



# Artistic expression of “People's Nature” implications of the new mainstream film Sniper

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**Abstract.** This research examines the film "Sniper" as a novel representation of Chinese cinema, embodying the concept of "People's Nature." The study analyses the film's narrative techniques and its relationship to the "Cold Shot" movement, aiming to draw insights into new mainstream cinema and the aesthetics of "People's Nature." From a creative perspective, the study discusses the value of this concept in art and its effective portrayal in literature.

**Keywords:** Sniper; People's Nature; New Mainstream Cinema.

## 1 Introduction

This research explores the artistic interpretation of "People's Nature", a concept central to Chinese socialist literature and art, and the Communist Party of China's (CPC) century-long narrative. It underscores a 'people-centered' value system, encouraging introspection and critique. A surge of success in 'new mainstream films' such as 'Sniper' indicates a shift in China's cinematic landscape. In 'Sniper', the minor characters' narratives vividly mirror mass experiences, emphasizing a strong patriotic sentiment and effectively interpreting the deep-rooted "Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea" ethos. This study critically examines the portrayal of "People's Nature" within 'Sniper', focused on its nuanced nationalized aesthetics. It asserts that quality art and literature that encapsulates public sentiments and aspirations form the basis of new mainstream cinema, extending on Mao Zedong's interpretation of 'People's Nature'. Further, the narrative strategy of detailing minor characters' personal journeys brings history, crafted and experienced by masses, elegantly to the fore, demonstrating the substantial patriotic spirit, and interpreting the essence of the "Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea" spirit.

## 2 The Concept of 'People's Nature' in Contemporary Literature

### 2.1 The Genesis of 'People's Nature'

The core principle underpinning the Marxist theory of art remains the conviction that art should belong to, draw from and resonate with the masses; a belief professed by Lenin. <sup>2</sup>This notion established 'People's Nature' as the linchpin for socialist literature and artistic development, with an emphasis on creating content that fundamentally serves the people. Mao Zedong's 1942 discourse at the Yan'an Literary and Artistic Symposium reinforced this thematic focus by addressing the essential issue of serving the masses through literature and art. <sup>3</sup>Half a century later, this ethos continued to infiltrate cultural policies, with Xi Jinping at the 2019 assembly of cultural, artistic, and social science representatives of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) emphasising this mandate: artistic and philosophical works should primarily answer the fundamental question of 'for whom they create and advocate.' <sup>4</sup>These dictates necessitate that artistic endeavours, rather than being detached from the populace and their lived experiences, should firmly embed themselves within the sociocultural texture of their lives, absorbing their voices, capturing their narratives, appreciating their values, and acknowledging their destinies.

### 2.2 The Conception of "People's Nature"

Regarded as a novel art form, film ascended to prominence in the 20th century, owing to its succinct and comprehensible audio-visual lexicon. The Marxist literary and artistic dictionary, edited by Lu Meilin, delineates the "People's Nature of Literature and Art" as a representation of the populace's thoughts, emotions, aspirations, ideals, requisites, and interests manifest within artworks - a pivotal criterion for appraising their societal value <sup>5</sup>. In the contemporary epoch, 'people's nature' is frequently examined in unison with party nature, portraying the characteristics of literary and artistic creations that echo the peoples' ideas, emotions, desires, and interests. New mainstream cinema has transcended the focus on "major characters" and progressively emphasises "minor characters", apparently signifying an ideological recasting of "peoplehood" in revolutionary history. To some degree, the new wave of Chinese cinema projects as the conduit for the mainstream ideology, instilling and maintaining perspicuous and methodical standards to fortify the inception and progression of an emergent socio-political order.

