



# The Writing of Cultural Memory in the New Mainstream Film

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**Abstract.** The new mainstream film, a fresh manifestation of the Chinese film industry's self-evolution, has emerged as a key cultural memory carrier for China's new period. Using the new mainstream movie as the research subject, this paper examines how cultural memory is improved and rebuilt during the film's narrative and communication processes. It also looks at efficient methods of writing cultural memory into the creation of images and media communication within the new mainstream movie and offers scholarly resources for the creation of more globally recognized Chinese cultural images.

**Keywords:** new mainstream films; cultural memory; media memory; identity.

## 1 Introduction

Since its inception, film has taken on a significant cultural role as a vehicle of cultural memory. As of March 2024, among the top 10 films in the domestic box office, five new mainstream films accounted for a cumulative total of more than 24.252 billion yuan, achieving a win-win situation for both mainstream ideology and the commercial market. The new mainstream film breaks the type and media communication paradigm of the traditional theme film. It integrates the main melody with typification and commercialization, strives to build a strong Chinese cultural gene pool for the current social life, and shapes the image symbols and images that carry cultural memory.

Therefore, it is of great practical significance and academic value to explore the effective ways of cultural memory writing in image construction and media communication in new mainstream film

## 2 New Mainstream Film: the Medium of Cultural Memory

### 2.1 Cultural Memory and Film

Cultural memory is based on Maurice Halbwachs "Collective Memory" theory. Jan Assmann formally proposed that "cultural memory is the long-term memory of culture, which is constructed through the collective symbols in movement of social communication." [1] Cultural memory is transmitted from generation to generation through the

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storage of cultural forms or cultural symbols, which organically communicates historical memory and individual memory, Outlines the "self-image" of the group, and finally realizes the resonance of the cultural identity of the nation state.

At the same time, because cultural memory is often "subject to complex and diverse historical changes - or: the innovation process determined by media technology."<sup>[2]</sup> The memory mechanism is rooted in the nature of images. As a typical mass media at present, film builds a more three-dimensional memory place by virtue of audio-visual language, and reconstructs the original boundary of memory. Cultural memory just emphasizes the characteristics of individual, social and historical interaction. The film uses narrative strategy as a rhetorical means to become a bridge between cultural memory and audience 's historical memory. The audience forms a rethinking of individual destiny under the film-watching ceremony, thus forming a collective identity at the spiritual level.

## **2.2 Transformation from the Main Theme to the New Mainstream**

Throughout the history of China's film development, it is not difficult to find that China's films have constantly explored the road of characteristics around the mainstream ideology, and have gone through the development stage of "main theme" to "new mainstream".

The term "main theme film," or mainstream film, refers to a movie that adheres closely to socialist trends, preserves national culture and the spirit of patriotism, and reflects the tone of upwardly mobile films.<sup>[3]</sup> Early Chinese main theme films highlighted the missionary role while presenting important historical themes, characters, and events from revolutionary history. For example, films such as "Fighting North and South" and "Baise Uprising", with their distinctive national attributes and historical roots, have become one of the powerful means of writing China's socialist cultural memory.

Films are gradually bridging the gap between commercial and theme films, ushering in the industrialization period under the combined influence of policy and market economy. In order to transcend the previous primary theme's singular expression and portray the mainstream philosophy and values of the nation in the modern day, the new mainstream film blends multiple artistic mediums, starting with the demands of the mainstream audience. The Battle at Lake Changjin writes about dramatic historical events by fusing advanced audio-visual elements with mainstream ideology. This creates a bridge between the past and present and allows history to complement reality. Thus reinforcing the audience's identity.

### **3 Awakening and Reshaping: the Image Construction of the New Mainstream Film**

#### **3.1 Returning to the Human Dimension in a Small Way**

The fragments of one's own life form the basis of memory. We can only understand the voice of the times by writing the art of people's lives. The new mainstream movie will examine the image of the group that is not in the spotlight, portray the spiritual attitude of individuals from all walks of life under the mainstream ideology, and focus on little people and small occurrences in the contemporary filmmaking environment. The audience tends to emphasize "people-oriented" cinema and television works that connect human emotions with feelings of home and country, based on the threefold role of communal memory, personal memory, and cultural memory. The turn to the individual as the subject of memory in *My Country My Parents* builds the audience's memories of the cultural life of the 1990s through fast-cutting adverts, and restores the original appearance of life through micro-narrative techniques, where the individual and the collective, the image and the audience overlap to generate a common historical memory.

Participation and interaction are the basis for the formation of a sense of commonality, which leads to the formation of an "imagined community". In the context of new cultural consumption, the return to the human nature and the use of "mortals" as the protagonists of narratives are conducive to the promotion of audience participation in image dissemination. The heroes in new mainstream cinema have lost their lofty aura, easing the conflict between "heroes" and "the everyday", and realizing the audience's expectation for three-dimensional and diversified heroes. More than showing the image of diplomats at the national level, "A Home Coming" incorporates the emotions of ordinary people who long to return to ordinary families and respect life. The film, in its camera expression, throws away the divinity of the historical figures, and adds details and emotional expression to reduce them to ordinary people.

#### **3.2 Authenticity of Details and Reproduction of History**

Memory is frequently linked interactively via the memory field, which is made up of memory symbols. Specific character symbols, object symbols, and scene symbols are encoded to form a human memory text, thus awakening emotional resonance. New mainstream film seeks to restore history and approach the truth to a large extent. The glamour of art lies in the portrayal of details. When the creators restore history in front of the audience through artistic treatment and precision, create a narrative space across time and space, echo the events that the audience has experienced, perceived and thought about with the texts in the film and television works, and trigger the recollection of memory with the figurative memory text, thus awakening the public's emotional memory.

