China's Official Values Propaganda in New Mainstream Films: A Systematic Literature Review and Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

Chinese new mainstream films are responsible for propagating China's official values to spectators. This study aimed to provide a critical and well-rounded understanding of the propagation of new mainstream films and the authorities' values for the filmic, cultural, and other relevant academic communities. A systematic literature review was conducted according to the PRISMA statement. Studies were identified from two databases—Web of Science and Scopus—and integrated into a double-sided snowball sampling procedure as seeds to identify other relevant resources. Codes and themes were generated using ATLAS.ti for data extraction and synthesis. The narratives of certain new mainstream films contradicted China's official political position and national interests. This study examined the narrative mechanism used to interpret this issue from a theoretical perspective and revealed three themes that were discussed in the context of China's political discourse: patriotism, harmony, and prosperity. A filmic narrative mechanism model based on Gaudreault and Jost's work (1999 [2004]) was refined. Moreover, the cognitive gap in and between the mega-narrator and supreme narrator resulted in expressions that were incompatible with China's official position. This research contributes significantly to the study of Chinese new mainstream films.

Keywords: new mainstream films, core socialist values, official political discourse, values propaganda, supreme narrator

1. Introduction

Films have been regarded as a propaganda instrument by Chinese officials (Yang, 2016). China's main melody films are characterized by the solid authority's mainstream values propaganda (Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). In 1987, Teng, the director of the China Film Administration, proposed the concept of the main melody at a film conference (Kong, 2023; Su, 2016; Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). The primary function of main melody films is to promote the state's political values as embodied in the minds of individuals (Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). In 1989, *The Birth of New China* was produced for the 40th National Day of China (Yan, 2022) and is regarded as the pioneer of main melody films in Chinese cinema (Xie, 2020).

However, because main melody films lacked market appeal to the spectators, the mainstream film argument was introduced after the 21st century (Zhou & Ouyang, 2023), which became more commercialized than before (Kuang, 2022). In the following years, Chinese films promoting officials' political discourses were given a new term and interpretation and regarded as new mainstream films (Kuang, 2022; Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). According to Kuang (2022), new mainstream films have been upgraded from mainstream films. Kuang (2022, p. 1) said, "[...]it has made the audience resonate in the historical moment reappearance of the national memory through the shaping of civilian heroes in the background of the great era." New mainstream films mainly consider film commercialization and value promotion (Sun, 2023).

Regrettably, there is no academic consensus on the use of proper nouns in films that promote official political values. Some scholars have analyzed these films using the term "main melody" (Guan & Hu, 2021; Hussain et al., 2023; Qian, 2022; Xiang & Wang, 2022; Xie, 2020, 2021; Yan, 2022; Yang, 2023a). Another group of scholars used the term "mainstream" (Hu et al., 2024; Zhu, 2020). In addition, scholars such as Kuang (2022), Kong (2023), and Zhou and Ouyang (2023) have offered a clear conceptual explanation and distinction of these three terms. For example, the same film *The Wolf Warrior 2* was referred to as a main melody (Xie, 2020), mainstream (Zhou, 2020), and new mainstream (Zhou & Ouyang, 2023) film. This study employed the concept of "new mainstream" because we believe that the characteristics of the developmental history of these films at different stages should be addressed.

Africa is stigmatized in new mainstream films. It has been described using negative images in *Wolf Warrior II* (*Zhan lang II*, 2017, hereafter *WWII*; Galafa, 2019; Guan & Hu, 2021; Nicieja, 2023; Talmacs, 2020; Zhang, 2020). This negative prejudice and the biases against Africa from the West were incorporated in *WWII* narratives (Galafa, 2019; Nicieja, 2023) and embodied in neo-colonialism (Galafa, 2019). Specifically, Tomas and Berry (2021, p. 2) pointed out that *WWII* and *Operation Red Sea* (*Hong hai xing dong*, 2018, hereafter *ORS*) described Africa as a "lawless" and "disordered" place, involving the rescue of Chinese individuals trapped in Africa's warfare.

Rodrigue (2021) expressed opinions similar to those of Thomas and Berry (2021) by conducting a comparative analysis of *ORS*. The film reflected the improper and stereotypical characteristics of Africa with "piracy, desert and war" (p. 137) and even "terrorism" (p. 147); these expressions were influenced by previous Hollywood films' adverse depictions of Africa (Rodrigue, 2021). The Chinese narrative and description of Africa have been dragged into the racism debate in Chinese new mainstream films.

Talmacs (2020, p. 1242) explored Chinese university students' opinions of Africa and African individuals in *WWII* and obtained unsatisfactory results: "In a country historically fraught with anti-African racism, Chinese university student responses to the blockbuster, *WWII*, suggest attitudes towards and impressions of black Africans continue to draw negative connotations with poverty, low civility and distrust." The prejudicial characterization of Africa and African people in new mainstream films is intolerable for China's domestic people; it reinforces stereotypes of poverty and chaos in Africa globally, which are harmful to Sino-African relations. In summary, *WWII* and *ORS* represent new mainstream films that demonstrate African images with stereotyped narrations, which do not match the Chinese officials' political will and national interests.

China's officials perceive Africa as a good friend. According to Chinese mainstream media, Xinhua Net, in 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping (2018, para. 7) in his speech at the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, stated that, "For China, we are always Africa's good friend, good partner and good brother. No one could undermine the great unity between the Chinese people and the African people." Moreover, according to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, the Chinese diplomatic ambassador Liu Yuxi emphasized the deep friendship between China and Africa in 2021.

Africa and the Global South are strategically important to China in Sino-U.S. competition relations. China has been seen as a challenger to the existing global order dominated by the U.S. The concept of "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" proposed by China contrasts with the unilateralist "America First" policy proposed by the U.S. authorities (He, 2020). According to He's (2020) analysis, China aims to construct a fairer international order. Considering a community with a shared future, Chinese authorities are defending the interests of the Global South based on equal cooperation between China and other nations. Moreover, in the political context of China's One Belt and Road Initiative, according to Nantulya (2019), the close cooperation between China and Africa has significant economic and political benefits for each side.

