

The Effectiveness of Ideological Communication in Mainstream Films Based on Semantic Networks

—Taking the Chinese and American Movie Reviews of Top Gun: Maverick as an Example

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Abstract: The co-occurrence networks are used as a tool for examining and interpreting discourse analysis to reveal the attitudes and perceptions implicit in film reviews. Based on the self-constructed corpus of online movie reviews in China and the United States, this research generates co-occurrence word-sense networks and summarizes three frameworks: “sequel narrative,” “heroic narrative,” and “military narrative,” and further reveals and explains the ideologies and linguistic features revealed in the different discourse frames. At the macro level, the Chinese and American audiences’ evaluation of the film shows different results of medium and medium-high. At the micro level, corresponding to the three frames, Chinese and American audiences construct images of commercial sentiment films and dramatic action films, national propaganda films and Hollywood hero films, U.S. Air Force propaganda films and U.S. Army recruitment advertising films; under the hero narrative frame, individual heroism and collectivism are realized side by side in the audiences’ discourse; under the military narrative frame, the political identity of transnational narratives is not realized in Chinese audiences.

Keywords: mainstream films, film reviews, semantic network, analysis, ideology

1. Introduction

Film and television works are one of the important ways to disseminate culture and ideology, especially those released globally have a wider range of influence, and their dissemination effectiveness deserves our continuous attention. At present, scholars mainly use Western film theory and Film criticism theory to study the political, economic, and cultural issues reflected in films, and explore the foreign dissemination and reception of films from the perspective of artistry and modernity of films, but the viewing experience of domestic and foreign audiences and whether there are different interpretations of films have not been thoroughly studied and interpreted.

With a total of \$1.5 billion, Top Gun: Maverick is in second place on the 2022 global box office list, which is an impressive box office figure for a film in the era of the New Crown epidemic or not. With extremely high word-of-mouth, it received enthusiastic reactions at home and abroad, and major media praised the big win of “Top Gun: Maverick” from the perspectives of box office records,

technical special effects, and ideological value. In the 5W communication model proposed by Lasswell, the effectiveness of the message can be observed from the audience's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses, and the success of the communication campaign can be tested. While movies deliver messages to audiences, online movie reviews are the most direct expressions of audiences, feedback to ideological communication, and at the same time shaping ideology, a process in which the country's image is passively constructed by other subjects or individuals. Based on this, this paper generates co-occurrence word-sense networks based on a self-constructed corpus of online film reviews in China and the United States, and raises three interrelated questions (1) Are there different conceptual frameworks in the discourse system presented by film reviews? (2) If there are different conceptual frameworks, what are the similarities and differences in the construction of film images in terms of the ideologies revealed by the reviews and the emotional attitudes expressed by the audience? (3) Explain the attention and acceptance of the film by Chinese and American audiences from the perspective of cross-cultural communication; did Chinese audiences develop political and other identities?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mainstream Film

The term mainstream film is widely used, and Przylipiak believes that it has at least six meanings. It can be a blockbuster, a film that propagates dominant ideologies, a realist film, a film that employs continuity editing, a film rooted in the tradition of classical Hollywood cinema, or a film that is easy to comprehend [1]. Mainstream films, in China, are often known as main-melody films or even sometimes as 'red-themed' films [2]. The mainstream film, often referred to as main-melody films in China, is even sometimes called a "red-themed film". This type of film is a tool for government propaganda by portraying revolutionary history and heroic stories to spread Chinese ideology. Main-melody films, as a research topic with Chinese characteristics, lack direct relevance in foreign studies, but from the nature of mainstream films, films that aim to spread mainstream ideology exist both at home and abroad. Therefore, this study starts with the ideology of film and defines mainstream film as a film that propagates mainstream ideology.

