3.2 Nationalism in China

According to Chang (2000), Gries (2004) and Zhao (2004), the definition of Chinese nationalism is a little complicated. This is related especially to the traditional western view of nationalism in political science that links nationalism to nations' seeking to become states. This, according to Gries (2004), does not apply very well to China. Moreover, as he pointed out: "The western view of a nation as a uniquely modern institution is also problematic in Chinese context" (p. 7).

Chang (2000) observes:

The case of China is unique for a number of reasons. As a nation, China has been in existence perhaps longer than any other country in the world. Yet nationalism in its territorial and political sense is a new phenomenon emerging only in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, owing to the absence of a common religion and a rigid class structure, the Chinese nation has always been a loose community bound more by a common way of life than any Messianic appeal. In fact, both "China" and "Chinese" are vague terms, the former referring more to a geographical area and a cultural phenomenon than to a territorial state, and the latter also more to a cultural than to a political group (p. 259).

Therefore, Chang has followed the argument introduced earlier – that nationalism in China is much more cultural than political. In other words, he believes that the Chinese have a strong sense of cultural awareness but a weak sense of political identity. Chang explains that to be part China means to be included in this "cultural phenomenon rather than to have a special bond to a territorial state or to be loyal to a specific political regime in China" (p. 266). Zhao (2004) refers to Chang's concept of "cultural nationalism" in terms of "culturalism". As so, for him, the self-image of Chinese people is culturecentric rather than nationalistic. Zhao emphasizes the Confucian cultural system also mentioned by Gries (2004) as an important part of Chinese nationalism. There are several reasons for the early development of cultural awareness among the Chinese, but not political nationalism in China. First of all, China as a nation is a product of many centuries of evolutionary change; second, isolated environment in which the process of evolution took place; third, gradual cultural assimilation rather than military conquest as a means by which the evolution was taking place (Chang, 2000, p. 267).

However, as scholars point out, Chinese nationalism in the modern and contemporary Western sense, "with its emphasis on a clearly defined and delimited territorial state distinct from all other states, and a clear, solid bond between government and citizens with mutual obligations" (Chang, p. 275) nowadays co-exist

among Chinese with the cultural one mainly because "the boundary between the
Chinese nation and the Chinese state has remained blurred under communist
rule" (*ibid*., p. 287).

There are reasons for this unclear distinction between a state and nation because of
China's special situation as a multi-ethnic country complicated by the questions of
Tibet, Xinjiang, Hongkong and Taiwan. As Chang (2000) explained: "*When China
declares that Tibet or Xinjiang is an inseparable part of China as it has done many
times, the 'China' referred to is political and territorial, meaning the 'Chinese state'.
But when Beijing proclaims Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan to be an inseparable part
of China, the 'China' is cultural*" (ibid.).

In these claims and also in spreading patriotic and nationalistic feelings among
people, media are useful tool. This was for example very true in the CCP's campaign of
education in patriotism that was launched in January 1993. Zhao (2004) described:

> *It was reported by the official media that, by May 1994, more than 95
> percent of primary and middle school students in Beijing were
> organized to watch patriotic films recommended by the State Education
> Commission. Beijing cinemas and television stations aired the films and
> projection teams were sent to mountainous areas to show the film to
> local students. Beijing's students wrote more than 1.5 million essays*

about what they had learned from the heroes and heroines of the films

(p. 218).

Moreover, in 1994 new Guidelines for Patriotic Education were adopted and "the old Marxist indoctrination was replaced with patriotic themes" (Zhao, 2004, p. 219). As a part of the campaign, the State Education Commission, the Ministry of Culture, the Communist Youth League Central Committee, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Political Department nominated and publicly distributed one hundred movies glorifying the Communist Party of China.   Moreover, movies that featured traditional figures or stories repeatedly won awards. As Zhao argued: "Modern media became a very powerful instrument to promote patriotic sentiment" (p. 240).