Therefore, while new mainstream films are responsible for propagating China's official values to the spectators, these films stigmatize Africa, which is at odds with China's official willingness and political stance and damage China's national image globally. Scholars have analysed new mainstream films under the official political discourse. However, conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) in this area is necessary because it can support future studies by comprehensively understanding the political propaganda function of these films and avoiding the bias problem in traditional literature reviews (Shaffril et al., 2021a). This SLR was conducted under China's official political discourse, that is, the core socialist values, because these values are the central aspect of new mainstream films (Sun, 2023). Regarding the stigmatization narratives in new mainstream films, this study explored the reasons behind the principles of creating these narratives from the perspective of the narrative mechanism.

With the research problem in mind, the following research questions were identified:

RQ1: How do new mainstream films promote core socialist values to spectators?

RQ2: Why do new mainstream films inaccurately promote China's official discourse among spectators?

2. Method

2.1 Method for Research Question 1

To answer RQ1, we employed an SLR as a research method to systematically search for the relevant literature and critically analyse new mainstream films of China that propagate the Chinese authority's values and political wills. Snyder (2019, p. 334) stated, "The aim of a systematic review is to identify all empirical evidence that fits the pre-specified inclusion criteria to answer a particular research question or hypothesis." This systematic review followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al., 2021) to ensure high quality. Sarkis-Onofre et al. (2021, p. 1) pointed out that "[...] the PRISMA Statement is a road map to help authors best describe what was done, what was found, and in the case of a review protocol, what are they are planning to do."

2.1.1 Data Search Procedure

On 9 June 2024, we meticulously searched for relevant research articles using keywords in two credible databases: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). This study used the Boolean operator to search for the titles, abstracts, and keywords of previous studies in Scopus and for the topic (TS) in WoS to identify relevant studies. Table 1 lists the search strings used in this study.

Table 1. Search string

Database	String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("Chinese" OR "China's") AND ("Mainstream" OR "Main melody" OR "New Mainstream") AND ("film" OR "movie" OR "blockbuster" OR "cinema"))
WoS	TS= (("Chinese" OR "China's") AND ("Mainstream" OR "Main melody" OR "New Mainstream") AND ("film" OR "movie" OR "blockbuster" OR "cinema"))

With this research problem in mind, keywords and their synonyms were identified during the search procedure. We used advanced search functions in the WoS and Scopus databases to create the search strings.

2.1.2 Systematic Search Strategies

This SLR was guided by the PRISMA (2020) statement, which was adapted from the work of Page et al. (2021), as shown in Figure 1.
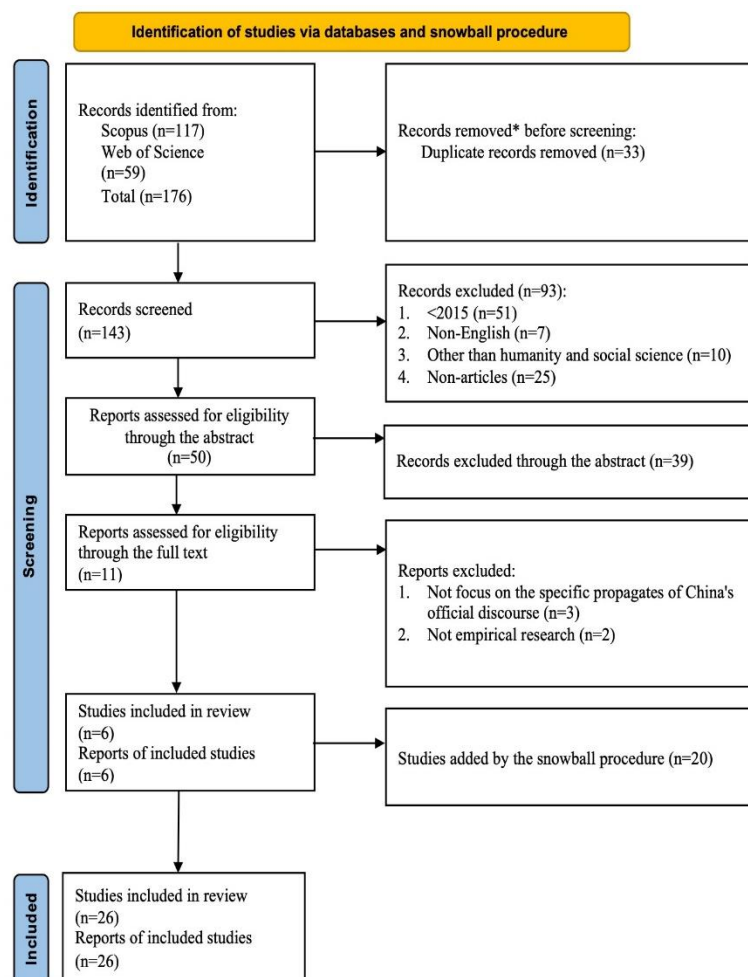

Figure 1. Flow chart for this SLR

Description: *Adapted from Page et al. 2021.* *The automation tool Zotero was used to identify the duplicates. Zotero identified 33 articles (n=33), but researchers manually removed them.

In addition, this section was structured according to the indications of Shaffril et al. (2021b) for the identification, screening, and eligibility of studies as search strategies.

Identification of studies

By searching for all the keywords and their combinations, we retrieved 59 results from WoS and 117 from Scopus. In total, 176 results were obtained by combining both. The PRISMA statement thoroughly reviewed and assessed the qualifications of 176 previous studies. Among the 176 studies in the WoS and Scopus databases, we primarily used Zotero to identify 33 duplicate articles, which were excluded from this research. We finally obtained 143 articles for the SLR (n = 143).