Regarding the relationship between ideology and film, Althusser first proposed the "ideological state apparatus theory", academics believe that cinema can be seen as a "mental device" that complements the dominant ideological paradigm [3]. Cinema is created by science and technology but is an important vehicle of ideology and social culture. It is an apparatus destined to obtain precise ideological effects, necessary for the dominant ideology: the fantasmatization of the creative subject, which cooperates with apparent efficiency to maintain idealism [4].

Mainstream films aim to appeal to a broad audience and be easy to enjoy [5]. Holbrook found that most American studios aspire to the status associated with commercial success [6]. However, among the various views and debates about mainstream cinema, what is central to Chinese mainstream cinema is that it should not only be commercially successful in the film market but also conform to the changing requirements of national and social value ideologies, which runs counter to the concept of mainstream cinema commonly adopted in the West [7]. Mainstream and official cultural expression in China fall into two basic categories or streams: a "red classic" stream, based on high revolutionary optimism and romanticism; and another focused on narrating heroic life stories and values [8]. In this post-socialist Chinese socio-cultural milieu, "mainstream cinema" became a new political term denoting a more nuanced artistic and popular cultural practice adopted by the Chinese Communist Party for ideological and official propaganda purposes [9]. But the most common understanding for the general public is that the mainstream film genre is a means of official ideological communication and purpose-specific propaganda.

Chernoff argues that mainstream cinema, as one of the most powerful and dynamic institutions in popular culture, strongly influences social values and culture [10]. Although mainstream cinema in the United States is concerned with commercially convenient success, this does not mean that there is no ideological output. As films increase at the box office worldwide, the American culture hidden behind them is quietly spreading around the world and becoming the dominant culture of the world. Bordwell's study found that mainstream films have a clear set of narrative forms, with plots driven by a clear protagonist, characters clearly portrayed, and each scene marching toward a single goal [11]. For example, the American films *Top Gun*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Saving Private Ryan* actually convey the meaning of truth and beauty and content in line with the mainstream values of the country, which can also play a role in educating the public. *Top Gun* has been described by Belton as "the cinematic equivalent of a Navy draft poster" [12]. Films like *Top Gun* or *Dunkirk*, are aimed at re-shaping cultural understandings of patriotism, national identity, soldiers' behavior, and US military moral fiber, ultimately seeking to validate US militarization [13]. Thus *Top Gun: Maverick*, the sequel to *Top Gun* analyzed in this study, has the same strong mainstream cinematic overtones.

2.2. Research Perspectives of Mainstream Films

Combing through foreign literature, we found that foreign studies on mainstream films are mainly on the level of film and history, culture and values. Foreign studies on political identity of mainstream films are mainly on the level of culture and values, so the studies on the level of culture and values have significance for this study.

The study of political identity from a nationalist perspective is largely based on an analysis of how the national spirit is manifested in event narratives in film. Neve shows that the 1990s, American cinema produced a staggering number of artistic expressions of national politics, especially the presidency, with two powerful themes usually present in the films: the Cold War and the belief in democratic reform and renewal [14].

The study of political identity from a cultural perspective mainly involves the study of the relationship between culture and film. Studies of the Hollywood film industry contributing to the export of mainstream American values combine film with social culture, with social history, and with socio-politics. For example, in "understanding television", British author Whannel not only dissects the historical evolution of British and American cinema, the relationship between film and government, film and culture and race, and the future of cinema but also depicts the impact of film on society, culture, education, family and people's ideology and way of thinking, as well as the impact of film and theater documentary are studied in depth from sociological, historical, political economy and semiotic perspectives [15].

Studies presenting political identity from the body perspective focus on the metaphorical role of the body in the culture of dominant values. As a mainstream film that transmits the ideology of the state, it helps audiences to define social justice with the help of the physical narratives of the actors involved in the film, which Foucault finds that the flesh is directly involved in a certain political sphere, that power relations directly control it, interfere with it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to perform certain tasks, perform certain rituals, and perform certain tasks, perform certain rituals, and send certain signals [16]. All of these studies are based on the culture and values conveyed by the films themselves, but not many studies have been conducted on their communication effects, so this paper aims to study the cultural and political identity of transnational narratives.

