

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study had two objectives: to find out if nationalism often discussed in other studies with connection to China in the 21st century can be seen also in most consumed popular Chinese films, and to explore how nationalism is expressed in the movies.

The research has shown that Chinese blockbusters are rich in nationalistic themes.

It has been demonstrated that not just films backed and sponsored by the government carry nationalistic messages but that pure commercial movies have also moved in this direction. However, there is one major distinction between these two groups of films that is related to the concept of political and cultural nationalism. As has been said, the research identified the themes of both of them, i.e. both manifestations of nationalism that identify nationality with citizenship and stress out affiliation to the Chinese state and nationalism that focuses on genetic or cultural characteristics (affiliation to the Chinese culture) were included. It became evident that movies backed and co-sponsored by the government tend to express more often the political nationalism (*Purple Sunset, Red Turn, Charging Out Amazon, C.E.O., Deng Xiaoping in 1928*) and pure commercial movies tend to express the cultural one (*Hero, Warriors of Heaven and Earth, The Promise, Curse of Golden Flower, A Battle of Witts, The Warlords*). Of course, the exceptions exist. *The Knot*, for example, is a movie heavily backed and promoted by the government, however, as a movie seeking re-unification of China (as a

state), is trying to spread the idea of “Chineseness“(based on culture). As such this movie becomes a hybrid in which expressions of political and cultural nationalism co-exist.

Another exception is *Tokyo Trial* designed as a commercial blockbuster (however, heavily promoted by the government) with pan-Asian cast that falls under the category of political nationalism seeking the respect for Chinese state. Then, *Assembly* is another commercial movie, but set in a war between communists and KMT, focusing on soldiers' path towards becoming country's heroes.

In sum, this study supports Chang's (2000) argument that in nowadays China political and cultural nationalism co-exist. For Chang, the reason of this co-existence is a “blurred boundary between Chinese nation and Chinese state under the communist rule“ (p. 275). However, in the filmmaking area the reasons are probably different. As has been pointed out, the changes in the structure of Chinese movie industry pushed filmmakers towards commercialization. Movies analyzed in this study are those that succeeded in this process, i.e. won popularity among the audience and earned money. Most of them deal with more distant history of China and promote cultural nationalism. It can be concluded that cultural nationalism is more appealing to the audience, and filmmakers realized this fact and decided to offer the viewers what they called for - “great, old, heroic China“. Moreover, this kind of movies also proved to have bigger

potential to succeed in other countries. Movies such as *Hero*, *Curse of Golden Flower*, or *The Warlords* did very well abroad.

Another thing that was incorporated in the movies to lure the audience was so-called “hollywoodization“. Zhu (2003) wrote that Chinese filmmakers started to copy Hollywood formula in the mid-1990s in reaction to government permission for annual importation of ten international blockbusters to China that made them feel endangered. This Hollywood formula characterized by high-cost production, special effects, sophisticated cinematography, and the usage of stars prevails in Chinese blockbusters in 21st century. Moreover, it is not limited to pure commercial movies but it is also trying to be adopted by the movies backed by government (*The Knot*, Deng Xiaoping in 1928).

In China, Hollywood was taken as a model worth following not just for its commercial appeal, but also for its skillful incorporation of political messages into the movies. As Zhu (2003) reminded, Hollywood films such as *True Lies*, James Cameron, 1995 and *Forrest Gump*, Robert Zemeckis, 1994 were considered by the Party as clever representations of the American patriotism and capitalist ideology and in Changsha meeting in 1996 were introduced to filmmakers as models they should follow (p. 101).

Indeed, Hollywood movies are rich in nationalism and politics. For example, Giglio (2000) brought a lot of arguments about the fact that Hollywood is not free from

politics when he discussed background and hidden meanings of movies such as *Minority Report*. Devin (1999) came up with the same argument when talking about movies such as *Rambo*.

From the cross-cultural perspective, one can find a lot of similarities between nationalisms in U.S., China and elsewhere. It's basically about the promotion of one's culture, promotion of one's regime, celebration of one's successes or heroism, and about horrifying the enemies. However, there are also some differences that are related to (historical) experiences of each country. In case of U.S. and China the differences are related to the fact, that the United States (unlike China) has never suffered from a major war in their territory. Therefore, the "bitter nationalism" stressing people's suffering and humiliation that is often mentioned in Chinese case is missing in American movies, however can be found in European ones, especially when it comes to Poland and other Eastern European countries that suffered heavily during Second World War and later on under the communist rule controlled from Moscow.

