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## GRASSROOTS AND STAR IMAGES IN THE CCTV SPRING FESTIVAL GALA: THE RE-PRODUCTION OF NATIONAL IDEOLOGY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULAR CULTURE

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### Abstract

This study is basic research, which conducts a qualitative research method to study the phenomenon of the ‘Grassroots and Star Images in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala’ on the issue of ‘Re-production of National Ideology and National Identity Construction’ in the context of Popular Culture. This study employs text and discourse analysis of grassroots programs in the Gala since the 1990s and found that the grassroots image in the Gala has experienced the “invisible” in the 1990s to the “visible” after 2000. The grassroots image featured in the Gala emphasizes two key aspects. Firstly, the concept of “family culture” evokes deep resonance and ethical identification with Chinese culture among individuals of Chinese descent worldwide. Secondly, it fosters social unity and harmony by reinforcing core socialist values. This study analyzed the star image presented at the Gala and found that in response to the nostalgia prevalent in mid-1990s popular culture, the Gala emphasized songs with ambiguous connotations tied to “love,” supporting the narrative of reform and the market economy. Since the late 1990s, the Gala has shifted from showcasing the unique styles of celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the early 1990s to presenting their images within broader narratives of “nation” and “state.” These narratives encompass Chinese history and culture themes, revolutionary and national spirit, patriotism, and a “family state.” The Gala maintains its long-term cultural leadership through continuous interaction with popular and folk cultures. By weaving grassroots and celebrity images into the program content, the gala has long engaged in a grand discourse narrative of “nation” and “state,” ultimately completing the construction of national identity. This is the cultural significance of the ideological reproduction of the Gala.

*Keywords:* Grassroots and Star Images, The CCTV Spring Festival Gala, Re-production of National Ideology, National Identity Construction, Popular Culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The initial studies on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, conducted by scholars in literature and

art such as Geng (2003), mainly concentrated on its aesthetic features. Some researchers have criticized the Gala as a means of state power and ideological control, analyzing it through political economy and cultural criticism (Bin, 1998; Lv, 2006; Pan, 2007; Pan, 2010). Bourdieu (1993) posits that the cultural field constitutes a space of power struggles, where various actors compete for discursive authority in defining legitimate culture. In response to their criticism and influenced by Bourdieu's cultural field theory, Shi and Liu (2012) argued that the Gala has evolved into a "field" of significant struggle and negotiation, embodying various social forces, ideas, and demands, with the audience not entirely passive. Within the Spring Festival Gala field, multiple forces—including official ideology, commercial logic, professional artistic standards, and popular taste—engage in dynamic interplay, collectively shaping the representation of both grassroots and celebrity figures. Chen (2012) examined the dynamic development process of the Gala in the past 30 years, revealing the market, political, technical, and audience factors that affect the development of the Gala. In contrast, influenced by the "communication ritual view" proposed by Carey (2009), scholars such as Qi (2017) have affirmed the positive role of the Spring Festival Gala in constructing state ideology and revealed how such media production and construction may exert a profound influence on audiences' identity formation or national identity. The theory of ideological reproduction originates from Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, later developed by cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall, who emphasized mass culture as a contested site of ideological struggle. The theory of national identity construction can be traced back to Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (2006), Homi Bhabha's and Sheng's researches on national narratives (1990-1994, 2011). These theories emphasize that national identity is not an innate or essential attribute, but rather a continuously constructed product shaped through cultural practices, media representations, and daily rituals. As an annual media ritual, the Spring Festival Gala participates in shaping and reinforcing the consciousness of the Chinese national community through specific symbolic systems and emotional mobilization. Giddens (1991) proposed a new framework for explaining the relationship between modernity and the self. Smith (1991) argued that national identity emerges from a group's historical and cultural foundations rather than being either purely constructed or biologically determined.

Studies on the grassroots image in the Gala focus on media and social interaction, revealing the link between grassroots image production and national policies (Chen, 2014; Cheng & Liu, 2010). For instance, Chen (2014) analyzed the evolving portrayal of migrant workers, noting a shift from satire to acceptance, highlighting the interplay between political ecology and media development. Based on Couldry's media ritual theory (2003), Yuan (2017) examined the "rural outsiders" image as a ritualized behavior in media ritualization. However, research on the portrayal of stars in the Gala remains limited. In addition, few scholars have studied the interaction between the Gala as a representative of Chinese mainstream culture and pop culture and network subculture in the context of Chinese popular culture.

This study examines the representation of grassroots and pop star images at the Gala. It employs theoretical frameworks such as "Reproduction of National Ideology" and "National Identity Construction" and utilizes qualitative research methods, including text analysis, case analysis, and discourse analysis. The aim is to investigate how this national cultural event creatively re-produces grassroots and pop star images to fulfill political and consumerist needs while maintaining cultural leadership. Ultimately, the study explores how the Gala uses grassroots and pop star images to reinforce national ideology, construct national identity, and reveal the underlying dynamics that position the Gala as a power mechanism.