3. Methodology

3.1. Semantic Network Analysis

Semantic network analysis is a sub-type of social network analysis [17], which can handle texts from multiple producers. It allows the analyst to explore the common perceptions of a group of text producers through co-occurrence analysis, lexical clustering, and centrality analysis so that the representations in the perceptions of text producers can be presented in a more objective way [18]. Semantic network analysis was first proposed by cognitive psychologists, and its epistemological basis is that concepts form cognitive networks with each other in a nodal manner in human mental cognition. When extended to the textual analysis of word groups and texts, the vocabulary remains the main unit of analysis [19]. Frames become significant through a specific set of words, with high variability between clusters and low variability within clusters [20]. Analyzing the semantic network of co-occurring words in a corpus (the corpus assembled for this paper) can help the analyst to understand the lexical usage characteristics of the corpus and to generalize thematic frames.

3.2. Data Collection

Top Gun: Maverick is a classic American mainstream film that was released in May 2022. By the end of 2022, it had grossed \$1.489 billion worldwide, ranking second on the 2022 worldwide box office annual chart. This 36-year sequel to the film, which is no less popular than 1986's Top Gun, has gained the hearts of audiences worldwide. The rabid audience reviews for Top Gun: Maverick (4.1k reviews on IMDb) provide favorable data to support this study. First, we used a Python tool to collect online reviews of the film Top Gun: Maverick from Chinese audiences on the Chinese movie review platform Douban (<https://movie.douban.com/>), and the collection range was the first 1000 data under the short review directory. The first 1,000 online reviews of Top Gun: Maverick were collected from American audiences on IMDb (<https://www.imdb.com/>), a US-based movie review platform. The data were collected on March 20, 2023, retaining review dates, ratings, and text comments. By eliminating irrelevant and duplicate items, 800 reviews in Chinese and 992 reviews in English were obtained. This is used to construct a small online corpus of Chinese and American movie reviews.

3.3. Research Steps

The first step is to perform word separation and deactivation. With the help of Python's natural language processing tool, the corpus was subjected to morphological reduction, letter case conversion, and word segmentation and deactivation using Jieba (a Chinese word segmentation tool) and NLTK (an English word segmentation tool) to generate word frequency tables. Later, a custom deactivation word list is generated by manual screening and the text is refiltered. After Chinese word separation and English analysis of the lexical assignment, two monolingual corpora were established. Next, high-frequency words were extracted. High-frequency word statistics and visual analysis were performed on the collated dataset to deeply explore the relationships and connotations behind the data, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of online movie reviews. The top 105 high-frequency words from the Chinese corpus and 193 high-frequency words from the English corpus, and then the co-occurrence matrix was generated with this part of high-frequency words, which was imported into Gephi software (<https://gephi.org/>) to generate keyword social network relationship graphs and semantic network global graphs for analysis. Finally, the high-frequency words were clustered. After the global analysis, the first 707 high-frequency words of the Chinese corpus and 556 high-frequency words from the English corpus were clustered using the modular clustering function in Gephi, and

several types of discourse frames were constructed in the corpus to explain the discourse ideology under the linguistic representations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overall Evaluation

Since the rating mechanism of IMDb is a 10-point system, the rating mechanism of Douban is a 5-point system. To unify the scoring standards of the two platforms, the ratings of IMDb in each interval were converted and processed, and the final score was 5 out of 5. The number of samples collected from the two platforms was not consistent, so a line graph was used to analyze the direction of the audience's emotional attitude toward the movie. Figure 1 shows the audience's rating, it can be seen that the Chinese audience's movie review scores are concentrated in 4, with relatively few low and high scores, showing a trend of high in the middle and low on both sides. The American audience's review scores are concentrated in 5, with few low scores, showing a significant upward trend. From the ratings, it is initially inferred that Chinese audiences tend to be satisfied with the film, while American audiences are more satisfied with the film.