Artistic and literary endeavors must encompass dual objectives: engendering edification while simultaneously serving the masses; they ought to satiate public necessity whilst fostering enhanced literacy. These works should both fervently cast the actualities of mass life and amplify their voices, whilst welcoming critical reviews from their audience post publication. Yu Ji, in "Month of Exhibition of New Films by State-run Film Studios", delineates the image of the 'hero', rendered through the potent audiovisual medium of film, as an instrument for ideological propagation and policy discourse. It constructs a noble 'other', facilitating role model provision and viewer identification

within the cinematic narrative. This simultaneously provides a 'witness' and 'participant' in the grand historiography legitimising the Communist Party and the New China, amplifying the 'carnival' of magnifying reality<sup>6</sup>. As Chinese cinema steadily industrialises and progresses, the melange of melodramatic films broadens, thus cultivating the genesis of "new mainstream cinema"

In the film "Sniper", the fundamental principles articulated in General Secretary Xi Jinping's discourse on literature and art, as well as in Comrade Mao Zedong's speech at the Yan'an Literary and Artistic Symposium, are deeply reflected. It also evidences the growing prominence of "new mainstream cinema", further testified by its box-office success and public acclaim. The term "new mainstream cinema" now not only demarcates a genre, but also has evolved into an efficacious vehicle for defining China's identity and retelling the "China Story". This arena is dedicated to the largest demographic cross-section, capturing and candidly portraying the image, intellect, and cultural spirit of post-modern China through its visual artistry. To align with socialism, these films must adopt a people-centric approach, implying that their narratives, story arcs, and creative designs should originate from the people's lived experiences. By mirroring the authentic expressions of the people and conveying their actual voices in proportion to the contemporary epoch, such films can further solidify unity in the pursuit of socialism and the advancement of human civilization more effectively. The concept of prioritizing "People's Nature" is intrinsically associated with the aim of "serving the people". For the past years, this has indeed been the dominant motivation underpinning the Chinese Communist's literature and art.

### **3 Aesthetic Examination of 'People's Nature' in "Sniper": Artistic Microcosms and Cultural Empathy**

Esteemed fifth-generation filmmaker, Zhang Yimou, accentuates the emotional nuances of ordinary individuals within their historical contexts, a testament to why "The Story of Zhang Taofang" deeply resonated upon its cinematic film. Early Chinese war films, including "Civil War" and "Decisive Engagement", were characterized by expansive narratives, encompassing the historical progression of the conflict and multifaceted engagements of the parties involved. Recent offerings, such as "The Eight Hundred", "The Sacrifice", "The Battle at Lake Changjin", and "Sniper", redirect the narrative emphasis towards individuals. The dichotomy of 'Big Time' and 'Little People', operating under a seemingly asymmetrical narrative structure, generates unique narrative effects, primarily due to their stark contrasts - a testament to the film's strategic development and enhancement, corroborating its foundational goal of representation and engagement.<sup>7</sup> "Sniper", a tale of young Chinese soldiers standing firm against superiorly-equipped foes, encapsulates a nation's communal sense of home and an anthem to the zeal of a youthful generation. The narrowed focus on 'little people' and the condensation of grand narratives into 'little stories' constitute the film's most compelling artistic dimensions, resonating with audiences on both intellectual and emotional fronts.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.1 Realistic representation of historical themes reflecting the people's nature in the film 'Sniper'**

The artistic expression of realism in "new mainstream cinema" is grounded in real-life occurrences. Through a compelling and intricate narrative, Zhang Yimou allows the audience to experience the unrelenting reality of the "Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea" war. Authentic historical events, regardless of their temporal placement, remain entrenched in society's collective memory and cultural consciousness. 'Sniper' depicts a small-scale sniper battle, involving only a handful of individuals, as opposed to extensive aerial bombings and mass charges. By employing reflective and innovative audio-visual techniques, viewers are exposed to the harshness of, the uncertainty of the global landscape, and the complexity of the human condition. 'Sniper' embodies a nuanced artistic perspective that incorporates elements of war and suspense to offer a reflective portrayal of the individual's experiences within a war-torn reality. Rather than magnifying conflict, the film subtly unravels its elements, drawing attention to the complexity of personal emotions amidst warfare. This technique is evidenced in its careful narrative construction, such as the strategic motivation behind the protagonist's siege and the detailed cause-effect relationship of the conflict. The film juxtaposes youth against the bleak backdrop of the war environment, using the icy game of guns in a snow-swept terrain as a metaphor for the cruel harshness of war. Nonetheless, it is the youthful spirit brimming with patriotic fervor that introduces a semblance of warmth, thereby offsetting the otherwise frigid disposition of war. Recurring throughout 'Sniper' is the profound contrast between the cold indifference of war and the passionate commitment of its young protectors. Despite the war's intrinsic brutality, it remains a crucible that tests the resolve of the young volunteers, their underlying family love, and unwavering patriotism. Ultimately, this evocative portrayal fosters profound reflection and introspection, securing recognition and approval from its audience. Thus, 'Sniper', in essence, posits a poignant assertion: war might be cold and unsympathetic, yet it is the soldiers' heartfelt dedication to their nation that breathes life and warmth into its otherwise unyielding framework.

