Constructing National Identity through Media Ritual: A Case Study of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala

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Abstract

National identity is an important social bond for the existence and development of nation-states. National identity is not an innate or unchangeable awareness; instead, it is continuously produced by historical and realistic contexts. Nowadays, given their far-reaching penetration and influence, the mass media have become the principal platform for building national identity. The Spring Festival Gala (SFG) is a grand TV celebratory gala which is produced by China Central Television (CCTV) and has been aired on every lunar New Year’s eve since 1983. Ever since then, for Spring Festival celebrations, watching the live broadcast with the whole family has increasingly become as indispensable as posting spring couplets, setting off firecrackers, and eating dumplings. In other words, watching the CCTV SFG on lunar New Year’s Eve has gradually developed into an emerging folk custom and tradition in China since the early 1980s.

This thesis investigates the national identity issue from the perspective of media ritual. It is argued that the SFG is in itself an elaborately-orchestrated media ritual, which plays an irreplaceable role in constructing national identity. In terms of its operation mechanism, the thesis argues that the SFG contributes to constructing national identity mainly through two strategies; one is a structural strategy, namely, ritualizing the SFG; the other is a textural strategy, mythologizing the SFG.

Keywords: national identity; media ritual; CCTV; Spring Festival Gala
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1. Introduction

National identity is one of the most important identities of human beings. Generally speaking, national identity refers to a person’s sense of belonging to one nation or one state in terms of history, culture, tradition, values and beliefs, etc. Constructivists argue that although national identity is usually based on blood lineage or citizenship by birth, which possesses natural priority, national identity is not an innate or unchangeable awareness; on the contrary, they assert that national identity is being continuously produced by historical and realistic contexts. For example, Stuart Hall argues that national identity is “not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture…fixed in some essentialised past, [but] subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” (Hall, 1990, p225). Further on, David Morley and Kevin Robins point out that, essentially, national identity is constructed and sustained through certain specific cultural mechanisms. They write: “powerful institutions function to select particular values from the past and to mobilize them in contemporary practices. Through such mechanisms of cultural reproduction, a particular version of the collective memory and thus a particular sense of national and cultural identity, is produced.” (Morley and Robins, 1995, p69).

In contemporary society, the mass media play a crucial role in building national identity. On the one hand, the state, as a powerful institution, is capable of engaging in ideological construction by controlling cultural production. On the other hand, as Morley and Robins point out, “the construction and emergence of national identities cannot be properly understood without reference to the role of communication technologies. These technologies allowed people a space of identification; not just an evocation of a common memory but rather the experience of encounter and solidarity.” (Morley and Robins, 1995, p67). In other words, with the rapid advance of communication technology, the mass media nowadays have greatly broken through the physical limits of time and space, where the audience’s sense of collective participation has been reinforced unprecedentedly. At the same time, relying on such
an incomparable technological advantage, the mass media themselves have also obtained far-reaching penetration and influence in society. Thus, shaping national identity via the mass media has gradually become an inevitable choice for modern nation-states, as Michael Schudson concludes: “the modern nation-state self-consciously uses language policy, formal education, collective rituals, and mass media to integrate citizens and ensure their loyalty.” (Schudson, 1994, p64).

The Spring Festival Gala (SFG) is a variety entertainment show elaborately produced by China Central Television (CCTV). Since 1983, it has been annually broadcast on the eve of the Chinese New Year. Up to 2012, thirty galas have been held. Each of these galas consisted of various artistic performances, such as singing, dancing, crosstalk (two-person dialogue with rich puns, delivered in a bantering manner), mini-comedy, Chinese traditional opera, magic, acrobatics, and the like. Since its debut, the SFG has enjoyed tremendous popularity in China and has attracted a large number of view. According to Guinness World Records, the 2012 SFG has attracted 500 million viewers, making it the most watched national network TV broadcast in the world.¹ Nowadays, for most Chinese families, staying up watching the SFG on New Year’s Eve is becoming an emerging, indispensable folk custom and festival tradition.