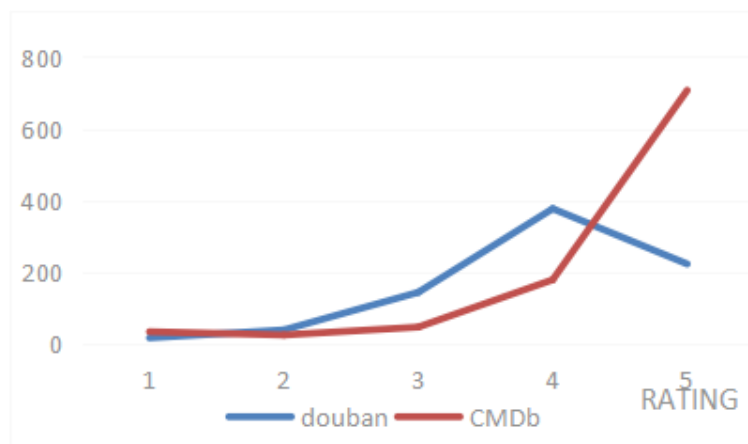


Figure 1: Audience rating chart [Owner-draw].

The data of 800 Chinese comments were divided into 5825 words with the Jieba word splitting tool, and the dummy words and hyphenated words were deleted and deactivated manually to build a corpus of Chinese comments with 4758 words. The high-frequency keywords with a frequency of 3 or more were selected, and a total of 1079 high-frequency keywords were obtained. The top 10% of them were selected as the analysis objects, and 105 high-frequency keywords were obtained by manual word selection again, which were used to establish co-occurrence relationships and imported into Gephi to obtain the semantic network relationship graph shown in Figure 2. In the semantic network graph and the modular network graph below, this paper sets the size of a node according to its degree of centrality. In an undirected network graph, the more connections a node has with other nodes, the larger the degree of centrality is. This means that the more frequently the word represented by the node co-occurs with other words, the larger the node will be presented in the graph. In addition, the weight of the edge connecting two nodes can measure the closeness of the connection between two nodes, which represents the frequency of co-occurrence between two words in this study.

Figure 2 shows the terms with the highest node degree values are “movie,” “America,” “Hollywood,” “main melody,” “first film”, “air war”, “storyline”, and “Tom Cruise”, indicating that Chinese audiences consider “Top Gun: Maverick” to be a classic American Hollywood film and automatically associate it with the concept of Chinese main-melody films. Terms such as “first film”,

“storyline” and “36” (36 years) indicate that Chinese audiences are concerned about the film’s articulation with Top Gun in terms of content. Terms such as “American”, “heroism” and “business” indicate that this is an American ideological propaganda film in the eyes of Chinese audiences. The words “Wolf Warriors,” “air war,” “mission,” and “conscript” indicate that the film, which is also a military film, creates a comparison with the Chinese film “Wolf Warriors,” which expresses that the Chinese will always have the powerful country on their backs, and “Top Gun: Maverick,” which expresses that the U.S. Air Force can challenge all impossibilities, and both films establish a good image of the military.

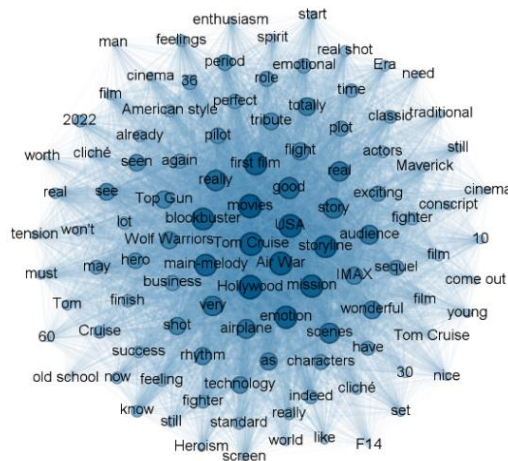


Figure 2: Semantic network diagram of Chinese viewers [Owner-draw].