2.1.3 Screening of Studies

We set the eligibility criteria for previous studies to restrict their correlation and qualifications. The studies were required to meet the following criteria to be included in our systematic review. We only selected research articles from the last 10 years, published after 2014, to ensure time efficiency because this research was closely related to the Chinese political context. In addition, the studies were required to be published in English. The studies involved the subjects of humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, we only included peer-reviewed research articles with empirical data. The exclusion criteria were as follows. This systematic review did not include studies not written in English; those published in or before 2014; or books, book chapters, reports, essays, notes, conference proceedings, and review articles. Research articles not relevant to the humanities and social science subjects were also excluded. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for databases searching

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2015-2024	2014 and earlier
Language	English	Non-English
Subject area	Humanity and social sciences	Apart from humanity and social sciences
Source type	Peer-reviewed articles (with empirical data)	Books, book chapters, reports, essays, notes, conference proceedings, review articles, etc.

In screening the potential literature, this study excluded 51 articles published before 2015 and included 92 articles published after 2015. Moreover, seven non-English articles were excluded, leaving 85 articles. We restricted the subject area for potential articles to the humanities and social sciences in the filter panel on the Scopus website. For WoS, we excluded unrelated subjects and categorized them as natural sciences or computer sciences. Therefore, we obtained 75 articles after excluding 10. We excluded 25 other types of literature, such as conference proceedings and reviews, resulting in 50 articles. By utilizing the filter on the Scopus and WoS websites, 93 studies were excluded after screening; 50 articles were retained for the eligibility process.

2.1.4 Eligibility of Studies

With the research questions in mind, except for the inclusion criteria, an additional criterion was introduced for this study's manual eligibility screening process. We focused only on specific studies with a complete argumentation process for RQ1 under the issue of Chinese new mainstream films' propaganda of Chinese official values, judgments, governing concepts, initiatives, and so on in the era under the leadership of President Xi as the core of power in China. To avoid subjective biases, previous articles that only involved simple ideas (e.g. *WWII* reflected nationalism) were excluded from the eligibility process. This study's manual eligibility screening results adopted two approaches: database searching and snowball sampling.

To answer RQ1, we manually examined the abstracts and whole pages of 50 articles to ensure that the literature was adequate and appropriate for this study. We carefully reviewed the abstracts of these 50 articles, excluding 39 articles. Subsequently, we carefully read the full text of the 11 remaining articles and excluded 5. Finally, six articles were included in the SLR. These articles addressed the research problem of this study and were related to the propagation of Chinese official values through new mainstream films.

Additionally, because the sample size was too small (only seven articles), we employed snowball sampling to obtain more relevant articles to ensure the reliability of the findings. The snowball approach for selecting articles was double-sided, with backward snowball (through the references of the seed files) and forward snowball (through the citations of the seed files; Wohlin, 2014). Furthermore, according to Xiao and Watson (2017, p. 103), three paths for selecting articles were identified for the literature review: "(1) electronic databases; (2) backward searching; and (3) forward searching." Thus, previous studies' references and citations can be an effective path to getting more relevant articles. For this research, we identified seven articles after searching the databases with PRISMA as the seed files for the double-sided snowball procedure based on the work of Wohlin (2014). The identified inclusion principles for the snowball process followed the previously defined criteria.

Four rounds of snowball sampling were conducted. In the first snowball round, we selected the seed articles' references in the afterward snowball stage. During the backward snowball sampling stage, articles were selected by screening the literature citing these seed articles. The article citations were obtained from Google Scholar. When the first-round snowball process was completed, we immediately began the second round of double-sided snowball proceedings with the articles obtained from the first round until new articles could not be found. When we reached theoretical saturation, the snowball program was stopped. After the four rounds of snowball sampling, 20 articles were identified, leaving us with 26 articles for the SLR after the snowball and database search procedures.

2.1.5 Data Extraction and Synthesis

This study addressed RQ1 by extracting research data from previous articles. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach to synthesize the research data. The data extraction and synthesis process involved three stages: 1) repeatedly reading previous articles, 2) generating the initial codes, and 3) generating the themes. In the primary stage, we repeatedly scanned and re-examined the articles included in this study. According to Shaffril et al. (2021a), repeated familiarity with articles can provide significant information about the further stages of the SLR. Furthermore, in the process of data extraction, the extracted data must be highly consistent with the research questions and should not deviate from addressing the research questions (Shaffril et al., 2021b). Therefore, the data extraction process was appropriate for RQ1. In the second cycle of codification, themes were generated from the initial codes. ATLAS.ti was used to code the data via an inductive approach. In addition, we conducted descriptive and thematic analyses of the extracted and synthesized data.

2.2 Method for Research Question 2

To answer RQ2, we discussed Gaudreault and Jost's (1999 [2004]) filmic mechanism theory and the theoretical model of the mega-narrator from the perspective of film narratology. We argued that understanding the reason behind China's new mainstream films stigmatizing Africa from the filmic narrator's perspective can be effective, as pointed out by Gaudreault and Jost (1999 [2004], p. 57):

From this perspective, we have proposed a model where the primary narrator, responsible for communicating the filmic narrative, could be said to manipulate the diverse modes of filmic expression, to orchestrate them, make them function, and regulate their play in order to provide the spectator with diverse narrative information.