When it comes to the second objective - how nationalism is expressed in the movies, it must be said that it always refers to history (mythical, ancient, and recent), or to events of modern time. It is very interesting that none of the analyzed movies is nowadays fiction, almost all of them present themselves as historical annals, stories told about the past (or myths in Smith's words) with prefaces and postscripts. Here,

Wright's (1975) argument can help to explain this fact. He believes that this kind of myth is very useful because it can use the past to create present conflicts and to offer their solution. „Myths use the past to tell us how to act in the present“ (Wright, p. 187).

It was demonstrated that during the first years of 21st century, nationalism in blockbusters tend to be more positive. China was portrayed as a final victor, or a country waiting for her golden age. Movies such as *Charging out Amazon* or *C.E.O.* were telling the people that China is superior to other countries and that her time has come and other countries has to admit it. At the same time they were urging people to be hardworking, proud, and patriotic. Then, movies like *Red Turn*, *Hero*, and *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* were giving privileges to the great leaders and guaranteed their best intentions to the nation. Just thanks to the wisdom of the leader and trust of the people given to him, the golden age could start. Therefore, it can be assumed that the beginning of 21st century was a period of excitement, hopes and expectations for Chinese filmmakers. The latter years show a more painful perspective. *Battle of Wits* and *Assembly* are showing Chinese suffering from civil wars and rebellions, while *The Warlords* and *Curse of Golden Flower* present the decline of China. Kings, emperors and local governors become rotten, just seeking wealth and power. Here, the suffering Chinese nation, pure, peace-loving, and willing to follow old teachings and ideals becomes more important than political authority and Chinese state. In this sense, the

movies from latter years are not just nationalistic, they also carry moral messages. The possible explanation is that Chinese filmmakers realized the problems of Chinese society – materialism and estrangement of China's new rich, threat of social unrest and corruption in government. Their movies thereafter became a call for the return to the old virtues, for peace, and stability.

The findings of this study suggest that film remains to be one of the tools of Party's propaganda. As has been mentioned in the beginning, the Chinese Communists have traditionally believed that “ideology forms an atmosphere favorable to political development“ (Su, 1994, p. 77) and that “film is a tool to educate the people in patriotism and socialism“ (Liu, 1971, p. 159). Therefore, traditionally (from 1949 until the beginning of the entertainment wave) the Party controlled the media and urged the filmmakers to produce movies strong in Maoism and nationalism. Of course, the propaganda movies still exist. The Party still maintains control over media including film and movies such as *Charging out Amazon*, *Deng Xiaoping in 1928*, *Red Turn*, or *The Knot* are her newest propaganda. At the same time, this post-modern propaganda differs from the traditional one because it adopts some commercial strategies (usage of stars, exotic setting, themes such as love and relationship, high-cost production) to lure the audience. However, it must be pointed out that just 14 movies out of 40 blockbusters were found to be nationalistic. Moreover, just three of them were pure

propaganda movies. When we look at this fact from the historical perspective, it seems that the Party either relinquishing or losing control over what people are watching.

From the historical perspective, the trend towards what Zhao (1998) described as “convenient fit between propaganda and commercialism“ is evident. Zhao argued that commercial area survives and flourishes “by softening the tones of political propaganda“ and thus supplements rather than opposes the Party organs. This category of movies that can be best represented by *Hero* or *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* goes beyond Chinese Communist state and delves into the period of ancient and imperial China. However, the content of the movies still works for the Party and at the same time has greater potential to please the audience. This “convenient fit“ is what Zhang Yingjin (2004) described in Zhang Yimou's case as “new alliance of art, capital and politics“ (p. 293). This is probably also the future of a great part of Chinese movies.

Further research is indicated with the focus on the audience from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West. This kind of study could show the differences in decoding the movies' messages among the groups and by examining audience's opinion about China's nationalistic movies and could bring along a cross-cultural perspective to this topic.