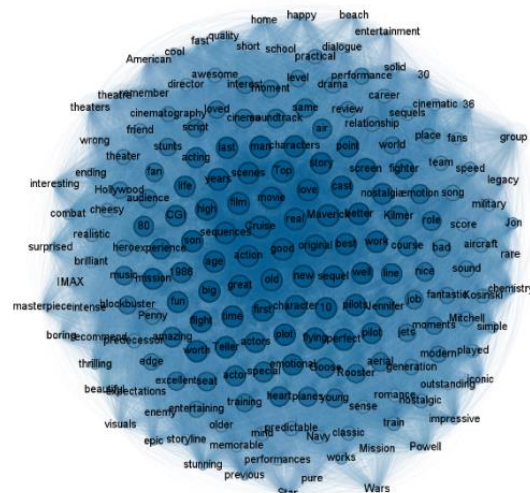


Figure 3: Semantic network diagram of American viewers [Owner-draw].

The 992 English comments were divided into 10,930 words by NLTK, the dummy words and conjunctions were deleted, and the deactivated words were removed manually to build a corpus of Chinese comments with 9997 subwords. The high-frequency keywords with a frequency of 6 or more were selected, and a total of 1,989 high-frequency keywords were obtained. The top 10% of them were selected as the analysis objects, and 193 high-frequency keywords were obtained by manual word selection again, which were used to establish co-occurrence relationships and imported into Gephi to obtain the semantic network relationship graph shown in Figure 3. Figure 3 shows that nouns such as “hero,” “war,” and “Navy” indicate that for American audiences the film is a classic

Hollywood war movie, showing the color of individual heroism. The terms “sequences”, “plot”, “CGI”, “characters” “music” and other terms indicate that American audiences evaluate the movie in more dimensions, such as whether it can connect well with “Top Gun” in terms of story, whether the movie’s plot is satisfying, whether the technical means in the movie are reasonable, the characterization of the movie and the rendering of the music. Adjectives such as “best,” “well,” and “cheesy” indicate that the emotional attitudes of American audiences toward the film are the same as those shown by Chinese audiences, which are extremely positive, neutral, and critical.

4.2. Framework Analysis of Sub-modules

Table 1: The semantic network of co-occurring words for the Chinese audience.

Module	Proportion	Frame	Representative high-frequency words
1	29.01%	Sequel Narrative	emotion audience plot technology blockbuster era classic character sequel Cliché deliberate
2	28.45%	Heroic Narrative	Tom Cruise movie air combat American Hollywood main-melody good scenes exciting Wolf Warriors
3	23.29%	Military Narrative	plot mission pilot hero plane hot-blooded beach finish navy protagonist

Table 2: The semantic network of co-occurring words for the American audience.

Module	Proportion	Frame	Representative high-frequency words
1	40.65%	Sequel Narrative	Tom Cruise movie action original sequel art characters story acting perfect
2	22.12%	Heroic Narrative	Maverick Rooster son mission emotional fighter Navy team war hero
3	20.32%	Military Narrative	Scenes film sequences flying air cast aerial experience actors side flight jets

In the Chinese corpus, high-frequency keywords with a frequency of 3 or more were selected, leaving only nouns, adjectives, and verbs. The lexical properties were carefully screened manually, and words that did not constitute a meaning for text analysis, such as “somewhat” and “indeed”, were deleted, and 707 keywords were finally obtained. High-frequency keywords with a frequency of 6 or more were selected in the English corpus, and the above operation was repeated, resulting in 556 keywords. The co-occurrence matrix established by the keywords was imported into the data visualization software Gephi 9.0, and the semantic network graphs (undirected graphs) based on co-occurring words were drawn. To summarize the discourse frames constructed in the corpus and to explain the discourse ideology under the linguistic representation, this paper adopts the modular clustering function in Gephi and partitions the overall semantic network using the built-in algorithm of Gephi 18. A total of 6 partitions were generated for Chinese movie reviews, accounting for 29.01%, 28.45%, 23.29%, 8.65%, 6.65%, 3.49%, and 0.56%, respectively. English movie reviews generate a total of 5 partitions, accounting for 40.65%, 22.12%, 20.32%, 8.81%, and 8.09%, respectively. Removing the modules with unclear frameworks, the top 3 representative modules were selected for analysis in this paper, as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 and Table 2 names Module 1 Module 2 Module 3 as Sequel Narrative Frame, Heroic Narrative Frame, and Military Narrative Frame, respectively, then representative high-frequency words under each frame were selected.