The artist seeks "to compose for the masses, expressing communal sentiments and evoking shared emotions," thereby utilizing art's inherent capability to communicate abstract spiritual power. The force propelling modern progress is 'the people', acting as catalysts for transformation. When a work inspires hope and prompts novel opportunities at a national and global scale, it holds the potential for leadership within the value domain. In 'Sniper', the protagonist Liu Wenwu, along with classes five, embarks on a mission to rescue a scout bearing essential intelligence. Pitted against technologically superior American troops, survival hinges on the display of unyielding mental resilience. This narrative framework underscores the crucial role of psychological fortitude in times of severe adversity, resonating with contemporary challenges faced by society. Characters within the film who manage to navigate hardships, resist defeat, and uphold determination serve as sources of empowerment and illumination for viewers. Although most modern viewers of war films like 'Sniper' do not directly share the depicted milieu, the enduring elements are the archetypical patriotic spirit and heroic ideals inherent within each individual. 'Sniper' caters not to an external environment, but rather to an

internal archetype. Hence, it serves as a reflection of universal human values and aspirations, rendered through the prism of military conflict. In an era of peace, as individuals distanced from direct military engagement, the necessity of nurturing the resolute spirit of our ancestors persists to prepare for future crises. 'Sniper' illuminates this through the portrayal of the volunteers in Squad 5. Despite being primarily referenced by names throughout the film, their identities stretch beyond the battlefield, encompassing roles as sons, fathers, and husbands. On the battlefield, however, they manifest as unyielding Chinese soldiers. In the vast scale of war, even heroes like Liu Wenwu and Dayong are but a minute fraction of the millions of Chinese soldiers supporting North Korea against the U.S. Their acts forming minor segments of countless wartime narratives. Yet, it is precisely this individual ordinariness that cultivates empathetic resonance within their audience. Regardless of dissimilar life experiences, viewers can discern reflections of their humanity on screen, affirming the artistic endeavor's appeal to the 'people's nature'.

### 3.2 Realistic civilian representation in the film

"New mainstream cinema" emphasizes the emotional manifestation of authentic characters. Its evaluative criteria lean towards narratives deeply rooted in personal stories intricately woven to captivate the audience. The film scrutinizes the dialect, actions, and sentiments of the characters enabling the audience to discover links to their realities and emotional experiences<sup>9</sup>. It upholds the ethos of 'new mainstream cinema' by incorporating real-life narratives but transcending them, bridging the auditory-visual divide between commercial and artistic cinema. "Sniper," compact yet profound, unveils the complexities of the sniper team and richly illustrates the intense combat between the volunteers and their adversaries. The director opted for historical wartime figures such as Zhang Taofang, Lu Changqing, and Huang Xinghai as generic sample, rather than specific individuals. This creative choice was directed towards showcasing the undaunted spirit and the refusal to surrender of the volunteer army. Hence, they represent not just a single army but symbolize the tenacity of all volunteer armies across time.