Mikhail Bakhtin once pointed out that: “the festival is the first form of human culture.” (Bakhtin, 1965, p11). Fundamentally speaking, a festival is an outcome of a nation’s historical and cultural accumulation. Hence, the festival itself contains abundant national cultural connotations. The SFG, on the one side, is rooted in the Spring Festival, the oldest traditional folk festival in China; on the other side, it is produced and broadcast by the state-controlled TV station; hence its program contents are ineluctably invested with state ideological connotations as well. Just for these two reasons, this thesis argues that the CCTV SFG is in itself a product which combines traditional folk customs with state ideological discourse. Meanwhile, by virtue of its overwhelming popularity and influence, the CCTV SFG constitutes a very

representative case for studying how the media construct national identity in the context of mass communication in contemporary China.

1.1 Aim of thesis

This thesis aims to study the national identity issue from the perspective of media ritual. More specifically, this thesis is dedicated to investigating the means that the CCTV SFG employs in the construction of national identity, spanning from 1983 to 2012. Therefore, this thesis has no intention of evaluating the gala’s artistic or aesthetic position or to select the best gala from its thirty-year history. Instead, the task of this thesis is to “unpack” the text’s historical cultural contents and ideological connotations, and in the meantime, to reveal its mechanism of meaning production so that we can better understand this largest-scale communication practice in contemporary China. In short, this thesis attempts to look for those symbolized and ideologized texts in the SFG, and provide them with sound theoretical interpretations. Hence, such an investigation, on the one hand, serves to test the applicability of western media and cultural theories in the Chinese context; on the other hand, it serves to offer some localized explanations for such a non-western communication practice.

1.2 The research question and research methods

The research question is: By what means has the SFG contributed to constructing national identity in China over the past thirty years (1983-2012)? In an effort to answer this question, the author has assumed that national identity is comprised of cultural identity and political identity; secondly, it is assumed that the CCTV SFG is a media ritual that combines traditional folk customs with state ideological discourse. The traditional cultural symbols and values in the gala serve to strengthen cultural identity, and state ideological discourses serve to reinforce political identity. By mobilizing them strategically, a clear-cut national image of China is constructed and presented in the SFG. In order to verify the assumptions mentioned above, in the subsequent analysis, tremendous effort will be spent in interpreting the gala’s ritualized structure, including its representational symbols as well as ideological connotations. These are core factors which determine how the SFG plays its role of national identity construction.
With reference to research methods, this thesis belongs to qualitative research. It adopts a twofold analytic approach, including structural analysis and (qualitative) content analysis. Structural analysis serves to analyze the gala’s structural design and its symbolism; (qualitative) content analysis serves to analyze the gala’s program texts, such as lyrics, dialogues of mini-comedies, hosts’ scripts as well as words or sentences that involve metaphoric meanings. It is worth mentioning that this thesis is a preliminary attempt in critical media studies, hence, by virtue of the aforementioned analytic approaches, this thesis will also endeavor to clarify the operation of ideology and power mechanism hidden behind the gala texts.

With respect to the sources and usage of materials, the materials on which this study is based consist of two sources: one is primary materials; namely, the SFG’s video archives from 1983 to 2012; the other is secondary materials; namely, those written materials in SFG studies, including historical and, statistical information as well as previous study results about the SFG. Concerning the video archives, there are two points need to be explicated; first, all of the SFG’s video archives can be retrieved online; second, since the SFG has been held for thirty consecutive years and each gala lasts 4.5 hours on average, the audiovisual materials of this study amount to over 130 hours, containing about 1100 episodes of various performances. Due to limited space, this study only extracts classic episodes in different historical periods for detailed case studies.

1.3 The structure of thesis

This thesis will be presented as follows. In chapter two, the general background of the Spring Festival and the CCTV SFG for this study will be introduced. This chapter is divided into two sections: the first one is an overview of the Spring Festival as well as the cultural significance it embodies; the second is a synopsis of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. Chapter three is comprised of two sections. The first section is a description of the theoretical framework. In this section, two core concepts for this study—ritual and media ritual—will be discussed in great detail. The second section is a literature review of the SFG studies from a variety of academic perspectives.

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Chapter four illustrates the research methods that will be employed in this thesis. To be specific, cultural hermeneutics, working as the overall method, runs throughout the entire thesis. Semiological analysis, more precisely, Roland Barthes’ mythological approach, serves to detect the implied messages that underlie the gala texts, and a deeper sense of the symbols employed in media rituals. In other words, this analytic approach is aimed at interpreting, in depth, the SFG’s ideological connotations, thereby demonstrating the ritual function that the SFG plays in constructing national identity. In addition, reflection on the methodology will also be discussed at the end of this chapter. Chapter five explicates two strategies that the gala exercises in the construction of national identity. The two strategies include: 1) structural strategy: ritualizing the SFG; and 2) textual strategy: mythologizing the SFG. Chapter six concludes the thesis.