## **2. FROM “CREATING STARS” TO “LEVERAGING STARS”: A COMPREHENSIVE CULTURAL PRODUCTION STRATEGY FOR THE GALA AMIDST CHINESE MEDIA MARKETIZATIONS**

In the 1980s, the emergence of new television media, coupled with the cultural market still in its formative years during the initial phases of reform and opening, allowed the Spring Festival Gala to establish a monopolistic advantage through its innovative production of artistic programs. Its ability to create stars has received widespread acclaim. Celebrities such as Zhang Mingmin, Fei Xiang, Mao Amin, Wei Wei, Song Zuying, and Yang Liping became well-known in Chinese households during the 1980s, all of whom rose to fame through the Spring Festival Gala as a platform.

Since the 1990s, the deepening of reforms and the establishment of a market economy have catalyzed market-oriented reforms in the media sector. This has led to a flourishing consumer culture and the emergence of a consumer society. Popular culture has increasingly become a prominent reflection of the dynamic cultural industry.

With the rapid development of network media, the explosion of entertainment reality shows on provincial satellite TV, coupled with the widespread use of mobile phones. As audience awareness of interaction and participation in media entertainment culture has grown, grassroots singers pursuing their musical dreams have rapidly gained popularity through online platforms and TV talent shows, attracting a significant fanbase. Hunan TV pioneered this trend, launching the “Super Girl” talent show in June 2004, which became domestic television’s first popular entertainment variety show. In response to the intense competition in the entertainment landscape of local and provincial TV stations, CCTV launched “Star Avenue” in October 2004. Emphasizing the principle of “people’s self-entertainment,” the program highlights public participation and entertainment, providing a platform for ordinary workers from diverse backgrounds across the country to sing and showcase their talents. “Star Avenue” has become a significant avenue for selecting actors and programs for the Gala. Many grassroots members of society, including farmers and migrant workers, have gained recognition among audiences by participating in CCTV’s “Star Avenue” and eventually performing in the Gala.

Since 2009, the Web 2.0 era, which is characterized by social media platforms, has empowered many grassroots groups, and network subcultures have emerged in an endless stream. More and more ordinary people with unique skills and extraordinary talents come to the public’s vision through TV variety shows and short video social media platforms such as TikTok, creating one myth after another from grassroots to stars.

Given political and market dynamics, the Gala is pleased to extend invitations or collaborate with celebrities and grassroots figures with strong market appeal and a solid public following. On the one hand, the charisma of these celebrities can be harnessed to enhance the viewership of the Gala, fostering a deeper connection between the event, young audiences, and the public. On the other hand, as a national cultural celebration and ideological platform, the Gala will inevitably integrate and recontextualize elements of popular culture and online subcultures to maintain its cultural leadership.

## **3. RE-PRODUCTION OF GRASSROOTS IMAGES OF THE GALA**

Featuring grassroots performers on the Spring Festival Gala was CCTV’s strategy to adapt to the new media landscape. By incorporating folk culture into this national ritual, it both satisfied audiences’ desire for authenticity and maintained the dominance of mainstream values.

### 3.1. "Invisible" Grassroots: The Reproduction of the Gala Under the Dual Role of Market Competition and National Will in the 1990s

#### 3.1.1. *Media and Chinese Society in the 1990s*

In the 1990s, China's media market displayed three key characteristics: First, the rise of market competition attracted the urban middle class and newly wealthy as primary audiences. Second, CCTV maintained a stronghold in the Spring Festival programming while competition among central and provincial stations intensified. Finally, variety shows flourished across the media landscape. In July 1997, Hunan TV launched "Happy Camp," a game entertainment program featuring stars, which sparked a wave of similar shows across local stations. This shift transformed domestic variety programming and challenged the traditional Spring Festival Gala model (Chen, 2012).

The contradiction between uneven economic growth and social development in China began in the 1990s, marked by the widening gap between rich and poor, increasing urban-rural disparities, and imbalanced development between eastern and western regions. In Chinese society, a considerable number of vulnerable groups have appeared. Sun (2004) identified several key components of vulnerable groups. First, the momentum from rural reform in the mid-1980s diminished by the mid-1990s, as township enterprises declined and falling prices for agricultural products highlighted the weaknesses of farmers, widening the urban-rural gap. Second, migrant workers, affected by both economic and social factors, represent another vulnerable group. Lastly, a new urban impoverished class, mainly consisting of laid-off and unemployed individuals, has intensified since the mid to late 1990s.

#### 3.1.2. *Farmers who are "Consumed": The Image of Farmers in Zhao Benshan's Sketches*

In the 1990s, as the income gap between urban and rural China grew, many farmers migrated to cities. Meanwhile, the media's shift to market-oriented development led to a reliance on advertising revenue, focusing primarily on the urban middle class as the target audience. As a result, farmers and workers, who have noticed the backbone of society, became marginalized and "forgotten" by mainstream media. When covered, it was often about tragic events such as mining accidents, crimes, and murders, portraying them as "others" rather than integral members of society.