The film utilizes a bifurcated protagonist structure, centering on team leader Liu Wenwu and Da Yong. Initially, Liu Wenwu emerges as class 5's centrifugal entity in the film's first half, his proficiency and marksmanship pivotal to the mission's success. However, the plot pivots upon his heroic death. The latter half consequently captures Da Yong' propelled by the legacy of his fallen comrades. Symbolically inheriting the team leader's iron spoon and binoculars, Da Yong embraces his newfound responsibility. The recurrent motif of the iron spoon, a minor detail in the film's midsection, magnifies into a monolithic narrative element, integral to the war's decisive maneuver. Da Yong is seen not only acquiring physical relics but also embodying the team leader's intellectual prowess and valor, thereby infusing a nuanced layer of destiny into their relationship. Together, they epitomize the transformative spirit of volunteer soldiers. Da Yong's embodiment of the team leader's attributes translates into the audience's alignment with these volunteer warriors' inherent "nature," a testament of the film's potent symbolism. Da Yong's journey, transitioning from an emotionally fragile individual to a competent sniper, encapsulates the narrative arc of team five, exemplifying

joy, suffering, resilience, and fragility. His transformative trajectory symbolically underscores compelling themes of constructive ambition, collectivism, and altruism. By film's end, Da Yong's comprehension of Liu Wenwu's adage - "As long as one man stands, so will the fifth team" - signals a profound understanding of resilience and unity. The character arc is a mature delineation, underpinning an optimizing narrative trajectory and precise characterisation.

The film 'Sniper' utilizes three roll-call scenes to deliver a unique aesthetic experience and memorialize the ordinary person's contribution in the historic conflict against the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The first roll call introduces characters as intelligent and resourceful volunteers, the second roll call, significantly heavier in emotional weight, occurs as Liu Wenwu sacrifices himself for the hostages he had led from their hometown, a circumstance he mourns aloud. This call imparts a profound emotional impact on viewers, shifting the perception from the initial relaxed military ambiance towards a sentiment of sorrow. The third roll call culminates the narrative, where the soldiers' unanimous response to the company commander's resurgent deployment emotionally climaxes the narrative, highlighting the soldiers' collective valor. These scenes, serving as temporal markers, intersperse the film, tying together major plot developments, thereby elevating the film's emotional contour and enhancing the viewership experience. The zenith of 'Sniper' lies in the transformation of the soldiers from individuals to collective embodiment - the "Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea" Volunteer Army, transcending into a collective identity set to resonate across generations. This metamorphosis, fuelled by the marked fervour of countless 'class-fives', collectively forms the veritable Volunteer Army. The trifold roll-calls serve as the emotional catalyst, imprinting not only individual names but the valiant choices made in national defense within the viewer's memory. These transcendent moments capture the essence of "People's Nature," a significant thematic element throughout the film. The theme song 'Going Home' in the film, *Sniper*, underscores the importance of homeland, fostering a shared bond that resonates deeply with audiences. The soldiers' portrayal mirrors everyday people, emphasizing a common human longing to return home. This authenticity enriches the emotive focus of the film, deepening audience connection. The film's depiction of camaraderie and collective tactics illustrates the concept of "People's Nature", contrasting it with Western rugged individualism. The strategic actions further highlight the distinctive Chinese strategic wisdom.

### 3.3 Audiovisual Aesthetic

Director Zhang Yimou's compelling narratives largely stem from his adept manipulation of audio-visual aesthetics, a proclivity evident in his film, *Sniper*. Central to the film's aesthetic is the motif of "Stationary Snow," imbuing a unique visual charm not through romantic, floating snowflakes, but via the beauty of undisturbed snow and ice, persisting even amidst ongoing battles. The visual message is intensified through repeated on the protagonist's face, binoculars, costumes and shots of a Mosin-Nagant rifle. The reality-based colour palette emphasises stark elements such as snow-covered cloaks, white rifle barrels, desolate grass, and rocks. This culminates in a tense sniper standoff, juxtaposing tranquillity with a lurking lethality. The static snow's role echoes

the "aesthetics of violence" seen in earlier films, thereby contributing to a novel action aesthetic whilst pushing the boundaries of the genre's traditional aesthetics, a testament to the film's innovative nature<sup>10</sup>.