1.4 The significance of the thesis

Centered on the social evaluation of the SFG, there exist two conflicting opinions in recent years. The first one holds an optimistic attitude towards the SFG. Optimists argue that cultural traditions in contemporary society have begun to fade away irretrievably. It is just in such a difficult period that the SFG appeared. In this sense, it functions as a substitute for cultural traditions. The SFG provides individuals with a convenient way to celebrate festivals collectively in the era of consumer culture. Hence, it has adequately played the function of “creating a festival atmosphere, carrying on the festival spirit”; the second opinion claims that the SFG has destroyed traditional folkloric activities and has vulgarized the Chinese New Year’s Eve. Dissenters complain that celebrating Spring Festival nowadays has been oversimplified as merely watching the SFG on TV. They warn that such a practice will, in the long run, impede the accumulation and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, some radical scholars even advocate online abolishment of the SFG.  


It can be seen that the first viewpoint regards the SFG as a substitute of cultural traditions, and although it recognizes the gala’s function of a “cultural bond,” “substitute” is still not an accurate concept because it underestimates, to a certain degree, the gala’s ideological instrumentality. In contrast, the second viewpoint regards the SFG as a destroyer of cultural traditions. This viewpoint is also problematic, because it pays attention merely to the gala’s reshaping of the folk customs of the Spring Festival yet neglects the gala’s multiple connotations *per se*. Most importantly, it fails to recognize the deep value of “social integration and identity construction” that the SFG loads. Hence this viewpoint is also one-sided.

In order to balance the two conflicting opinions, this thesis holds a neutral and moderate attitude towards the SFG. Hence, this thesis views the SFG as a media ritual elaborated by traditional folk customs and state ideological discourses. Theoretically speaking, such a viewpoint is an organic combination of structural functionalism and ideological criticism. Only by holding such a relatively balanced viewpoint will we be able not only to recognize the positive role that media ritual plays in constructing national identity, but also to understand how dominant ideology and symbolic power operate hegemonically in media ritual. In this sense, media ritual provides us with an ideal conceptual pivot to investigate the pros and cons of state ideology, utilizing the SFG as a means of identity construction. Hence, in this regard, this thesis first contributes to the SFG studies by introducing a novel and unique theoretical perspective.

Secondly, the awakening of Chinese national identity has been frequently discussed in academia in recent years. However, most perspectives on this issue are from the discipline of political science. As a result, “we remain less informed about how media representations function as a nexus articulating the national identity and nationalist ideology on one hand and people’s everyday lives on the other” (Pan, 2010, p521). Taking this into account, this thesis particularly takes the SFG, the extensively influential but scholars-seldom-dabble-in media phenomenon as a starting point to expound the relevance between national identity and everyday family media habits. In this sense, this thesis enriches empirical research on media and identity through a
local case study of China.

Last, in the ever-accelerating era of globalization, the transnational flow of capital and people has become more and more frequent, and traditional symbols which delimitate national identity, such as religion, language, etc., have gradually fallen into decline. Hence, national identity is facing a confusing and anxious predicament; especially the unequal dissemination of information between developed and developing countries has deeply aggravated the identity crisis in developing countries and has disintegrated the citizen’s loyalty and sense of belonging to a large extent.

In terms of the specific circumstance of China, on the plane of the economy, China’s economic structure is now in a radical transformation phase; the process of industrialization and urbanization is forging ahead at an amazing speed. On the plane of society, along with the further deepening of the reform process, the internal defects of the socioeconomic system have begun to become increasingly apparent. In the meantime, various social conflicts and contradictions have also begun to increase continuously. Because it is extremely difficult to address these problems in the short term, as time passes, individuals have gradually developed a strong sense of loss towards the government and the state, thereby leading to the weakening of loyalty and sense of belonging.