Most recently, earlier this year, another "patriotic" education campaign under the name "Oppose splittism, Protect stability, Encourage development" has been launched in Tibet as a reaction to Tibetan unrest in March 2008. The aim of the campaign is to strengthen ties between public and the Chinese Communist Party. CCP members involved in the campaign have to educate rural people about the March riots in Tibet "using video and pictures" (*Taipei Times,* April 22, 2008).

But when and how did nationalism in China emerge? Nationalism in its modern sense (political nationalism) swept across Asia "a little over 100 years ago as a reaction to Western power and dominance" (Wang, 2003, p. 93). Its rise at the turn of the 19th

century in China was according to Zhao (2004) triggered by the globalization of the

European-centered Westphalian nation-state system because it was for the first time in

Chinese history when the country was challenged by an equal (if not superior)

civilization. Zhao argues that "the clash of Chinese universalism and Western

imperialism and the subsequent political and cultural crisis in China compelled Chinese

elites to borrow the Western concept of nationalism for their own defense" (p. 47).

Agreeing with Zhao on the emergence of Chinese nationalism, Chang (2000) goes

further and explains that development of political nationalism in China was "a process

of painful self-negation" because it involved tasks such as the scaling down of the

global world outlook to the nation or state, the recognition of China's backwardness

when it comes to comparison with the newly developed West, and the building up of

military strength to defend China's territory and regime.

Wang (2003) uses the similar argumentation and characterizes the early political

nationalism in China as "infused with a mixture of despair and strident

bitterness" because Chinese nationalism was "rooted in fear of enslavement, of

dismemberment of the country, and of being at the lower end of a Social

Darwinist" compared to Western powers as well as to Japan (p. 99). However, as Wang

reminded, this bitter nationalism "survives among some Chinese inside and outside

China to this day" (ibid.). Bitter memories lead, according to him, to "restoration

nationalism", that is widespread among most Chinese: "*This form of nationalism stresses the recovery of sovereignty over Chinese territories that still remain outside Beijing's jurisdiction, and places great emphasis on preserving traditional values and regaining self-respect for all Chinese*" (p. 14).

The reasons are the feelings of an incomplete reunification of China after several civil wars and sense of cultural loss. According to Gries (2004), Chinese nationalism still copes with the burden of the past, more specifically with the Century of Humiliation (from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century) that is still crucial to Chinese nationalism today. Gries says that the narrative (story told about the past) about the Century of Humiliation frame the ways that Chinese interact with the West. He pointed out that during the 1990s, the "official Maoist victor narrative was slowly superseded by a new and popular victimization narrative that blames the West, including Japan, for China's suffering" (p. 48). Examples of "rape of China" narrative include Chinese-American Iris Chang's 1997 *The Rape of Nanjing*, that became bestseller in China, and movies such as *Opium War* (1997). This narrative also emerged according to Gries after the 1999 United States bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade when the *People's Daily* brought the commentary under the title "*This is not 1899 China*".

As most authors agree, China has witnessed a new wave of nationalism   in the

1990s. This new wave was characterized not just by new efforts of Party's propaganda machinery, but also by the debates on the intellectual level and by the rise of "popular nationalism". On the intellectual and popular level the wave of nationalism was strengthened by China's economic achievements. Zhao (2004) is convinced that these achievements have built up self-confidence among intellectuals, who began to believe that traditional culture "could play an important and positive role in national development" (p. 147). Gries (2004), agreeing with this argument, points out that Confucianism plays an important role in today's China nationalism. This can be ilustrated by a speech of Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress Tian Jiyun who declared in 1995 that "the IQ of the Chinese ethnicity, the descendants of the Yellow Emperor, are very high" (in Sautman, 1997, p. 79).

Gries counted three separate waves of Chinese nationalism in the 1990s – the Diaoyu Islands protests of 1996; the *China Can Say No* sensation of 1996 – 97; and the Belgrade bombing protests of May 1999 (p. 121). Entering the 21st century, we can identify even more waves: the 1 April 2001 spy plane collision over the South China Sea; the 13 July 2001 China's winning bid for hosting Olympic Games; the 13 October 2003 launch of Shenzhou 5 spacecraft; anti-Japanese protests over textbooks in April 2005; and most recently the April 2008 protests against CNN and Carrefour that spread in China as a reaction to the disputes over Tibetan unrest a month earlier. Moreover, the

hosting of Olympic Games has brought another wave of nationalism among Chinese.