Far-famed filmic narratologists André Gaudreault and François Jost (1999 [2004]) expressed their ideas about the "narrator" in the field of film narratology. According to them, the "narrator" has been divided into two categories: the "narrator" has been divided into two categories: the "implicit narrator" ("primary narrator") and the "explicit narrator." (p. 52). Furthermore, they signified the "grand filmic image-maker" that "manipulates this audiovisual network," and the "grand filmic image-maker" is "implicit, extradiegetic, and invisible." (pp. 51–52). Regarding fiction, the narratologists "call this organizing function the implicit narrator" and pointed out that "In the cinema, the primary speaker, the implicit narrator, speaks cinema using images and sounds; the explicit narrator only uses words." (p. 52). Subsequently, "[...]in the cinema it is relatively difficult to make invisible the presence of the primary instance, which is the grand image-maker, the meganarrator, by interposing a secondary one." (p. 54). The "mega-narrator" and "implied author" do not directly show themselves on the screen (Guo, 2021, in Chinese). However, their presence is observed in the films (Gaudreault & Jost, 1999 [2004]). Despite the existence of the mega-narrator, the other narrators in the film "are only delegated narrators, second narrators, [...]." (p. 53).

The primary narrator in the filmic narrative is equal to the grand image-maker and mega-narrator, and these terms that govern audio-visual language are invisible and regarded as the implicit narrator in the cinematic narrative. The narrativity of film has been divided into two layers by Gaudreault and Jost (1999 [2004]). The first layer is the "monstration," which results in the junctions of frames; the second layer is called "the shot," resulting from the first layer, monstration (Gaudreault & Jost, 1999 [2004], p. 58). According to Gaudreault and Jost (1999 [2004], p. 58), the first layer, "monstration," creates the continuity of filmic images, whereas "This second layer of narrativity is thus based on a second cinematic articulation: that between shots." Moreover, the "meganarrator" or the "grand image-maker" dominates the two "instances": "monstrator" and "narrator," respectively (1999 [2004], p.58).

The following model, constructed by Gaudreault (1988, as cited in Gaudreault & Jost, 1999 [2004]), generally demonstrates the relations of the "mega-narrator," "monstrator," and "narrator" in the cinematic narrative (Figure 2).
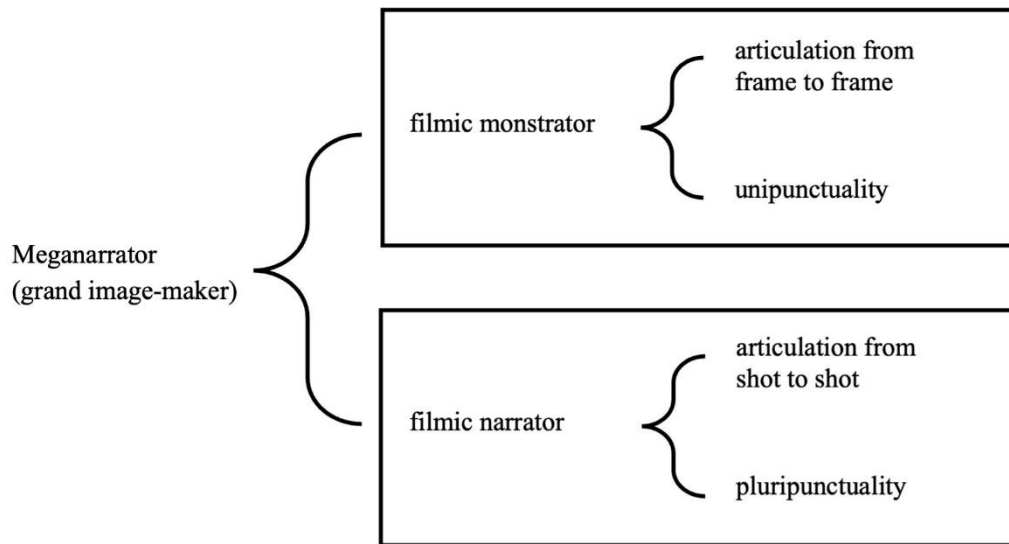
Figure 2. Gaudreault (1988) `s model of "meganarrator."

Considering that Chinese new mainstream films propagate Chinese officials' political discourse, we claimed that beyond the concepts of the "implicit narrator," "mega-narrator," "grand image-maker," or "primary narrator" (Gaudreault & Jost, 1999 [2004]), a supreme instance or source exists called the "supreme narrator." This narrator regulates the storytelling of films beyond the "grand image-maker" or "mega-narrator" in the filmic narrative mechanism.

3. Results

3.1 Background of Selected Publications

Regarding the publication years of the included articles, this study selected the last 10 years of publications, from 2015 to 2024. This section describes the publication years of the selected articles through the PRISMA flows from Scopus and WoS and the snowball technique procedure as the background for the selected studies. This section is organized chronologically. No selected articles were published in 2015, 2016, or 2017. One article published in 2018 was selected for this study (Berry, 2018), and two articles published in 2019 were included (Galafa, 2019; Shi & Liu, 2019). The selected articles published from 2015 to 2019 were retrieved using a two-sided snowball procedure.

Five articles were published in 2020 (Berry, 2020; Talmacs, 2020; Xie, 2020; Zhang, 2020; Zhu, 2020). Among these articles, except for Zhou's (2020) study, which was retrieved from the databases, all other studies were retrieved via the snowball procedure. Three articles published in 2021 were selected using the snowball procedure (Guan & Hu, 2021; Hu & Guan, 2021; Xie, 2021), and no articles published in 2021 were found through the databases. Two articles published in 2022 were selected from the databases (Lu & Li, 2022; Yan, 2022). A snowball search identified three articles (Qian, 2022; Schillinger, 2022; Xiao & Wang, 2022). Therefore, five selected articles were published in 2022.