The heightened visual tinge of blood against the cold greys and whites of an icy landscape serves as a potent visual metaphor in *Sniper*. The drifting snow imbues a sense of gritty realism and substantiates the icy weapon's materiality. The film reconciles the frigid environs with the organic, rustic sniper, crafting a setting replete with danger, eschewing the need for extensive sets or convoluted special effects. *Sniper*'s explicit intent and near-singular mission, aligned with the directorial finesse of Zhang Yimou, a trained photographer, create a distinctive visual aesthetic through extensive use of overhead long shots and moving lenses. Thus, the audience engages with the scenes fabricated by these visual symbols, experiencing the milieu and persona directly.

#### **4 Durability of New Mainstream Cinema**

The *Sniper* film series seamlessly blends noble values with compelling narratives, shaping a fresh kind of cinema that promotes not only national socialist principles but also popular appeal. By effectively using new technologies in film production, distribution and screening, these films encourage audience engagement and introspection, promoting positive beliefs without coercion. Philosopher Han Byung-chul argued that the art of storytelling, especially crafting compelling narratives, excels coercion and obligation in effectiveness.<sup>11</sup> These narratives lean into relatable, heroic character portrayals, diverging from past overblown depictions, and enabling viewers to identify and aspire towards national ambitions as mirrored on-screen. "*Sniper*" leverages military contexts, innovative genres, and sniper action aesthetics along with the carefully applied "industrial aesthetics" - a realistic representation of mechanically produced artifacts. The film's success, both commercial and critical, can be attributed to director Zhang Yimou's use of industrial aesthetics to heighten the realism and texture of the narrative while simultaneously invoking historical responsibility and the construction of a revolutionary hero image with nuanced emotional portrayals. Despite occasional criticisms about the lack of realism and texture in the final film, the new mainstream cinema, as represented by "*Sniper*", reveals its durability and relevance in the modern era.

The 'film industry aesthetics' recently has advocated 'industrial survivability' and 'genre survivability' as potential developmental avenues for emergent cinematic forces, yet underscored the notion that genre specifics are of lesser concern. Film *Sniper* encapsulates this trend, wherein its plot intensity, spatial scene consolidation, character enhancement, rational cost control, and standardised production effectively ensured profitable box office returns. This strategy starkly contrasts with the heavy investment-centered production model of sizeable industrial blockbusters. The film '*Sniper*' represents a significant stride in the continual evolution of new mainstream cinema, serving as a pivotal case study for this transformation. Contemporary Chinese cinema is typically categorised as requiring considerable capital and production inputs, thereby realising a proportionally higher risk with larger investment. However, films embodying a moderate "industrial aesthetic" are less vulnerable to such pressures. As director Ning

Hao elucidates, the approach towards creating 'medium-sized' films is satisfying for investors due to reasonable expenditures and potentially profitable returns.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in line with China's '14th Five-Year Plan' for the film industry, the country envisions launching around 10 critically acclaimed films annually, with an expectation of approximately 50 local films exceeding a box office return of 100 million yuan.<sup>13</sup> Such ambitions necessitate the production of more films adhering to practicable budgets, demonstrating a diversity of genres and promoting a strong 'medium film industry aesthetic.' This approach will facilitate the steady progression of Chinese cinema.

## 5 Conclusions

The new mainstream film 'Sniper' by Zhang Yimou exemplifies the symbiosis of melodrama, craftsmanship, and commercial appeal in the evolving Chinese film industry. The study emphasizes the imperative of character depth and narrative diversity in modern cinema. Increasing societal understanding through high-quality productions is being prioritized, suggesting a shift in cinema towards a multifaceted artistic expression. As China's cinema rapidly evolves, its potential to become a 'film powerhouse' and global disseminator of cultural and spiritual values is evident. However, balancing artistic authenticity, commercial viability, and cultural representation presents a significant challenge.

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