The portrayal of farmers in the Gala serves two primary functions. It can obscure the marginalized status of farmers while simultaneously reflecting the Gala's focus on "people" and "mass" participation. Zhao Benshan's sketches align with both market competition and national sentiment. As a folk artist from Northeast China, he has created a unique comedic style through grassroots performances that portray relatable farmers. Since debuting in 1990, Zhao appeared in Twenty-one editions of the Gala until 2011, winning the sketch category over ten times and earning the title of "sketch king" in the 1990s. His sketches in Gala depict the down-to-earth image of Northeast simple, witty, kind, cunning, and worldly farmers. His popularity highlights the Gala's ongoing effort to balance political ideology with consumerist demands. On the Gala stage, Zhao Benshan maintains a consistent stereotypical image: a wrinkled Zhongshan coat, a worn octagonal hat, a "pig's kidney face" that looks like a smile and a cry, and a reformed Northeast dialect. These symbols point first to a concept familiar to the Chinese: the farmer. As Shi (2010) analyzed, "Zhao Benshan has filled the gap in the image of peasants in the Chinese cultural pattern since the 1990s." This research holds that Zhao Benshan's distinctive peasant image meets the dual needs of political ideology and consumerism ideology in the Spring Festival Gala. It is a successful combination of "political farmers" and "market farmers," which not only strengthens the political legitimacy of the Gala as a national cultural celebration on behalf of the largest group but also satisfies the "peasant imagination" and "rural imagination" of the urban audience in the market-oriented operation of the media and also covers the cruel social reality that farmers have increasingly become "vulnerable groups" in the market-oriented reform in the 1990s.



**Figure 1:** Distinctive Peasant Images in the Gala Sketches Performed by Zhao Benshan (in the middle). “Pay a New Year’s Visit” in 1998 (a) and “Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” in 1999 (b). Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: January 20, 2024).

### 3.1.3. *Workers who are “Represented”: The Image of Workers in Huang Hong’s Sketches*

Huang Hong is a renowned artist within the national system, born initially as a soldier and recognized as a first-class national actor. His creative approach in sketch performances adheres to the Gala’s aesthetic principle of “combining education with entertainment.” Huang’s works frequently intertwine significant national government policies, using contemporary social issues as entry points, and they reflect the evolving societal landscape through the narratives of ordinary people, possessing a strong sense of timeliness and relevance. Unlike Zhao Benshan’s consistent portrayal of Northeast farmers, Huang Hong’s characters reflect the changing social realities relevant to his sketch themes. In “Shoe Polish” (1993), he showed a migrant worker adapting to the national market economy as a part-time laborer seeking opportunities. In “Playing Poker” (1994), a salesman, through poker and discussions with a journalist classmate, highlighted societal injustices like oversaturated management roles and unethical practices in the entertainment industry. His commentary critiqued the ethical decline of a profit-driven market. In “Shoe Nails” (1997), he portrayed a roadside shoemaker advocating for professional ethics, while in “Pump up the Bike” (1999), he depicted a laid-off worker rallying others to face unemployment with optimism. Overall, Huang Hong’s sketches powerfully express the “national will” and “ideology” by speaking on behalf of the grassroots. The reality that millions of workers have been laid off due to the restructuring of state-owned enterprises since the mid-1990s is rarely acknowledged in the Spring Festival Gala, making the topic of layoffs a sensitive issue. It was not until 1999 that the Gala featured its only sketch on this subject, “Pump up the Bike.” This article will analyze how the Gala avoids social contradictions and expresses the will of the state through the image of laid-off workers who are “represented” and “expressed.” The sketch, “Pump up the Bike,” written by Huang Hong and featuring Huang Hong and Ju Hao, tells a story of conflict and reconciliation between a laid-off bike repairman (Huang Hong) and a demoted small cadre (Ju Hao). Frustrated with his job, the small cadre confronts the repairman while he is inflating his bicycle tire, questioning his motivation. A misunderstanding leads the repairman to remove the valve core, intensifying the conflict. However, as the small cadre calms down, the repairman helps him inflate his tire again. Ultimately, the small cadre finds encouragement and rekindles his enthusiasm for work, thanks to the repairman’s optimism. The sketch concludes with a poignant dialogue exchange (The author arranges the sketch lines according to the CCTV network 1999 Spring Festival Gala sketch “Pump up the Bike”).

**Small Cadre:** While most people aim for the top and seek out high places, I am drawn to the depths. Why do I feel so unhappy? Why is everything so challenging?