4.2.1. Sequel Narrative Frame

In a general sense, a film series refers to films whose content has continuity, and multiple integrated parts, and constitutes a series These serialized products have a consistent heritage in terms of theme, main or important characters, characterization and their growth, and visual style, thus becoming a genre [21]. Sequels are a mode of series development, and audiences will produce more diverse evaluations under the influence of the framework of the sequel narrative.

Figure 4 shows all the high-frequency words appearing in the Chinese reviews under the Sequel Narrative Framework. The larger the node, the higher the frequency of the word represented by the node co-occurring with other words in two. In Chinese film reviews, “emotional” is the most frequently co-occurring term, indicating that Chinese audiences’ discussion in the framework of sequels is centered on film sentiment. The phrase “emotional-blockbuster” appears several times in the text, indicating that Chinese audiences consider the film to be a commercial blockbuster peddling sentiment and that this is a mixed blessing. Some think the film is a combination of textbook sentiment selling and political commercial artwork, such as (1) there are few movies with more exciting sequels, and *Top Gun* is a full commercial blockbuster without the sentiment of the first one. However, there are also views that the film is only a sequel to the party for the second sale, and will only consume the emotions of the audience, such as (2) the essence is still in the harvesting of emotions, the intention to continue for the continuation is too obvious. In addition, negative words such as “cliché” and “deliberate” always appear at the same time as positive words such as “good” and “addictive”, indicating that the film’s plot is too obvious. This shows that although the plot setting of the film lacks novelty, it can still pull the audience’s emotion, and the audience unconsciously affirms the film, such as (3) the most sincere cliché. This narrative identity built based on emotional identity successfully evokes the emotional interaction of the general audience and establishes the foundation for the gradual realization of value identity, cultural identity, and political identity.

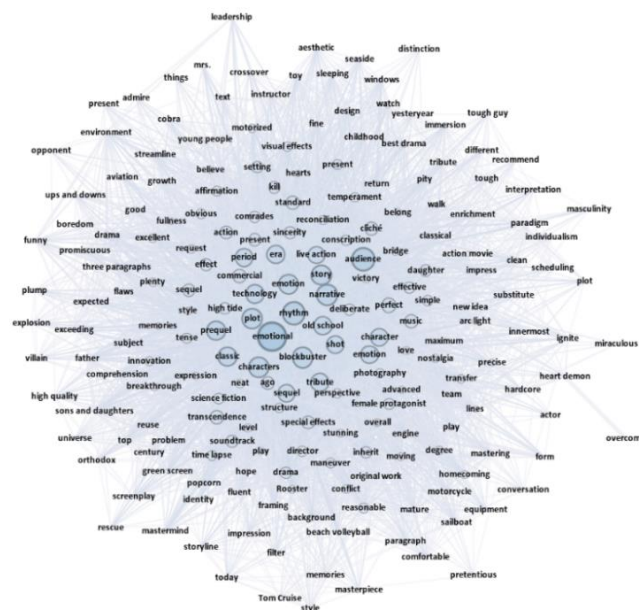


Figure 4: Semantic network diagram of Chinese viewers under the sequel narrative [Owner-draw].