The seven selected articles were published in 2023 (Huffer & Gong, 2023; Hussain et al., 2023; Kong, 2023; Nicieja, 2023; Yang, 2023a, 2023b; Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). Of these seven articles, two were selected through the databases (Kong, 2023; Zhou & Ouyang, 2023), and the others were identified using the snowball procedure. Three selected articles were published in 2024 (Hu et al., 2024; Huang & Lams, 2024; Wang & Feng, 2024). The study by Hu et al. (2024) was selected through the snowball procedure, and the other two were selected from the databases. Discussions on the political propaganda perspectives of Chinese new mainstream films have increased over time (Figure 3).
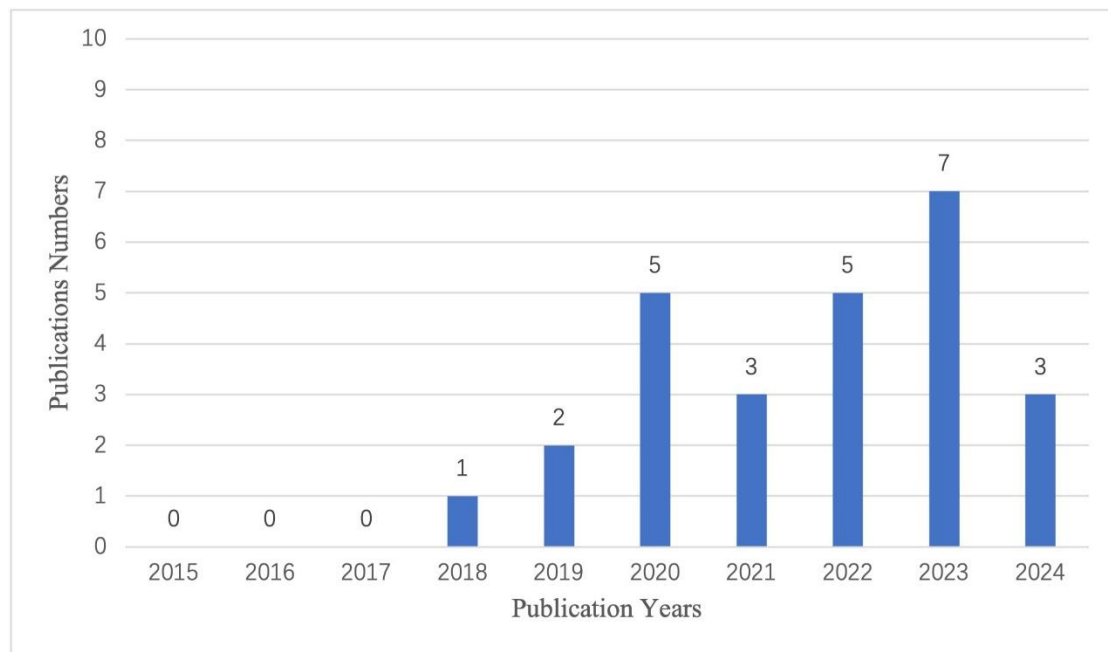
Figure 3. Publication numbers of years of identified articles

The state's willingness to include Chinese officials' values, political advocates, and thoughts of Chinese leaders propagated through Chinese new mainstream films have begun to be noticed and discussed in recent years, especially after the 2020s, in the international filmic and cultural criticism community.

Gong (2013) introduced the context of "core socialist values" in Chinese official discourse. According to Gong's (2013) article published in China's mainstream media, "Guangming Daily," the core socialist values were created in the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. Miao (2020) pointed out that "prosperity," "democracy," "civility," and "harmony" advocated by the Communist Party were prioritized and categorized into the national level of core socialist values. "Freedom," "equality," and "justice" were societal values, and "the rule of law," "patriotism," "dedication," "integrity," and "friendship" were categorized as personal values (Miao, 2020).

3.2 Thematic Analysis for Research Question 1

After the coding procedure for the selected publications in ATLAS.ti, four themes were generated under the official Chinese political discourse, answering RQ1: 1) patriotism, 2) harmony, 3) dedication, and 4) prosperity. These themes were summarized in the context of the Chinese authority's core socialist values. We conducted the thematic analysis according to these themes.

3.2.1 Patriotism

Patriotism is based on the personal core socialist values. Patriotic propaganda has become common in Chinese new mainstream films. Galafa (2019, p. 10) pointed out that "It is an open secret that the *Wolf Warrior 2* is an attempt at imbuing China's film industry with patriotism." Most of the selected articles in this research showed that Chinese new mainstream films were closely related to patriotic propaganda (Berry, 2018; Galafa, 2019; Guan & Hu, 2021; Hu & Guan, 2021; Huang & Lams, 2024; Huffer & Gong, 2023; Hussain et al., 2023; Kong, 2023; Lu & Li, 2023; Nicieja, 2023; Schillinger, 2022; Shi & Liu, 2019; Wang & Feng, 2024; Xie, 2020, 2021; Yan, 2022; Zhang, 2020; Zhou & Ouyang, 2023) and stimulated the audience's patriotic enthusiasm (Talmacs, 2020; Xiang & Wang, 2022; Xie, 2021). *My People, My Country (Wo he wo de zu guo*, 2019, hereafter *MPMC)* revealed patriotism through narratives of loyalty to the nation and concern for the compatriots (Wang & Feng, 2024). Moreover, *The Eight Hundred (Ba bai*, 2020*)* demonstrated the spirit of patriotic heroism (Schillinger, 2022). *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (*Chang jin hu*, 2021, hereafter *The BLC*) showed the spirit of patriotic devotion (Nicieja, 2023). *WWII*'s narratives were based on a patriotic pride approach (Hu & Guan, 2021). Conversely, *ORS* expressed patriotic pride narratives besides the anti-Western discourse (Berry, 2018).

Additionally, national pride was embodied and promoted in Chinese new mainstream films. National pride was highlighted during President Xi's administration (Huang & Lams, 2024). Even Chinese students in New Zealand were encouraged by *WWII* and *The Wandering Earth* (*Liu lang di qiu*, 2019, hereafter *The WE*) to feel pride in China (Huffer & Gong, 2023). *The WE* was considered to enhance individuals' national pride (Zhu, 2020). *WWII* demonstrated national pride to the spectators (Yang, 2023a) through its protagonist, Leng Feng (Shi & Liu, 2019). Individuals experienced pride

for China while watching *WWII* (Talmacs, 2020). In the film, the Chinese citizens saved by China overseas enhanced the feeling of pride in the audience (Guan & Hu, 2021).