Since the audience is not physically present in the past, the psychological presence created by the film gradually becomes a primary constructive field of collective memory within the socio-cultural framework, allowing people to further consolidate and strengthen their individual memories. From the script to the actors' performances,

costumes, props, etc., the new mainstream film *Chinese Doctors* is a documentary-like 1:1 reconstruction of the chaos and tension of the outbreak in Wuhan at the beginning of 2020. With its richly detailed audiovisual text, it interacts with the memory schema held by the audience, realizing the audience's "bodily co-presence", and facilitating the audience's community imagination and construction. This has also become a direct means for new mainstream cinema to write cultural memories.

### **3.3 Enabling Technology to Transcend Historical "Wonders"**

Film production inherently uses the "macro-narrative" technique in the context of an all-media allocation and the swift advancement of digital technology to produce a cinematic "spectacle". Cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann, is the spatial production of memory in a new medium following specific reconstruction and modification in order to replicate the memory.[4]

True stories are used as the model for new mainstream movies, which artistically reconstruct them. It shapes the spectacle of audio-visual images using innovative audio-visual techniques and cutting-edge digital technology, tremendously satisfying the audience's audio-visual experience with artistic expression that surpasses reality. In addition to providing the audience with immediate viewing stimulation and an immersive audiovisual shock, "The Battle at Lake Changjin" also writes the spiritual outlook of the Chinese people during that era, activates cultural memories, and helps the audience realize their national and ethnic identity by utilizing digital special effects technology to create a grand and realistic battlefield environment.

### **3.4 Collision of Diversified Themes and Genre Elements**

Under the demands of the era of commercialization and art, new mainstream films have absorbed the artistic features of genre films and explored genres, which are more in line with the aesthetic interests of mainstream audience groups. In order to adapt to popularisation and pan-entertainment, new mainstream films have added more genre elements of comedy films. As a kind of popular art, comedy is closer to the life of the public. The comedy+new mainstream films represented by *My People My Homeland* have completed the narrative of the melodrama film and expressed the mainstream values in a light-hearted and humorous way with a civilian selection, the use of comedic stars with clear directions and a comedic way of presentation.

However, new mainstream films do not simply add comedic expressions to their creations. Rather, under the premise of fully understanding the severe challenges of the changing times, they express the tragic elements in a comedic way, depicting the splendour of the years and the geo-life in a light-hearted and funny way, penetrating the mainstream values inadvertently, and triggering the audience's emotional touches and reflections.

## **4 Awakening and Reinvention: the Image Construction of New Mainstream Film**

### **4.1 Succession of Media Memory**

The manner that audiences acquire and distribute media content has drastically changed in the contemporary "Internet Plus" era. Information is now shared rather than unilaterally disseminated. The new mainstream movie, as a media product, wakes the audience's cultural memory and reshapes the media memory by immersing them in the cinema environment established by the producers through the audio-visual text of the film and the ritual behaviour of offline viewing. Viewers create an identity in the movie by sharing a common emotional experience.

The so-called media memory refers to the media's collection, organization and editing of information through fictional or non-fictional ways to form the media's presentation and memory text of the content, as a way to reshape human's individual, collective and cultural memory of the information and so on. Media memory is separated into short-term memory and long-term memory, and it shares traits with individual memory. It always grows further based on personal memory, and the relationship between media and memory is vital to the transmission and upkeep of human civilization. Dutch scholar Douwe Draaisma once pointed out: "Artificial memory can not only assist, liberate and even replace human memory, but also affect our cognition of memory and forgetting." [5] Film, as one of the mainstream media nowadays, influences the human perception of memory and forgetting.

New Mainstream Cinema selectively collects memory texts from historical sources and then encodes them artistically. Cultural memory is developed through the depth of history, its capacity far exceeds the vision of collective memory, and due to the long history and incomplete historical records, individual memories tend to be fragmented and blurred. Therefore, the creators of new mainstream cinema use the function of images to distill texts that are in line with the current values and cultural environment for artistic creation. It interconnects the old memories precipitated by the history of the old times with the current cultural space, directly affects personal memory, and creates a benign interaction between short-term memory and long-term memory, thus increasing the intrinsic value of cultural memory.

### **4.2 Expansion of Topic Ecology**

New mainstream films now have a channel of transmission thanks to the advent of new media technology, but they also increasingly depend on it as a means of "post-creation". A wide range of young audiences participate in the secondary creation of media memories, delivering emotional expressions in the form of film reviews or mixtures, or inadvertently creating emoticons and other cultural and creative products on social platforms. The new media has created a new media field for new mainstream films, where audiences are both recipients and promoters of information. Users' spontaneous secondary writing of media memory further prolongs the cycle of short-term memory, so

that the precipitated short-term memory becomes a more stable and sustainable long-term memory, and achieves the ability to propagate through time and space.

## 5 Conclusion

As a mainstream media product, new mainstream films have completed the exploration of powerful ways of writing cultural memory from the dimensions of image construction and dissemination mechanism. New mainstream films are created around socialist cultural memory, using reasonable marketing and creative methods to mobilize the memory mechanism and continue the memory sequence, thus triggering social fervour. It positively guides the audience's collective beliefs and values, broadens the latitude of memory construction from the details, tells a good Chinese story, and shapes the image of Chinese culture known to the world.

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