



# Chinese ‘Main-melody’ Cinema

## History, Institutions, Languages, and Narratives

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This thesis investigates main-melody cinema (*zhuxuanlü dianying* 主旋律电影), a category of Chinese propaganda films that was officially established in 1987 during the National Conference of Feature Film Studio Directors in Beijing. Since its institutionalization, this category has progressively become one of the most commercially successful and culturally significant segments of China’s domestic box office.

Positioned within Chinese film studies, the research adopts a diachronic perspective, tracing the historical origins, institutional frameworks, and narrative transformations of Chinese propaganda cinema, and examining how it has evolved into a mainstream genre with cultural relevance for nation-building processes in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The thesis is structured into two main sections.

Section I provides a historical overview of the institutions developed by the Chinese state to regulate and support propaganda cinema, from early film regulation under the Qing dynasty to the centralized control exercised by the Film Bureau under the ideological guidance of the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The aim is to highlight the historical continuity and relative coherence

of Chinese propaganda cinema through an analysis of its institutional framework, by offering a synthesized review of key academic contributions and by equipping the reader with tools to critically assess the contemporary developments of main-melody cinema—which are the focus of Section II.

Section II presents an original periodization of the evolution of main-melody cinema from 1987 to 2022. The starting point marks the formal creation of the category, while the endpoint provides sufficient critical distance to reflect on the productions created for the 100th anniversary of the CCP’s founding in 2021, a pivotal moment for Chinese propaganda and nation-building. In this context, this thesis proposes a model based on four phases: emergence, canonization, mainstreaming, and intensification. Section II explores how main-melody cinema has integrated spectacle-driven and commercially oriented modes of storytelling while maintaining its propagandistic aims—thus aligning with global cinematic trends and attracting private investment from major companies such as Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent. Films such as *The Birth of New China* (1989), *Assembly* (2007), *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), and *My People, My*

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*Country* (2019) serve to exemplify this evolution.

These films are critically examined through an integrated methodology that combines film analysis and narrative theory with approaches drawn from linguistic and cultural Chinese studies. This approach is necessary in order to account for the role of language and culture within Chinese filmic discourse. The goal is to identify the key elements of propagandistic storytelling and to analyze the narratives and discursive strategies of main-melody films with close attention to the specific ideological and cultural context of the PRC. For each case study, characteristic narrative sequences are discussed, and selected lines of dialogue are presented and analyzed both in the original Chinese and in translation.

The thesis is accompanied by an Appendix, which includes a glossary of the Chinese terms cited throughout the study, together with Italian translations.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that main-melody cinema plays an active role in shaping China's national identity, functioning as a symbolic medium through which new narratives of the nation's past, present, and future are constructed and disseminated both within the PRC and in a global context. More broadly, the study reflects on how propaganda, popular culture, and market forces converge in shaping contemporary societies. In the current context of clashing narratives and resurgent nationalisms, exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is hoped that this research will contribute to building bridges for critical engagement and intercultural dialogue.

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