Figure 5 shows all the high-frequency words appearing in the American reviews under the Sequel Narrative Framework. In American reviews, “Tom Cruise” is the most frequently used term, indicating that the American audience’s discussion in the framework of the sequel is centered on the film’s actors. Among them, “Tom Cruise-original” is the most frequently co-occurring term, which

“Tom Cruise-air war” and “Tom Cruise-hero” are the two most frequently co-occurring terms, suggesting that the film has successfully built up a heroic image in the minds of Chinese audiences. such as (1) a hero is never too late. In addition, “American-Wolf Warriors” is an association phrase unique to the Chinese context, and “Wolf Warriors” is a classic Chinese mainstream movie, in which the image of the main character Leng Feng is a Chinese localized “Hollywood-style Wolf Warriors is a classic Chinese mainstream film, and its protagonist, Leng Feng, is a localized Chinese “Hollywood-style” special operations hero. The fact that Chinese audiences refer to Top Gun: Maverick as the “American Wolf Warriors” indicates that the film has a high status in the minds of some Chinese audiences, and its meaning has crossed national boundaries, which is also the result of the transnational narrative of the United States through film. “Hollywood-mainstream” is also an associated phrase unique to the Chinese context, as the new mainstream film has become a hot topic in China in recent years and its concept has reached a basic social consensus. “Hollywood film” in the United States contains three layers of meaning: one is the industrial base, the other is the industry, and the third is the geographical location. This article discusses the first layer of the American film industry in California, that is, the processing base for promoting the core ideas of the United States. Chinese audiences consider this Hollywood-colored film to be a mainstream film promoting the national ideology, such as (2) the usual Hollywood narrative framework of the set melodrama, textbook heroism, and past friendship, which is indeed the best melodrama of this year. Some audiences reject such Hollywood movies, such as (3), which show the naked American heroism: hegemony. However, from the overall movie reviews of Chinese audiences, we can find that under the big value of patriotism, individual heroism and collectivism have achieved coexistence in the discourse. Hollywood influences the global audience with blockbusters and star effects, supporting and constructing the national image and international political discourse of the United States from the level of culture and public opinion, such as (4) You know this is a heroic movie and you know that heroes with beautiful women, but are still moved and pulled up on adrenaline.

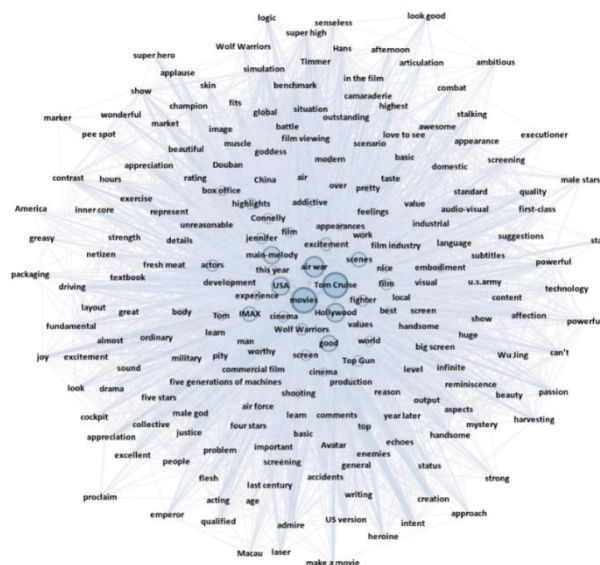


Figure 6: Semantic network diagram of Chinese viewers under the heroic narrative [Owner-draw].

Figure 7 shows all the high-frequency words appearing in the American reviews under the Heroic Narrative Framework. In American reviews, “Maverick” is the most frequent word, indicating that American audiences’ discussion in the framework of the sequel is centered on the film’s characterization. The terms “Maverick-Rooster,” “Maverick-emotional,” and “Maverick-friend” are

military-related films in Hollywood for its compact rhythm, a grand plot, and economic and efficient immersion experience.