**Bike Repairer:** You may be surrounded by good fortune without realizing it. Who has not faced complexities in their life? Let me share an example from my own experience. After graduating at eighteen, I took a job at a bicycle factory. I have earned a spot on the honor list three times, and the factory director holds me in high regard. I am on the verge of being promoted to deputy team leader. When the leader spoke to me about the factory’s plans to downsize and merge with another facility,

I felt compelled to respond immediately. I stated that our workers should prioritize the country's needs: "If I do not lay off, then who will?"

**Small Cadre:** Old comrade, you have been laid off. I am sorry, old comrade.

**Bike Repairer:** It is okay. Sometimes, it is like this bike tire. If there is too much air in it, let some air out. If there is not enough air, add some to feel good and enjoy life, right?

**Small Cadre:** When the bike's wheels turn forward, people should look forward.

**Bike Repairer:** You are right; I am starting from scratch. I am not bragging about you. Once I start my bike repair stall, it will not take six months. I will become the largest stall owner on this street.



**Figure 2:** The 1999 Sketch "Pump up the Bike" was Performed by Huang Hong and Ju Hao. Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: January 20, 2024).

This sketch text uses two rhetorical devices to suture social contradictions and express ideology. Firstly, through the discourse of "sharing difficulties with the state and government," it advocates the spirit of "self-sacrifice" in the pre-socialist era in the era of "market economy" and "fair competition" as the central theme (Dai, 2018). Another approach is to adopt the model of "The lowly are the wisest, and the noble are the stupidest" in the art of sketch drama (Dai, 2018).

Laid-off workers depicted within the "lowly" social reality have taken on a prominent role in the sketch, offering moral and spiritual "redemption" for higher-ranked cadres. This discourse aims to elevate their status, providing temporary psychological comfort. By contrasting their perceived social status with that of laid-off workers, the audience develops a self-soothing mindset of "better off than some, but not as good as others." This dynamic offers a sense of psychological satisfaction regarding their circumstances, easing some of their discontent with societal issues and promoting a feeling of social connection. However, the heroic statements from this worker, such as, "We workers should prioritize the country's needs. If I do not lay off, then who will? ", reveal a strong sense of moral responsibility and self-sacrifice that ultimately makes his character seem inauthentic, exposing the text's inability to reconcile social contradictions.

### 3.2. "Visible" Grassroots: The Reproduction of the Gala Under the Macro-policy Adjustment of the Chinese Government Since 2000

#### 3.2.1. Grassroots (Migrant Workers/Farmers) Programs Have Sprung Up

Since 2000, the Chinese government has focused on agriculture, rural development, and farmer welfare. In a July 2003 speech, Hu stressed the need for a people-oriented approach and a sustainable development framework that enhances economic, social, and human progress. The Chinese government set the goal of creating a harmonious socialist society. To address urban-rural disparities and support migrant workers, the central government has implemented policies recognizing their contributions to industrialization and improving their status in urban areas while promoting social recognition of their community. In alignment with the relevant policies established by the Chinese government, the Gala emphasizes the importance of representing grassroots images, particularly those of migrant workers and farmers.

It seeks to challenge the “conscious” collective silence of the media prevalent in the 1990s (Dai, 2018; Lv, 2003). The portrayal of migrant workers has evolved from featuring actors to actively inviting individuals who are genuine farmers or migrant workers to participate in the Gala (Yuan, 2017). The Gala is a strategic tool for maintaining a strong competitive edge in the highly contested media landscape. To counter the relentless competition brought by emerging network media and entertainment variety shows from local and provincial television stations, CCTV launched “Star Avenue” in October 2004. Since 2010, the CCTV Variety Channel has introduced an interactive variety show titled “I Want to Go to the Spring Festival Gala,” designed to scout outstanding folk programs for the Gala. Notable participants include Abao (2006), Ma Guangfu (2009), Ren Yueli (2011), the rock group “Xu RI Yang Gang” (2011), and the Shenzhen Wanfu Street Dance Troupe (2011)—all of whom represent ordinary individuals, including farmers and migrant workers. Yuan (2015) notes that the “ordinary people” featured in the Spring Festival Gala were winners of CCTV’s talent competitions, “Star Avenue” or “I Want to Go to the Spring Festival Gala.” Consequently, the Gala became an actual award ceremony for reality show participants. By leveraging the “real person card,” these grassroots individuals have helped CCTV strengthen its central position in a decentralized market.

### 3.2.2. Four Themes of Discourse Construction of the Gala’s Grassroots Programs

The first theme focuses on responding to national policies aimed at rectifying the terminology used for migrant workers. It emphasizes their crucial contributions to reform, opening up, and modernizing socialism. There is a call for society at large to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of migrant workers, to show care for them, and to promote harmonious coexistence among various social groups (Chen, 2014). Notable works in this context include the dramatic sketches “City Outsiders” (2004), “Brothers” (2004), “Kindergarten for Migrant Workers’ Children” (2006), the dance “Entering the City” (2007), and Sketch show “Bus Concerto” (2008). The second theme focuses on the life attitudes of migrant workers, emphasizing their active pursuit of dreams and the importance of self-esteem and self-improvement. Performances under this theme feature migrant workers showcasing their authentic identities while demonstrating a positive mental outlook. Notable works related to this theme include the poetry recital “Words from the Heart” by the children of migrant workers at Xingzhi School in Beijing (2007), the “Song of Migrant Workers” performed by the Chongqing Guangsha Construction Group Migrant Workers Art Choir (2008), the dance “We Workers Have Power” by the Shenzhen Migrant Workers Song and Dance Troupe (2011), and the song “In Spring” by the migrant workers’ ensemble “Xu Ri Yang Gang” (2011).