Under such a twofold context, it is of urgent practical significance to study how the media construct a positive national image and the government’s legitimacy in order to enhance citizens’ sense of national pride and belonging.
2. Spring Festival and CCTV Spring Festival Gala

2.1 The Spring Festival

2.1.1 An overview of the Spring Festival

The Spring Festival (also known as Chinese New Year) is the oldest and the most ceremonious festival in the sequence of Chinese festivals. It usually begins on the first day of the first month in accordance with the Chinese traditional lunar calendar and ends with the Lantern Festival on the 15th of the first month. The Spring Festival is not merely celebrated by the Han People, the ethnic majority in China, but is also celebrated by other ethnic groups in their unique ways, such as the Bai, Hani, Manchu, Miao, Mogolian, Yao, Zhuang and so on. Additionally, the Spring Festival is also celebrated by China’s neighboring countries and places where Chinese diaspora reside in large populations, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Chinatowns all over the world.

In ancient China, the Spring Festival refers to the beginning of spring rather than the beginning of a year. Hence, the Spring Festival indicates the coming of springtime. The Spring Festival is of great significance in agricultural society, inasmuch as agriculture was the pillar industry in ancient China. In the meantime, agriculture has a strong seasonal character; if the farming season is missed, the yield of the year will be affected greatly. Therefore, the Spring Festival is usually considered as a festival full of hope and vitality.

It was not until the Revolution of 1911⁵ that the Spring Festival was set officially as the beginning of a year. The Revolution of 1911 abolished the feudal system, which ruled over China for thousands of years. The calendar of the feudal dynasty was abolished as well. In order to bring China in line with international conventions, the republican government began to implement the Gregorian calendar nationwide. At the same time, in view of agricultural convenience, the traditional lunar calendar also remained in use. Therefore, from then on, the first day of the first

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⁵ The Revolution of 1911: the Chinese bourgeois democratic revolution led by Doctor Sun Yat-sen, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty.
month in the Gregorian calendar has been stipulated as New Year’s Day, and the first
day of the first month in the lunar calendar is stipulated as Spring Festival (or the
so-called Chinese New Year).

It is worth mentioning that the ancient agricultural society considers crops
ripening as the mark of time. According to astronomical phenomena, the calendar
establishes the starting point and the finishing point of a cycle. The year is the general
name for seasonal cycles, and the Spring Festival is the temporal junction between the
new year and the old. The transition from old to new can also be considered as a
psychological process of transition from nervous to relaxed, from serious to joyful,
and for this reason, people begin to celebrate the shift of time with a variety of festive
folkloric activities.

Additionally, Chinese myths and legends also account for the origin of Spring
Festival as a folkloric celebration. According to a widespread folk legend, the Spring
Festival celebration derives from a tale about *Nian*. Once upon a time, there lived a
ferocious beast named *Nian* (means “year” in its literal sense). The beast stayed in
forests all the year around but appeared in villages to prey on livestock and human
beings on New Year’s Eve, so on every New Year’s Eve, thousands of animals and
people were attacked by *Nian*. People lived in the shadow of *Nian* for many years
until there came an old man one New Year’s Eve. The old man asked every household
in the village to paste red paper onto the door cases, and to prepare firecrackers and
stay up all night. At midnight, *Nian* came to the village again, but this time, it stopped
breaking into households and catching people when it saw the red paper pasted on
every door case. Just when it was attempting to break into the only household which
was without the red paper, all of a sudden the door opened and the old man walked
out, wearing a big red cloak. He let the villagers lurking around the yard start to set
off firecrackers in front of the beast, because he knew that the color red and firelight
were just what *Nian* was afraid of the most. *Nian* was so terrified, and thereupon it
soon ran away from the village and never returned.

Thus, in order to commemorate the midnight when the people got rid of *Nian*
forever, people started to call it *Guo Nian* (means “to pass the year” in its literal
sense). In addition, putting up spring couplets, setting off firecrackers, and staying up all night are all kept as folk customs throughout the lunar new year. Besides the aforementioned celebratory activities, traditional folk customs also include worshiping ancestors, sweeping the dust, putting on new clothes, having reunion dinner with family, eating dumplings at midnight, elders giving lucky money to juniors, visiting relatives and friends from the first day of the lunar new year, etc.

2.1.2 The cultural significance of the Spring Festival

It is no exaggeration to say that the Spring Festival is the most concentrated demonstration of the Chinese nation’s folk customs and traditions. In the long historical evolution of the Spring Festival, some folk customs and traditions have vanished while others still retain exuberantly vital to this day. Nevertheless, no matter how the customs and traditions of the Spring Festival have altered over time, the functional value of the Spring Festival, namely, reinforcing consanguineous identity and adjusting human relations, has yet remained unchanged since ancient times. It is not only the reason why the Spring Festival is able to continue today, but also where the cultural significance of the Spring Festival lies.