Additionally, *MPMC* promoted feelings of pride in audiences (Huang & Lams, 2024). More specifically, audiences' feelings of pride in China were activated by major national historical events and developments in main melody films (Wang & Feng, 2024). In *The WE*, China's narrative was placed at the core on the global stage, stimulating pride and patriotic sentiments in audiences (Xie, 2021). *WWII* instilled feelings of pride by describing China's advanced technologies and military intervention overseas (Shi & Liu, 2019). *WWII's* achievements in commercials proved that audiences accepted the feelings of pride induced by this film (Hu & Guan, 2021).

3.2.2 Harmony

This section discusses the harmony of national core socialist values promoted by Chinese new mainstream films. *Hi, Mom* (*Ni hao Li Huanying*, 2021) propagated the Chinese family's harmony. *My People, My Homeland (Wo he wo de jia xiang*, 2020, hereafter *MPMH*) demonstrated harmonious relationships in Chinese rural areas (Lu & Li, 2022). *The BLC* revealed the "Confucian harmony" of China, which contrasts with their opponents, the U.S. (Nicieja, 2023, p. 171). Meanwhile, two Chinese official concepts were a "harmonious society" and "harmonious world," which can be reflected in the Chinese mainstream film *The WE*. According to Zhu (2020, p. 5), "[...]the film [...]creating a homogeneous family, work that aligns with the trendy concept of 'harmonious society'[...]." In addition, Yang (2023b, p. 89) stated, "This interaction mode also signifies benevolence, aligning with China's 'harmonious world' perspective." The Chinese new mainstream films *Hi, Mom*, *MPMH, The BLC*, and *The WE* indicated the value of harmony in Chinese official discourses.

3.2.3 Prosperity

The value of prosperity represented a national core socialist value. China's rural areas were shown as affluent and vibrant in two Chinese new mainstream films, *Coffee or Tea? (Yi dian jiu dao jia,* 2020) *and MPMH* (Lu & Li, 2022). *MPMH* focused on the progress of China's countryside (Yan, 2022). According to Lu and Li (2022), *MPMH* propagated China's countryside achievements from a macroscopic perspective to show the official Chinese discourse on the rural vitalization strategy. By contrast, *Coffee or Tea?* focused on the microscopic perspective of showing the prosperity of China's villages and the property scene in contemporary China's new countryside with complete and spectacular infrastructure facilities (Lu & Li, 2022).

Chinese new mainstream films describe China using a prosperous and powerful image by portraying China's prosperity in rural areas and at the national level. *WWII* described China as a powerful country (Hu & Guan, 2021; Hussain, 2023; Zhang, 2020). In this film, the belief that China is a powerful country was emphasized to be propagated to its audience (Huffer & Gong, 2023). China is portrayed as assertive and capable of protecting its overseas residents and people from other countries in *WWII* (Talmacs, 2020). *WWII* demonstrated China's strong naval power (Hu & Guan, 2021) and hoped to signal to its spectators that China has a robust military force and solid economics and politics (Talmacs, 2020). Similar narratives reflecting that China is powerful enough to protect overseas individuals not only appeared in *WWII* but also in *ORS* and *Operation Mekong* (*Mei gong he xing dong*, 2016). Moreover, the need for Chinese overseas citizens to be protected by a strong state was also emphasized (Guan & Hu, 2021).

China's strength at the international level was demonstrated by the Chinese science-fiction blockbuster *The WE* (Huffer & Gong, 2023). *The WE* reflected China's leadership in global affairs (Hu et al., 2024; Huffer & Gong, 2023; Yang, 2023b). Furthermore, *MPMC* portrayed and propagated Chinese history using an advanced, ongoing, and successful image (Huang & Lams, 2024). This film reflected the prosperity of a strong China (Wang & Feng, 2024). Guiding Star, an episode of *MPMC*, showed China's vast territory and strong state power when the Chinese astronauts returned to their motherland (Yan, 2022).

3.3 Theoretical Analysis: A New Filmic Narrative Paradigm Thinking

As mentioned earlier, films serve to further the Chinese authority's political propaganda (Yang, 2016). The Chinese government regulates the Chinese film industry (Ceccarelli, 2023). Sun (2023, p. 9) pointed out that "New Mainstream Films are in line with a series of mainstream values such as patriotism, [...]It serves for the expression of mainstream ideology." Furthermore, Yan (2022, p. 338) stated, "Upholding the mainstream ideologies remained the top objective of these films." The evidence proved that the Chinese government regards Chinese films as an instrument of propaganda for its political discourse and wills. Therefore, we argued that Gaudreault and Jost's opinions are ineffective in dealing with specific genres of films, such as new mainstream films that promote the political discourse. A higher-level narrator of the "mega-narrator" from Gaudreault and Jost's beliefs may exist and be capable of governing the whole film's narrative and exporting its ideologies and values to spectators. However, it only exists in the deep space of the film, which indicates its invisibility on the film's surface. Such a powerful narrator represents the highest Chinese political authority in new mainstream films.

In Chinese new mainstream films, the Chinese authority has been seen as the primary narrative source that regulates the official values and promotes them to the secondary narrator—the grand image-maker in Gaudreault and Jost's ideas. We regarded the primary (supreme narrator) and secondary (grand image-maker) narrators as co-coders in the film. This is one reason for the criticism of neo-colonialism in *WWII*. In the film coding process, the grand image-maker receives the value signal created by the supreme narrator. Subsequently, the grand image-maker converts the raw data into artifacts and, in the process of the second encoding of the film, narrates the film to the audience using an inconsistent approach to the raw data from the supreme narrator.