Figure 8 shows all the high-frequency words appearing in the Chinese reviews under the Heroic Narrative Framework. In Chinese reviews, “storyline” is the most frequently used term, indicating that Chinese audiences’ discussions in the military framework revolve around the film’s plot. The terms “storyline-mission” and “storyline-hero” are the two most frequent terms, and Chinese audiences focus on the attributes of the mission, the results of the mission, and the people who carry out the mission, such as (1) the tightly paced battle scenes. It can be found that the storyline of the movie, such as “mission failure”, “mission restart” and “mission success”, which revolves around the “mission”, together constitute the emotional identity and value identity, but hardly constitute the national emotional identity and national value identity, such as (2) in a society that does not need war, who will still make such a heroic glorification film full of political hints? In addition, military terms such as “airplane,” “pilot,” and “navy” appear frequently, and the film uses air battles to build the main plot of the story, with the climactic air battle scenes being vivid. The realistic images are presented, and the audience’s expectations are met, leading to both a narrative climax and an emotional experience, but Chinese audiences still quickly recognize it as a U.S. Air Force propaganda film, such as (3) which brushes the ceiling of military recruitment advertising films again after 36 years! The term “patriotism” also appears in the reviews, and Chinese audiences are already familiar with the patriotic sentiment constructed in the military framework of the film, such as (4) American 2.0 patriotism, American democracy, mission second, and how to get people back alive first.

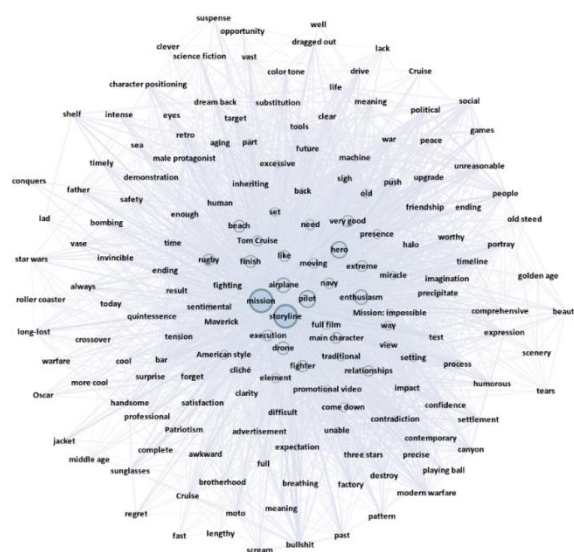


Figure 8: Semantic network diagram of Chinese viewers under the military narrative [Owner-draw].

Figure 9 shows all the high-frequency words appearing in the American reviews under the Military Narrative Framework. “Scenes” was the most frequent word in American reviews, indicating that the American audience’s discussion in the framework of the sequel was centered on the scenes of the film. “Scenes-flying” and “Scenes-fight” are the two most frequent terms and American audiences also pay attention to the aerial combat scenes in the movie, such as (1) The most fun I had with the movie was the fighter jet scenes! In addition, the words “CGI,” “aerial,” and “jets” appear several times, indicating that in the minds of American audiences, “Top Gun: Maverick” is not only a visual feast created with computer special effects but also a propaganda film showcasing the military power of the United States, such as (2) By the way all the action sequence in Fighter jet are real. Some viewers recognized this as a Hollywood military movie formula, such as (3) This is the essence of

emphasizes unity and the U.S. places more emphasis on individual heroism. However, within the framework of the heroic narrative, the star effect and the exciting plot make most Chinese people recognize “individual heroism”. Under the broad value of patriotism, individual heroism and collectivism coexist in the discourse. As a result, cinema has become a powerful weapon for spreading political ideology in a country, even to the point of political identification.

However, it is not easy to create a political identity, and Chinese audiences are naturally wary of specific topics, such as “war” and “patriotism”. In the framework of military narratives, the emotional construction of patriotism is more common in movies, and the symbolic identification of transnational narratives is easy to achieve, while the emotional and value identification is difficult to rise to the national level, and the political identification of transnational narratives rarely happens. In general, although many audiences have realized that films are tools for propagating national ideologies, they still choose to be open-minded. For the Chinese in particular, there is a general belief that they can learn from successful films and apply their narrative techniques and production models to mainstream Chinese cinema.

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