**Figure 3:** Migrant Workers’ Children Perform Poetry Recitation “Words from the Heart” in the 2007 Gala. It Expresses the Children’s Self-esteem.

Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: August 20, 2024).

The third theme connects grassroots with professional singers, showcasing classic songs that express love for the country and the pursuit of dreams. These grassroots stars symbolize triumph over adversity, with notable performances such as Abao's "The Rising Sun on the Grassland" in 2006 and Ma Guangfu's "Beyond Dreams" in 2009. The Gala acts as an emotional outlet, illustrating how ordinary individuals can achieve their dreams while promoting social unity amidst economic and social disparities. The fourth theme focuses on longing for and nurturing a sense of "home" among ordinary individuals living away from their roots and facing challenges in unfamiliar environments. This theme is poignantly captured in Grassroots singer Ren Yueli's "Homesick" (2011) and Farmer singer Zhu Zhiwen's "I Want to Go Home" (2012). "Family ethics have transformed conflicts and structural crises between social classes into issues that can be resolved with warmth and affection within families". For many Chinese individuals, "home" is a timeless source of strength and an emotional refuge for those who are away. This deep longing for and protection of home is woven into the cultural identity of the Chinese community.



**Figure 4:** Farmer Singer Zhu Zhiwen sings "I Want to Go Home" at the 2012 Gala.

Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: August 20, 2024).

In conclusion, this study analyzed the grassroots image presented at the Gala. In the 1990s, grassroots groups in China were marginalized and often "ignored" or "distorted" in media coverage. The Gala featured constructed images of these groups through sketches rather than genuine participation. Folk artist Zhao Benshan created vivid portrayals of Northeast farmers, reinforcing Gala's political legitimacy as a national celebration and catering to urban audiences' "farmer imagination" while obscuring the reality of farmers becoming increasingly vulnerable due to market reforms. Similarly, artist Huang Hong depicted grassroots characters that lacked subjectivity and were a "mouthpiece" for government policies. Overall, consumerist and national ideologies shape the portrayal of "invisible" grassroots individuals in the Gala. After 2000, as national policies shifted to promote a harmonious society, issues of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers gained extensive media attention. Grassroots groups began to represent themselves at the Gala. The grassroots image featured in the Gala emphasizes two key aspects. It promotes socialist core values through inspirational stories of self-improvement and joy while reflecting a deep longing for home. This fosters an emotional connection to "home" and enhances the appreciation for "family culture" among Chinese people worldwide. Ultimately, the grassroots image conveys socialist values and resonates emotionally with the global Chinese community.

## 4. Re-production of Pop Star Images of the Gala

### 4.1. Pop Stars Featured in the Gala: A Result of Resource Exchange Driven by Mutual Demand

In Chinese popular culture, participating in the Gala offers celebrities minimal financial rewards. Despite its cultural significance and political support, the Gala provides only symbolic labor subsidies. In the 1980s, actors participated voluntarily and received no payment, while in the 1990s, they began

to receive a small subsidy of a few hundred RMB. Since 2000, even top celebrities have only received up to 3,000 RMB, much less than the millions they can earn on other commercial platforms. According to Bourdieu's theory (1986), cultural capital encompasses social recognition, symbolic authority, and professional legitimacy. As a state-endorsed cultural event, China's Spring Festival Gala grants celebrities institutionalized cultural capital (such as official endorsement) and symbolic capital (including nationwide visibility), thereby boosting their commercial value and social influence. Furthermore, the gala's massive viewership helps validate celebrities' embodied cultural capital (such as artistic skills), reinforcing their status within the cultural field. With many stars competing for limited spots, factors such as social identity, market appeal, image alignment with the theme, coordination with other segments, and a positive relationship with CCTV play a significant role in this opportunity. The national ideological framework should incorporate stars with diverse identities into programming to enhance the Gala. This approach leverages the cultural influence of these celebrities to attract younger audiences to CCTV and boost their engagement with the Spring Festival Gala. Additionally, including subcultures linked to popular stars can help mitigate potential negative impacts on national mainstream culture, ensuring that the content produced aligns with national ideology.