The operating mechanism is presented as follows: The "supreme narrator," as the supreme-level narrator, only directly exports its values and ideologies to the second-level narrator, the grand filmic image-maker; after the second-level narrator processes, its secondary narrator, the third-level narrator, is divided into the filmic monstrator and filmic narrator. Notably, the "supreme narrator" is invisible in the films, and the values conveyed by the supreme narrator appear in films only in the form of connotations. However, when the grand filmic image-maker presents the value to the spectators with an obvious approach, they can feel its existence, such as the character of Leng Feng, who holds the Chinese national flag and passes through the war field, attempting to stimulate the national pride feeling for the audience in *WWII*. The new mainstream filmic narrative model is illustrated in Figure 4.
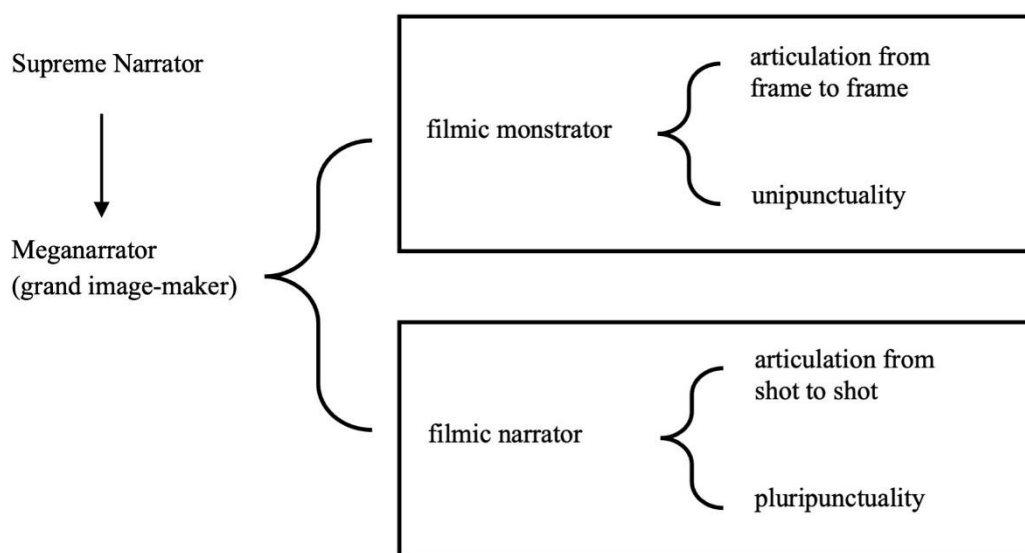

Figure 4. New mainstream filmic narrativity model. (based on Gaudreault`s (1988) model & cited from Gaudreault and Jost [1999(2004)]

Theoretically, in new mainstream films, the problem of Chinese film producers fails to accurately reflect the state's values and ideologies; the reason behind this could be the existence of a cognitive gap between the first level of the narrator (supreme narrator) and the second narrator (mega-narrator). The primary objective of the supreme narrator is to regulate the ideological and cultural aspects while producing films from a general perspective. Simultaneously, the mega-narrator is likely to be a practical operator with great power to express the Chinese authorities` political will in their productions. Moreover, these uncoordinated behaviours are practically unavoidable due to the complex nature of the "mega-narrator," even if the Chinese authority directly participates in the film production procedure or strengthens the supervision of films.

4. Discussion

We systematically reviewed previous studies on Chinese new mainstream films under the Chinese official discourse framework of core socialist values. Empirical evidence from our findings helps understand the nature of political propaganda in China's new mainstream films. Within the core socialist values framework, four values were identified from the selected articles: patriotism, dedication, harmony, and prosperity. In China's official narratives, patriotism and dedication were personal values, whereas harmony and prosperity were state values. The SLR findings indicated that China's authority has been utilising its new mainstream films of various genres to promote its political claims and shape a positive national image among individuals. These films communicated to the audience that a robust and harmonious country has patriotic citizens. The findings for RQ1 provided empirical evidence for new mainstream films propagating China's official values.

This research challenged and improved Gaudreault's (1988) "mega-narrator" model, revealing that a narrator higher than the "mega-narrator" exists in the narrative mechanism of Gaudreault and Jost (1999 [2004]) called "the supreme narrator."

In China's new mainstream films, the governor was the source of the political discourse promoted by the films. We also found that the narratives of new mainstream films that inaccurately reflect official wills, such as the stigmatization of Africa in these films, are caused by cognitive differences between the supreme narrator and mega-narrator. The findings of this study have been discussed in the context of China's official political discourses.

4.1 Patriotism and the Spirit of Dedication

First, patriotism occupies an important position among China's officially advocated values. Chinese mainstream media Xinhua Net (2022a, para.5) demonstrated Chinese President Xi's opinion of patriotism: "Patriotism feelings bring tears to our eyes, and patriotism spirit forms the backbone of the Chinese nation." In addition, Xinhua Net (2022b) stated that Xi had repeatedly called for the promotion of patriotism on the official website of the Chinese State Council. Furthermore, Xinhua Net (2022b, para.3) pointed out that "Xi, [...]has stressed the virtue of patriotism on multiple occasions." and mentioned Xi's belief in patriotism as the duty of citizens: "Love of our country, the feeling of devotion and sense of attachment to our motherland is a duty and responsibility of every Chinese." (para.4).

In 2018, this website documented Xi emphasizing the patriotic dedication embodied in a Chinese militia that guarded the island for 32 years (Xinhua Net, 2018). In addition, Chinese new mainstream films promoted the spirit of dedication. *WWII, ORS*, and *The WE* conveyed images of a selfless and dedicated spirit to the audience (Xie, 2020). *The BLC* reflected the spirit of dedication (Nicieja, 2023). The protagonist of *WWII*, Leng Feng, displayed altruism (Kong, 2023). Meanwhile, *WWII* showed that the Chinese passport directly emphasizes the dedicated spirit of being a Chinese citizen (Hussain et al., 2023).

