and entertainment waves of filmmaking at the time (Rao and Lan 2019). Soon it became a guideline in China's film production. In 1989, a host of 'dedication movies' were released to celebrate the National Day, such as *Weiwei Kunlun/The Kunlun Column*, *Kaiguo dadian/The Birth of New China*, and *Baise qiyi/Baise Uprising*. These films followed an epic storytelling style and exhibited a heroic vision of history (Li 2020). The audiences were expected to be 'interpellated' (Althusser [1971] 2001) into certain subject positions according to the state's dominant ideologies. In the early 1990s, 'main-melody' films continued with a trait of authority and seriousness (Rao and Lan 2019). However, due to the impact of Hollywood imports since the mid-1990s, 'main-melody' films were transformed. The 'dedication movies' in 1999, such as *Hengkong chushi/Roaring Across the Horizon*, *Guoge/The National Anthem*, and *Wode 1919/My 1919*, manifested a combination of heroic narratives with entertainment ingredients (Li 2020). In the new century, 'main-melody' films continued to embrace the values of mass culture and the rules of the market (Rao and Lan 2019). A new type of 'main-melody' films, also known as 'main melody commercial blockbuster' (Rosen 2012), or 'new mainstream films' (*Xin zhuliu dianying*) (Yin 2019), or 'new mainstream blockbusters' (*Xin zhuliu dapian*) (Rao and Lan 2019) came into being. Upholding the mainstream ideologies remained the top objective of these films. However, they also sought ways to 'stimulate audience interest' (Rosen 2012, 197) by integrating the best cultural, technological, and commercial resources of the nation (Rao and Lan 2019). As a result, the gap between 'main-melody' films and commercial films was largely bridged (Rao and Lan 2019).

The new type was best exemplified by Huang Jianxin's 'founding trilogy': *Jianguo daye/The Founding of a Republic* (2009), co-director; *Jiandang daye/The Founding of a Party* (2011), co-director; and *Jianjun daye/The Founding of an Army* (2017), co-producer. They adopted the strategy of an all-star cast, which in the case of *The Founding of a Republic* resulted in 'the amusing game of trying to discern which star was hiding under the makeup of a late 1940s historical figure' (Rosen 2012, 198). While stars can enrich the audience's cinematic pleasure through the psychoanalytic mechanisms of objectification and identification, they can also facilitate the audience's imagination and connections based on their previous work, media appearances, and gossip (Dyer 1986). With *MPMC*, Huang's

innovation took a step further. By bringing multiple directors of great popularity onboard, *MPMC* cashed in on these directors' box-office appeal while inviting the audience's inter-textual associations based on the omnibus seriality and an auteurist perspective. This new strategy manages to provide more sources of pleasure for the audience. As Douban user Yeye yeye (30 September 2019) acknowledged, 'Despite being a "dedication movie," the film was original and creative in bringing together China's best directors and actors, which itself is worth watching.'

In the current climate of Chinese cinema industrialisation, *MPMC* has been a winning strategy worthy of replication. During the 2020 and 2021 National Day holidays, two other 'main-melody' omnibus films, *Wohe wode jiaxiang/My People, My Homeland* (2020) and *Wohe wode fubei/My Country, My Parents* (2021), were released in mainland China. The former takes up the theme of rural development, which had been a priority issue on the nation's agenda before the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter focuses on the issue of generational inheritance, with the father figures depicted as the founders of the nation's establishment, construction, and development. The paradigm proposed in the present study is applicable to an analysis of the two films, albeit with minor revisions. An extra dimension can be added to examine the links within the trilogy, given that, for example, Ning Hao contributes again to *My People, My Homeland*, while Xu Zheng participates in all three films, bringing his main performers from *MPMC*. Notably, *My Country, My Parents* includes two first-time directors among its altogether four contributors, which recalls the omnibus format's conventional role of ushering in new talents. Despite weakened vertical connections from an auteurist perspective, pleasure would be equally obtained from seeking horizontal connections within the film and across the trilogy. This is also what Douban user Ooym (4 October 2021) commented on *My Country, My Parents* when they expressed a wish that the 'My' series could continue.

Notes

1. Film reviews on Douban include two categories: short comments and long reviews. This essay cites statistics on short comments for convenience. There were 290,200 short comments on the date (26 February 2022) the data was accessed. The ranking of the 'hottest' short comments provided by the website is mainly based on the number of 'likes' (*dianzan*), the credits of the users, and the number of follow-up comments. Some reviewers make comments on more than one issue listed here, and thus the proportions add up to more than 100%. The Douban short comments cited in the rest of the essay are among the top 100 'hottest' ones (unless indicated otherwise), suggesting that they represent a certain degree of consensus.
2. In the 1990s, Guan Hu's debut feature *Toufa luanle/Dirt* suffered from severe censorship, and so did Ning Hao's *Wuren qu/No Man's Land*, which was completed in 2009 but banned for four years before its final release.
3. A complete analysis of all episodes can be provided upon request.
4. The English translations of *MPMC* reference the film's original bilingual subtitles, with minor revisions. The translations from other films and the translation of cinephilia comments are all the author's own.

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