#### 4.2. Pop Culture and Ideological Reproduction of the Gala in the Era of Mass TV in the 1990s

##### 4.2.1. *Star Economy, Pop Music, and Nostalgia Consumption*

As China transitioned to a market economy in the early 1990s, cultural exchanges among the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan increased, allowing popular music from these regions to flourish in the mainland. The Gala often showcased stars performing beloved songs, such as Hong Kong singer Leung Yanling's "Like Fog, Like Rain and Like Wind" (1993), Taiwan singer Meng Tingwei's "A Cloud Made of Rain in the Wind" (1995), Hong Kong singer Andy Lau's "The Water That Makes Me Forget the Sorrow of Love" (1995), and Taiwan singer Jen Xianqi's "The Girl on the Other Side Look Over" (1999). These songs capture the rich emotional experiences involved in love. In the 1990s, mainland China's popular music matured, introducing a new wave of celebrity singers and hit songs. This era saw tracks like Mao Ning's "The Sound of Billows" (1993), Yang Yuying's "Gently Tell You" (1995), and Lao Lang's "You at My Desk" (1995) rise to prominence, many featured in the Gala. These songs often evoke nostalgia, reflecting Chinese society's rapid modernization and marketization during that time. Dai (2018) observes, "A strong old mood surged in Chinese cities in the 1990s, representing a fashion rather than a thought trend—a resistance to swift modernization, with nostalgia becoming an appealing aspect of popular culture."

##### 4.2.2. *Love in "The Sound of Billows": The Gala Overshadows the reflection of Modernity in the Nostalgic Mood*

Chen (2008), the songwriter behind "The Sound of Billows," shared that his inspiration for the song came from a chance encounter with the poem "Riding at Night" by Tang Dynasty poet Zhang Ji. He emphasized that the song is not a love song but a reflection of "the state of a generation caught between traditional and modern culture." This song conveys modern emotions through classical imagery. Inspired by Tang poetry with elements like fishing fires and bells, it evokes nostalgia among wanderers. The "old ferry ticket" metaphor highlights the loss experienced when recalling the past amid dislocations in time and space, reflecting the clash between tradition and modernity during the early reform and opening-up era.

The song's ambiance does not seamlessly align with the festive and joyful atmosphere of the Gala, prompting the incorporation of dance elements into the performance. A graceful female dancer interacts with singer Mao Ning on stage, engaging in a movement duet. They share glances, hold hands, and embrace while the dancer delicately wraps a scarf around Mao Ning, conveying deep

affection, attachment, and longing. This creative interpretation anchors the song's theme through unique audiovisual elements, centering on the reflection and nostalgia of a love that has faded. In doing so, this portrayal shifts the focus away from modernity and consumer culture critiques, instead emphasizing the Gala's uplifting messages concerning reform and a market-driven economy.

### 4.3. Gala Edition of "Wild Wolf Disco": The Gala's Network Subculture Reproduction

#### 4.3.1. "Wild Wolf Disco": The Internet Song that Swept across China in 2019

In the latter half of 2019, the renowned domestic rap track "Wild Wolf Disco" was composed and performed by Chinese Northeast rapper Dong Baoshi. It gained further recognition during the second season of iQIYI's self-produced variety show "China New Rap." On TikTok, "Wild Wolf Disco" amassed over 4 billion views, while on Weibo, discussions related to the song exceeded 50,000, and the view count surpassed 100 million. Additionally, "Wild Wolf Disco" ranked among the top three singles on the 2019 China hip-hop music genre chart and was recognized as one of the top ten most popular Chinese singles by Douban Music.

#### 4.3.2. Reasons for the Popularity of "Wild Wolf Disco"

An analysis of the popularity of "Wild Wolf Disco" clearly highlights several compelling factors. Firstly, the work skillfully intertwines the romantic pop culture aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s with a unique "garlic-flavored vaporwave" music style, effectively merging Northeastern dialects with vaporwave sounds. This fusion elicits a strong nostalgia and emotional resonance among today's consumers. This approach showcases a powerful example of nostalgic consumption within the cultural industry. Secondly, as a key representation of network subculture, "Wild Wolf Disco" articulates a distinct sense of "political correctness," positioning itself as an effective supplement to mainstream Chinese culture. The reform of state-owned enterprises in Northeast China during the 1990s led to extensive layoffs and the decline of prosperous communities. Young people sought solace in disco halls, reflecting the vibrant culture of that time while grappling with significant social contradictions and memorable experiences of that transformative era. Set in a "Disco Hall," the song narrative creates an atmosphere of collective revelry. It captures the vibrant energy of China's rapid social development while filtering out the accompanying pains and losses of that transformative period (Jiang, 2020). Finally, the dynamic communication enabled by China's online social media platforms has propelled widespread interactive engagement and reproduction, involving both pop culture icons and everyday consumers, which has undeniably fueled its immense popularity.