The patriarchal clan system, which revolves around blood ties, is one of the principal social systems in ancient China. This clan system is characterized by emphasizing blood relationships and interpersonal interaction. Hence, many traditions and folk customs of the Spring Festival are all closely centered on blood ties and interpersonal interactions. Among all of the traditions and folk customs, ancestor worship, the family reunion dinner, and Bai Nian (means “to pay new year’s calls” in its literal sense) are the three most typical reflections of this blood-tie-based social system.

i. Ancestor worship

Ancestor worship during the Spring Festival is a long-established folk custom in China. According to Chinese traditional ideas, people believe that although their ancestors have passed away, their souls still exist in the world, gazing upon and influencing their offspring at every moment. Hence, in order to remember their ancestors and pray for their blessing for a new year, every family usually holds a
worship ritual during the Spring Festival. The manner of worship is different from place to place, but the most common practice nowadays is that on New Year’s Eve, all family members are led by the patriarch to offer incense and sacrifices to ancestral tablets or photographs, and thereafter to kowtow and read out benedictions.

The cultural significance of ancestor worship can be elucidated from two aspects. On the one hand, it transmits the traditional Confucian thought of filial piety and gratefulness; on the other hand, through ancestor worship, family members are able to better know themselves and their family clan, thereby forming a confirmation of their consanguineous identity and belongingness. For instance, during the course of worship ritual, all family members will be informed by the patriarch about the blood relationship between themselves and their ancestors, the origin of their family clan, as well as the positions where they are in accordance with the family tree. Through such a retrospective process of the root of life, the kinship idea that blood is thicker than water is deeply rooted in the heart of each family member, thus rendering the whole family clan united as one. In this sense, the ritual of ancestor worship plays an irreplaceable role in strengthening clan identification and cohesion. Just relying on this unique social function, ancestor worship becomes an important and enduring traditional folk custom in Chinese patriarchal society.

ii. Family reunion dinner

For most Chinese people, the most obvious and immediate significance of the Spring Festival is embodied in the family reunion. Lunar New Year’s Eve is the beginning of the family reunion and dining together with the entire family is the climactic moment of this reunion. Therefore, most Chinese attach great importance to the reunion dinner on New Year's Eve. Before that day comes, in order not to miss this important moment of family reunion, hundreds of millions of people begin to return to their hometowns from all directions in China, no matter how far away they live from their hometowns. Hence, every year as Spring Festival approaches, China experiences a peak season of transporting home-returning passengers. Especially in modern society, along with the frequent movement of the population, the relationships among human beings have begun to become complicated and indifferent, and the yearning
for home and reunion has thus increasingly become a collective resonance for individuals.

The family reunion dinner is just the optimal material carrier of this psychological demand. Although it is a process of having a delicious meal, yet the meaning that this process delivers has gone far beyond food *per se*, essentially speaking, the family reunion dinner is a demonstration of the Chinese nation’s cultural psychology via the festival diet. First, the upsurge of returning home for the Spring Festival reflects the Chinese ingrained “hometown complex.” The economic form and production mode of agricultural society determine that Chinese ancestors have to attach themselves firmly to the land they live on, as Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius Grove note: “Generations of peasants were tied to the land on which they lived and worked. Except in times of war and famine, there was little mobility, either socially or geographically.” (Hu and Grove, 2010, pxxi). As a consequence, with the lapse of time, such a lifestyle that lacks mobility has gradually made individuals develop a strong emotional attachment to their hometown, and further develop into a common national psychology and cultural identity.