4.2 Prosperity and the Chinese Dream

The findings of this study revealed that China`s new mainstream films described its prosperity. In the Chinese political discourse system, not only is the context of prosperity demonstrated in the core socialist values but also the Chinese dream. The Chinese dream is a political idea proposed by Chinese President Xi in 2012 after he had become the Chinese leader (Wang, 2014). China's State Council Information Office, on its website, documents an essay from The Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (2022, para.2), which highlighted that, "In essence, the Chinese Dream is a commitment to bringing prosperity and happiness to the country, the nation and the people." The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation occupies a significant position in the Chinese Dream as a political slogan. According to China's State Council website, in Xinhua Net's (2017, para.4) article, President Xi stated, "[...]achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the nation in modern times." Thus, the concept of prosperity in Chinese new mainstream films is closely related to the political concept of the Chinese Dream. Furthermore, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is a crucial component of the Chinese D̲ream.

New mainstream films reveal the concepts of the Chinese dream and great national rejuvenation. The Chinese new mainstream film *MPMC* promoted these concepts (Huang & Lams, 2024). The purpose of incorporating the concept of the Chinese dream in *My People, My Country* was to build national pride in individuals (Huang & Lams, 2024). Meanwhile, *WWII* propagated China's political discourse of the Chinese dream (Shi & Liu, 2019). The Chinese dream concept reflected in *WWII* was viewed as a replacement of the West (Shi & Liu, 2019), as China replaced the West and was portrayed as Africa's saviour (Galafa, 2019; Hu & Guan, 2021; Nicieja, 2023; Yang, 2023a). Moreover, Huang and Lams (2024) pointed out that *MPMC*, through seven short stories, displayed China's national rejuvenation in different fields. Xiang and Wang (2022) believed that *WWII* reflected Xi's political discourse of the great rejuvenation. In addition, Yang (2023b) claimed that in the Chinese science-fiction film *The WE* demonstrated the idea of the Chinese Dream and national rejuvenation.

4.3 Harmony and Confucianism

Previous studies have shown that harmony has been emphasized in Chinese new mainstream films under the political framework of core socialist values. Harmony is significant in China's officials' political discourses and is rooted in Chinese culture. Miao (2020, p. 177) pointed out that harmony is included in Chinese official values and has become "an underpinning feature of CCP's development goal." Chinese mainstream media, Xinhua Net, documented Xi's speech: "Work together to build a community of shared future for mankind." Xi's (2017, para.31) speech emphasized the idea of harmony and proposed: "Amity with neighbors, harmony without uniformity, and peace are values cherished in the Chinese culture." Song (2021, p. 73) said, "[...]social harmony, peaceful development and the development of ideology in the era of socialist core values, it is rooted in the soil of Chinese traditional culture."

In China's official discourse, the concept of harmony is closely related to the traditional Chinese philosophy of Confucianism. Song (2021) believed that Chinese traditions are prominent sources of China's core socialist values, and Confucianism has been regarded as an important aspect of traditional Chinese culture. Moreover, Liu (2019) indicated that a community with a shared future for mankind reflects the idea of "harmony" in traditional Chinese philosophy. Liu

(2019, p. 678) stated, "The 'gentlemen are different and harmonious' proposed by Confucius is very compatible with this view. [...] Its core idea is harmony. [...] It respects the diversity of world civilization." New mainstream films promoted Confucianism. In *WWII*, the brotherhood of the film's characters was believed to appeal to Confucianism (Hu & Guan, 2021). Hu and Guan (2021) stated that brotherhood signified obedience to the elder brother, and the protagonist's sacrifice for collectivist interests reflected Confucianism.

The collectivist sacrifice narratives were also present in *The WE*, reflecting Confucianism (Yang, 2023b). The contradiction between taking care of the children and performing the civic duty of the protagonist, Liu Peiqinag, in *The WE* was rooted in Confucianism (Berry, 2020). The father–son relationship primarily showed the idea of patricide, but this relationship was transformed and integrated into China's patrilineality (Zhu, 2020). In addition, China's mainstream films reflected other Confucian characteristics, such as benevolence in *WWII* (Xiang & Wang, 2022) and *The WE* (Yang, 2023b), filial piety promoted in *The BLC* (Nicieja, 2023), and kindness and diligence showed in *MPMC* (Wang & Feng, 2024). Moreover, the stigmatization narratives of Africa with the stereotyping in new mainstream films did not align with the value of harmony in the Chinese authority's discourse.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative research filled two gaps in the existing research. First, the selected articles that focused on the new mainstream films' propaganda of the official values were systematically reviewed. Three themes—patriotism, harmony, and prosperity—emerged under the political discourse of the core socialist framework. Moreover, these emphasized values were placed within several corresponding official political discourses and traditional Chinese cultures. Secondly, this research presented the concept of the supreme narrator, improving on Gaudreault's (1988) narrative model and Gaudreault and Jost's (1999 [2004]) narrative theory from the filmic narrative mechanism perspective. This improved narrative model explained that new mainstream films inappropriately propagated official intentions owing to cognitive gaps between the supreme narrator and mega-narrator. A limitation of this research was that it only focused on core socialist values while collecting data, rather than China's entire official discourse system. Further studies should conduct an SLR covering the official discourses propagated by Chinese films.

Authors contributions

Yangrui Su was responsible for recourses, conceptualization, investigation, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing, visualization, and validation. Dr. Hasrul Hashim was responsible for writing - review & editing, supervision, methodology, and validation. Assoc. Prof. Abdul Latiff Ahmad was responsible for writing - review & editing, and supervision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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