#### 4.3.3. "Chinese New Year Disco": The Adaptation of "Wild Wolf Disco" for the National Gala Platform

Hebdige (1979, 1988) argues that subcultures employ distinctive styles (e.g., clothing, music, language) as symbolic resistance, but ultimately cannot escape being co-opted by mainstream culture. In 2020, Dong Baoshi became the first rap artist to perform on the Gala stage. He adapted "Wild Wolf Disco" into "Chinese New Year Disco" at the request of the production team, keeping the original arrangement and energetic melody while significantly changing the lyrics to suit the event's atmosphere. This study examines the cultural connotations of the lyrics, revealing three significant transformations. First, the earlier lyrics reflect the vibrant "Disco" pop culture of the Northeast in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast, the recent lyrics highlight China's significant developmental achievements since the reform and opening, along with the joy and pride of its people in pursuing a happy life. Second, earlier songs incorporate a mix of cultural elements, including disco themes like late-night bars and neon-lit ballrooms, symbols of Northeast culture such as the Thunder Brothers, Northeast dialect, and leather coats, and pop culture references from the 80s and 90s, including big hairstyles, beepers, and icons like Aaron Kwok. In contrast, "Chinese New Year Disco" highlights modern Chinese life

with elements like high-speed rail, WeChat, 5G internet, and food delivery while showcasing traditional Spring Festival motifs such as big lanterns, dumplings, Chinese dragons, and New Year greetings. Third, when it comes to artistic style, the earlier lyrics exhibit a retro, nostalgic, ambiguous, and carnival-like essence of pop culture. The latter expresses an uplifting joy and a sense of pride among Chinese people worldwide as they come together on traditional Chinese New Year's Eve. The personal characteristics of the three celebrities—Hong Kong star William Chan, mainland star Zhang Yixing, and mainland rapper Dong Baoshi—were entirely overshadowed during the Gala, where their shared identity as “Chinese people” was prominently emphasized. The presence of these celebrities has become a vital medium for conveying the state’s grand ideology. Consequently, “Wild Wolf Disco,” a popular online rap subculture representative in China in 2019, was skillfully incorporated into the Gala and transformed into a mainstream song that articulates and evokes a sense of Chinese identity.



**Figure 5.** “Chinese New Year Disco” Performed in the 2020 Gala. Performers: Zhang Yixing (in yellow suite), Dong Baoshi (in the middle), and William Chan (in red suite).  
Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: August 20, 2024).

#### 4.4. The Presentation and Discourse Expression of Pop Star Images in the Gala

##### 4.4.1. Pop Stars from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan

Popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which express personal feelings such as love, friendship, and family affection, account for the most significant proportion among Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan programs in the Gala. Unlike the early 1990s, when stars performed love songs in a very personal style, with the return of Hong Kong and Macao to China, more and more stars from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan have been woven into the grand narrative of patriotism and “family-state.” Following Hong Kong’s return to China, the discourse in Hong Kong programs presented during the Gala has shifted from a “nostalgic discourse” focused on cultural roots to a national discourse emphasizing self-identification, patriotism, and collectivism (Zhang, 2018). For instance, notable performances include “I Love You China” (1998), “Greater China” (1998), “Passion Leap” (1999), “Love Each Other” (2010), “My Chinese Dream” (2014), “Give My Heart to You” (2015), “Country” (2017), “China” (2018), “Mom, I Am Back” (2019), “Common Home” (2020), and “Dear Motherland” (2020). The Gala transforms the songs that initially expressed personal emotions such as love, friendship, and family ties into the love, loyalty, and attachment of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan compatriots to their motherland through the reproduction of the image of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan celebrities. Personal emotions are transformed into collective emotions, and small families become a big country. For example, the phrases “miss” and “love” in the songs “Missing You 365 Days” (2014) and “Love You 10000 Years” (2017) initially expressed personal feelings of enduring love.

However, during the Gala, where singers from the three regions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait performed together, love expanded beyond individual emotions. It embraced a broader sense of love and loyalty among the Chinese people from these regions toward their motherland.

#### 4.4.2. Pop Stars from Chinese Mainland

Many singers who gained fame from television talent shows maintain significant market appeal and positive reputations after rigorous tests of their skills and character. These celebrities often perform at the Gala, frequently returning for the event. This study examines three prominent female singers from mainland China—Li Yuchun, Tan Weiwei, and Jike Junyi—focusing on the themes and presentation of their performances. The repertoire at the Gala typically includes three types of performances. Firstly, songs that Celebrate Chinese Culture.

This includes intangible cultural heritage songs that reflect the richness of traditional culture, such as Li Yuchun’s “Splendid” (2015) and Tan Weiwei’s “Huayin Laoqiang Shouts Out” (2016). Additionally, some pieces highlight the elegance of Chinese clothing and the natural beauty of the country’s landscapes, exemplified by the creative fashion show “Landscape Costume” (2021).



**Figure 6.** “Splendid” was Sung by Li Yuchun During an Intangible Cultural Heritage Program (2015). It Shows China’s Four Traditional Embroidery Styles: Suzhou Embroidery, Hunan Embroidery, Guangdong Embroidery, and Sichuan Embroidery.

Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: August 20, 2024).



**Figure 7:** Jike Junyi Sings an old Revolutionary Song, “Deep Love and Long Friendship,” which Expresses the Gratitude of the Yi People to the Red Army (2017).

Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: August 20, 2024).

Secondly, modern renditions of traditional revolutionary songs are used.

Modern interpretations of conventional revolutionary songs have gained prominence, exemplified

by Pop singer Jike Junyi's performances of "Deep Love and Long Friendship" in 2017 and "Red Azaleas" in 2019. In 2017, Daliangshan in Sichuan became a sub-venue for the western region of the Gala. Jike Junyi, a member of the Yi ethnic group, performed "Deep Love and Long Friendship" in traditional attire, expressing the Yi people's gratitude to the Red Army. Her unique interpretation breathed new life into the ancient melodies while highlighting the revolutionary history and national unity themes. In 2019, the Gala's venue shifted to the revolutionary holy land of Jinggangshan in Ji'an, Jiangxi, where Jike Junyi was again chosen to convey the revolutionary themes of the Gala. Thirdly, upbeat songs that reflect the themes of the Chinese Era.

Songs featuring the "main melody" intertwine contemporary social life with the national policies implemented by the government. Some of these songs celebrate the remarkable achievements in poverty alleviation and pay tribute to the national spirit of self-improvement, as heard in Li Yuchun's "Happy Mother River" (2020) and Tan Weiwei's "River of Life" (2020). Others express love and admiration for the New Era and the joys of a fulfilling life, exemplified by tracks such as "Sense of the Times" (2022), "Never Forget Your Original Aspiration" (2017), "New Starting Point of Happiness" (2018), and "Dance of True Love" (2022). Finally, some songs capture the excitement of spring and the aspiration for a brighter future, like "The Bell of Spring" (2022).



**Figure 8:** Tan Weiwei (in a yellow dress) sang "The Bell of Spring" with Sun Nan (in a red suit) before Midnight (2022). The Song Expresses the Joy of Welcoming Spring.

Source: Screenshots by the author from the show video of CCTV.com (Access: August 20, 2024)

To sum up, this study analyzed the star image presented at the Gala. As competition in the media market intensified, the Gala changed its cultural strategy from "creating stars" to "borrowing stars." In the 1990s, Hong Kong and Taiwan celebrities' unique styles and love-themed pop music became extremely popular in mainland China. Their involvement in the Gala reinforced the concept of a national community and provided a strategic advantage in the media landscape. These stars performed their iconic songs while maintaining their original essence. Responding to the nostalgia prevalent in mid-1990s popular culture, the Gala featured songs that diverged from the traditional themes of reunion and joy. Instead, it emphasized songs with ambiguous connotations tied to "love," which allowed it to replace potential critiques of modernity with a focus on romance, thereby supporting the narrative of reform and market economy. In the new media era, the Gala effectively incorporated TV talent shows and internet celebrities while engaging with popular and subcultural trends to attract young people and promote national ideologies. Since the late 1990s, the Gala has shifted from showcasing the unique styles of celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the early 1990s to presenting their images within broader narratives of "nation" and "state." These narratives encompass themes of Chinese history and culture, revolutionary and national spirit, patriotism, and the concept of a "family-state."

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research examines how the CCTV Spring Festival Gala constructs national identity within Chinese popular culture by re-producing grassroots and star images. Utilizing text analysis, case studies, and discourse analysis of the gala's grassroots and star programs, the study arrives at the following conclusions: The grassroots image in the Gala has experienced the "invisible" in the 1990s to the "visible" after 2000. The grassroots image featured in the Gala emphasizes two key aspects. Firstly, the concept of "family culture" evokes deep resonance and ethical identification with Chinese culture among individuals of Chinese descent worldwide. Secondly, it fosters social unity and harmony by reinforcing core socialist values. Responding to the nostalgia prevalent in mid-1990s popular culture, the Gala emphasized songs with ambiguous connotations tied to "love," which allowed it to replace potential critiques of modernity with a focus on romance, thereby supporting the narrative of reform and market economy. Since the late 1990s, the Gala has transformed songs that initially expressed personal emotions, such as love, friendship, and family ties, into expressions of love, loyalty, and attachment to the motherland felt by compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. This shift involved moving from showcasing the unique styles of celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the early 1990s to presenting their images within broader narratives of "nation" and "state." These narratives encompass themes of Chinese history and culture, revolutionary and national spirit, patriotism, and the concept of a "family-state." As a representative of the country's mainstream culture, the Gala maintains its long-term cultural leadership through continuous interaction with popular culture and folk culture. By weaving grassroots and celebrity images into the program content, the gala has long engaged in a grand discourse narrative of "nation" and "state," ultimately completing the construction of national identity. This is also the cultural significance of the ideological reproduction of the Gala.

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