Secondly, the traditional Confucian ethics especially emphasize the cultivation of family love. Family is the most basic unit of production of agricultural society, and long-term collective labor and life have made family members develop a self-conscious moral relationship on the basis of mutual dependence. This kind of moral relationship requires that juniors should show filial piety to seniors, and seniors should care for juniors. Only in this way will family harmony be able to be actualized. Hence, in the course of having a reunion dinner, people pay particular attention to the creation of a harmonious atmosphere. For example, at dinnertime, seniors ought to be invited to sit in the seats of honor; juniors ought to propose toasts to seniors every now and then; seniors put food into juniors’ plates in person, and so forth. Through such nurturing and practice, the family ethics and etiquette of Confucian society are hence able to be transmitted through the generations.

iii. Bai Nian

*Bai Nian* is a traditional way of expressing good wishes mutually during the
Spring Festival. Usually, *Bai Nian* starts with live-in family members and then expands outwards to relatives, friends, and acquaintances. In terms of its specific procedure, *Bai Nian* generally begins in the morning, from the first day of the Spring Festival. On that day, people should get up earlier than usual and call on others one by one. When visiting, visitors should wear new clothes to signify the beginning of a new year. Out of respect for seniors, juniors should call on seniors first and send them auspicious wishes; in return, seniors will give juniors the prepared “lucky money” as a new year present. The lucky money is usually packed in a red envelop, and it symbolizes the senior’s love and care. When *Bai Nian* comes to an end among family members, people begin to walk out of their homes, visiting relatives, friends and acquaintances at a distance. Basically, this activity will last for the entire Spring Festival.

*Bai Nian*, by its very nature, is a process of reconstructing human relations in the-familiar-based society. Fei Xiaotong once described rural China as a society built on familiarity with people and the things around them. He argues that Chinese society fundamentally grew out of its ties to the land, and this immobilized lifestyle has restricted the scope of villagers’ daily activities and has thus contributed to the formation of the parochialism and familiarity of rural China. He writes: “People in rural China know no other life than that dictated by their own parochialism. It is a society where people live from birth to death in the same place, and where people think that this is the normal way of life. Because everyone in a village lives like that, distinctive patterns of human relationships form. Every child grows up in everyone else’s eyes, and in the child’s eyes everyone and everything seem ordinary and habitual. This is a society without strangers, a society based totally on the familiar” (Fei, 1992, p41).

In Fei’s view, familiarity is the emotional basis of rural society, and reciprocal favors among familiars are just the inner mechanism which sustains this emotional basis. He suggests that in the-familiar-based society, there exist not only the endowed blood-geographical relationships among familiars, but giving-owing relationships as well. It is just the latter that integrates society into an intimate group, as he claims that
“the unity of the intimate group depends on the fact that each member owes countless favors to the other members……The continuing reciprocation maintains the cooperation among people in the group” (Fei, 1992, p125). From this perspective, as a folk custom grounded upon the giving-owing relationship, paying new year’s calls with each other is of great practical significance in improving the mutual intimacy and unity among familiars. So to speak, through Bai Nian, this simple but profound cultural ritual, what individuals obtain are not only harmonious interpersonal relationships, but also a sense of cultural intimacy and group cohesion to some extent.

Culture is one of the most difficult concepts to accurately delimit in academia. Although its definitions are multifarious, they all refer to the values and lifestyles of individuals living in certain regions to varying degrees. Different nations have their own distinctive cultural forms, such as language, customs, codes of conduct, etc. These cultural forms are, on the one hand, a natural source of sense of human identity, and; on the other hand a gauge that serves to measure cultures distinct from their own. In modern society, a nation-state’s identity initially derives from these kinds of natural feelings. Meanwhile, under the impact of ever-accelerating globalization, individuals’ craving for native, traditional culture is especially invested with a nostalgic feeling. Hence, in today’s globalized era, “nostalgia,” “root seeking,” and so forth have gradually become part of the global cultural landscape.

From the perspective of functionalism, the revival of ancient traditions in modern society has been validated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s discussion about tradition per se. According to them, “many traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012, p1). They point out that these “invented traditions” are “highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the ‘nation,’ with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories, and the rest” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012, p13). In other words, the invention of tradition is in itself a discursive construction of national identity, and in this sense, the revival of cultural traditions is also a similar discursive practice, both of which aim to highlight the national characteristics of themselves, thereby strengthening the sense of
collective identity within national communities.

However, it is worth noting that in pre-modern society, national traditions perform their cultural function usually in a folk, natural way; on the other hand, in modern society, with the active intervention of state power and ideology, national traditions are endowed with a public, collective, and even political attribute. Thus, the folkness and naturalness of traditions begin to fall into decline; in contrast, their symbolism of the state yet becomes increasingly clear-cut.