In general, Western interpretation of Chinese nationalism is focused on the

Chinese Communist Party with the argument that with communism in crisis Beijing

spreads nationalism to maintain power. Christensen (1996) expressed this dominant

argument in an influental *Foreign Affairs* article, where he wrote that "since the

Chinese communist party is no longer communist it must be even more Chinese" (p.

37). Smith (1995) adds that it is the nationalism of Maoism that is being stressed

nowadays. This Western intellectual view is shared by Chinese scholars like Wang

(2003) and Zhao (2004). According to Wang (2003), ressurection of patriotism and

nationalism in China is "attributed, among other things, to the decline in Marxist or

Maoist faith, or to resurgence of Chinese power in the nation-state" (p. 111). And Zhao

(2004) noted that the party decided to promote nationalism heavily shortly after the

1989 Tiananmen crackdown when the state launched a propaganda campaign of

education in patriotism mentioned earlier. The purpose of this campaign was to ensure

loyalty in population. It is probable that Chinese communists took a lesson from the

collapse of Soviet Union that according to Smith (1995) "suggests that even

revolutionary invented traditions must harness or forge (or often both) a national

culture and political identity if they are to strike deep popular roots" (p. 149).

As then CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin said, "in China today, patriotism and

socialism are unified in essence" (Zhao, p. 9). Zhao observed three themes to have

dominated the campaign – Chinese tradition and history, territorial integrity, and

national unity. The case of Chinese tradition and history is very interesting, because

Chinese tradition had been under attack by CCP for many years. However, Zhao argues

that Chinese tradition (ancestor worship, Confucianism, Great Wall and other Chinese

cultural artifacts) has been used to link communist China with its non-communist past.

From the above, one can see that even CCP turned to "cultural" rather than

"political" nationalism in the campaign and relied on the strength of cultural

"Chineseness" that according to Chang (2000) can "generate among all Chinese a

common sense of belonging that will pull them back from time to time from the abstract

tian xia to the more concrete Chinese state" (p. 293). This shift warrants a look into the

surge of „cultural nationalism" as seen as the most popular leisure time entertainment

medium in Chinese films.

3.3 Film Theories and Nationalism

There is an ongoing debate among scholars about the influence of movies on politics

and society and vice versa. This debate has not reached any conclusion yet, because, as

Giglio (2000) pointed out, "the empirical evidence that would prove a causal

relationship between film and political (or social) action has yet to be firmly

established" (p. 15). However "this failure by social science does not negate the possibility that specific films play a limited, but influental, role in the formation of individual beliefs and values" (*ibid.*, p. 16). Among the arguments put forward by film scholars, there is usually the one focused on the attitude of governments – particularly on attempts of dictators to control the movie industry and cooperation between democratic governments and movie industry especially during   periods of national emergencies (Furhammar & Isaksson 1971, Giglio 2000).

Scholars also agree that films play an important role in building and strengthening national consciousness. For Chu (2003), "film is a powerful medium, which produces a public space for the image processes of a nation to develop" (p. 79). Turner (1994) argues that all nations are constructed and all forms of collective identity are culturally produced. Also Benedict Anderson's (1983) "imagined community" sees the nation-state as imagined and socially constructed. This is in line with Billig´s theory of Banal Nationalism (Billig, 1995) that nationalism relies on routine symbols and habits of language, especially in the media, for its continuing stregth.

Anderson and other scholars of nationalism (Homi Bhabba or Ernest Gellner) emphasized that national identity as a unifying force relies on cultural products like newspapers, film, etc. These scholars argued that cultural products "narrate the nation" and, as such, produce and spread the meanings of nation consciousness. For

Anderson (1983), media "provided technical means for representing the kind of imagined community that is the nation." (p. 25) According to him, national identity, "as defined and disseminated through cultural products, acts as the umbrella, the glue that strengthens the nation and makes it the whole" (p. 31).