The cultural context plays a crucial role in facilitating the reader’s understanding of a text, inasmuch as is able not only to explicitly interpret the meaning of the text itself, but also to indirectly reveal the way in which specific reader groups understand specific messages. The Spring Festival is at once a text and a cultural context. As a text, the Spring Festival itself contains rich, multifaceted meanings. Through a concise introduction of its representative folk customs, we can basically draw the following conclusion: the Spring Festival has an endogenous, essentialist cultural function; namely, social integration and identity construction. In this sense, the Spring Festival is in itself a kind of cultural medium, through which shared beliefs of the Chinese nation are transmitted and represented. As a cultural context, the Spring Festival, on the one side, serves as a provider of cultural and symbolic resources in the SFG; on the other, it serves as the narrative background under which the SFG carries out the discursive construction of national identity. Relying on this duality of functional values, the Spring Festival becomes the best occasion for the state to covertly convey ideological discourse and construct identity.

2.2 A synopsis of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala

The late 1970s to the late 1980s was a period when the Chinese people were gradually emancipated from the spiritual shackle of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and commenced social transformation. During this period, earth-shaking changes took place in all aspects of social life: on the political level, political ideology began to loosen its grip on cultural terrains. The individual’s self-consciousness was gradually freed from dogmatic political constraints. In the meantime, along with the continuous improvement of living conditions, individuals’ aesthetic tastes began to
change obviously, and demands for entertainment began to recover little by little; on the economic level, with the implementation of the policy of Reform and Opening-up, a market economy and consumerism began to boom in mainland China. Meanwhile, the television industry began to experience an unprecedented metamorphosis, as Zhao Yuezhi and Guo Zhenzhi states, “evolving from a propaganda instrument of the Communist Party to a commercially oriented mass medium within the country’s evolving market authoritarian system” (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p521). It was in such a historical background that the CCTV SFG began to come into public view.

In 1983, CCTV launched a new television form of mass entertainment, the Spring Festival Gala. This gala distinguished itself from other TV celebratory shows at that time by creating a multitude of innovative precedents, such as live broadcasting nationwide, setting up hosts and hotlines, etc. All of these refreshing practices have been adopted and imitated by galas in later years.

The CCTV SFG is annually broadcast between 8:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. on lunar New Year’s Eve. It primarily aims to target all Chinese-speaking audiences in China and beyond. Since its first broadcast, the gala has obtained tremendous popularity, with a yearly viewership of over 500 million viewers. In April 2012, the SFG was conferred on a certificate of Guinness World Records as a variety entertainment gala with the world’s highest audience rating, longest broadcast duration, and the most actors participating. In recent years, besides CCTV’s flagship channel CCTV-1, the gala has also been extensively live broadcast on various satellite channels, such as CCTV-International, CCTV-English, CCTV-French, CCTV-Spanish, CCTV-Arabian, CCTV-Russian, CCTV-HD, and a majority of provincial TV channels in China. Moreover, since 2009, China Network Television (CNTV) began to offer simultaneous live broadcasts online worldwide.

Concerning the SFG’s performance forms, although the SFG has evolved significantly over the past thirty years, its performance forms have basically remained consistent. Specifically speaking, the SFG has several fixed performance forms accompanying audiences every year, such as singing, dancing, crosstalk, mini-comedy, magic, acrobatics, martial arts, poetry reading, traditional Chinese opera, and the like.
Furthermore, this gala also features the most popular artists, actors, performers, pop singers, film stars, sports stars, and other social elites from all walks of life.

After thirty years of operation, the SFG has become the most eye-catching cultural spectacle on the TV screen and the most well-known program on CCTV in the Chinese world. Correspondingly, the gala’s advertising revenues also began to grow explosively with its ever-increasing popularity. In 2002, the advertising revenue was 200 million RMB; in 2006 and in 2009, it approached 400 million and 500 million, respectively; the advertising revenue in 2010 even reached a stunning 650 million RMB.6