This correlates with the argument of Hall (2004) that national identity is constituted within representation. Hall perceives the cinema not as a second-order mirror but as a form of representation "which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are" (p. 397). Hall focused on the building of cultural identity in post-colonial countries which newly gained independence. However, as Smith (1999) pointed out, every country has its' own cultural and ethnic myths that are produced and reproduced during the time, especially during the prolonged periods of warfare; during the time when the country's unity is threatened; or during the time of commercialization when the community's isolation is diminishing.

There have been some studies on films and national identity. Anderson (1996) examined the connection between Canadian national identity and cultural production, namely films produced by state-funded National Film Board of Canada (NFB). This study described   the attempts of NFB to estabilish an official discourse of national identity stressing unified and distinct Canada and later "feminization" of the Canadian

"imagined community" due to the film production of a feminist film unit Studio D

formed at NFB.

Another study by Blandford (2007) focused on films and the question of British

identity. Blandford analyzed films from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales made in

1990s to trace and examine some ways that film begun to reflect Britain's changing

reality. He argues that in the 1990s the distinctive national cinemas of England, Ireland,

Scotland and Wales emerged. The English one stresses "Britishness" as something that

is English and upper middle class, or in other cases talking about the social issues of

England or about historical national myths; the Irish focusing on the Irish distinctive

culture related to the grasslands and countryside, or on the conflict with Britain; the

Scottish one basically stressing the differences between "Britishness" and

"Scottishness"; while the   cinema of Wales called "heritage cinema" focusing on the

problem of Welsh identity. Some attempts to discover the relation between films,

national identity and nationalism has been done also in a case of other countries, for

example Germany (especially after the reunification) or Australia. In the case of

Australia, Turner (1994) argued that   "Australian governments have gradually

relinquished their interest in managing the development of nation's print media and

have made assiduous use of state-funded image production" (p. 12).

Martin-Jones (2006) differs from others because he focused on cinemas of

countries from around the world and related films' content to the world affairs and changing national identities. According to him, the German movie *Run Lola Run* talks about the possible future for a re-unified Germany, *Saving Private Ryan* is a triumphalistic answer to the First Gulf War and *Terminator 3* talks about unsafety in post-Cold War world when America has retreated from its global responsibilites. Martin-Jones followed the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's film theory to examine how narrative time is used to construct national identity. Focusing on the meaning of time manipulation in movies, his theory explains the model of the "movement-image" and "time-image" with "movement-image" describing the linear progression of an action-reaction filmic structure and "time-image" characterised by optical and sound situations that serve as filling of the space.

This present study will use thematic content analysis to identify all the nationalistic/patriotic themes in the selected Chinese films to see how they present nationalism. Thematic analysis was used for example in a study by Dodds (2004) on Army recruiting themes in Guadalcanal Diary movie, by Darby (1997) when analyzing westerns done by John Ford or by Devin (1999) on portrayal of Vietnam war in Hollywood movies. Using this method, Devine analyzed more than 400 films from years 1948 to1993 and found their thematic changes during the time - from anticommunism and heroism in 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, to anti-war films in

1970s, films with "superhero mythology" in 1980s and finally to films about tragic and controversial nature of the conflict in 1990s.

In the case of China, the studies on nationalism and media available in English language have their attention limited on the news media. Li (2006), for example, focused on the *China Daily* and *The New York Times* coverage of the two events that sparked nationalistic protests in China: the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO in May 1999 and the collision between a US military aircraft and a Chinese fighter jet in April 2001. Li found the variations of language used in *China Daily* and *The New York Times* that he considers as corresponding to particular nationalist ideologies.

In the case of Chinese films, there are many studies on political propaganda of CCP or aesthetic analysis of the movies of the 5th generation filmmakers – especially Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. These studies, however, bear little relevance to this thesis's focus on nationalistic/patriotic themes in Chinese domestic box-office hits. It is hoped that my research can fill this intellectual gap in China film studies and help to inform us on the filmic discourse of nationalism. Certainly, it should shed light on the relationship between films and nationalism in China.