Either from a mass culture perspective or from a media economics perspective, the CCTV SFG has both subtly reflected the gigantic transformations of contemporary Chinese society. Hence its importance has reached far beyond an ordinary TV entertainment show. In terms of the gala’s identity positioning, the CCTV SFG can be considered as a trinitarian media product, which blends culture, commerce and politics at the same time. Viewed from its historical origin, incipiently, the SFG came into being in the form of a relatively relaxing, self-amused gathering. In the early 1980s, affected by the aftermath of political struggles, the cultural life of the masses was still monotonous and depressing; hence, as a laughter-themed, entirely new entertainment form, the SFG attracted everyone’s attention as soon as it was broadcast. In the meantime, along with its progressive self-improvement, the SFG’s popularity and influence began to become larger and larger in society. Since the 1990s, under the double influences of a market economy and the political situation, the commercial and political orientations of the SFG began to become increasingly manifest. As a consequence, folk discourse, commercial discourse, and political discourse have jointly shaped the SFG’s trinitarian structure and continue to this day. Correspondingly, the SFG’s functional value has also begun to change gradually, changing from an originally casual, entertainment-oriented gathering into a grand media ritual of contemporary China.

3. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

3.1 Theoretical examination of ritual

3.1.1 The concept of ritual

Ritual came into existence with primitive society. Ritual has sustained and reconstructed our social order. “As a specific cultural phenomenon, ritual not only reflects certain social order and social relationship, but also represents individual’s awareness, idea, thought and emotion of the times” (Wu, 2000, p1). In modern society, ritual is still an important part of an individual’s daily life. Furthermore, it is also an important approach through which national identity is able to be constructed and consolidated.

“Ritual,” as an analytical term, appeared in the 19th century; it was defined as a concept that belonged to the category of human experience. With increasingly intensive study, the concept of ritual presents a complicated trend, and its conceptual boundary is increasingly difficult to be demarcated. Different scholars have interpreted this concept from different academic stances. Ritual was just a pure religious concept in the very beginning. In its narrow sense, ritual refers to “formal activities happening in the course of religious worship” (Huang, 2003, p191). These activities, as anthropologists have summarized, “have high degree of formality and non-utilitarian orientation…these activities include not only religious activities, but performances, parades and visits as well” (Huang, 2003, p191). On the other hand, in its broad sense, “all the activities and behaviors developed from traditional customs, generally accepted and conformed to certain specific procedures are able to be defined as rituals” (Wu, 2000, p1). Nowadays, the concept of ritual has no longer confined to anthropology and is studied in various disciplines in the social sciences.

3.1.2 Ritual studies under different perspectives

i. The perspective of religious anthropology

The attention to ritual that anthropologists have paid stems from the relationship between ritual and myth: which one is the real origin of religion? In his book The
Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Emile Durkheim divided religious phenomena into two categories: “beliefs” (spiritual level) and “rituals” (behavioral level); that is, as religious behaviors, rituals, and beliefs, myths are all within the religious system. Anthropologists have different opinions of the origin of religion. Previous opinions regarded beliefs and myths as the religious core, while rituals were just religious products, or rituals were just performances and practices which aimed at mythological narrative. “What they are concerned about is, through assumptions, explaining how religious beliefs are formed and believed” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1965, p172). According to Radcliffe-Brown, since the late 19th century, it has been widely believed that religion originated from ritual. The reasons lie in the fact that: 1) ritual behaviors decide beliefs, and ritual behaviors per se are symbolic forms of feelings; and 2) “rituals are the steadiest and most lasting factors of all religions. Moreover, rituals are more enlightening than myths” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1965, p172).

ii. The perspective of structural functionalism

The school of structural functionalism stresses that rituals have obvious sociality. Hence, “under the perspective of structural functionalism, rituals have nearly lost its religious meanings, becoming a social phenomenon” (Wang, 2007, p431). Ritual is expressed through the collective practices of a social community, so it works with the community and sustains it. Durkheim has laid a functionalist foundation for understanding religion. What he is concerned about is neither the historical development of religions, nor the individual’s personal experience. Instead, he is concerned about how the society is integrated through religious rituals. Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown have inherited Durkheim’s interpretative approach of ritual functionalism. Malinowski places particular emphasis on the ritual’s significance in relation to the individual’s personal experience, whereas he also acknowledges that ritual has the function of social integration (Malinowski, 2002). Compared with Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown attaches great importance to ritual’s social function. He argues that rituals play an indispensable role in constructing the social structure. He proposes the concept of “ritual value,” which asserts that certain basic social values can be established by virtue of rituals, and most of the rituals’ values constitute the
common values of the society (Radcliffe-Brown, 1965).

iii. The ritual view of communication

Inspired by Durkheim’s sociology and anthropologists’ thoughts, James Carey asserts that mass communication has a ritual significance; namely, the ritual view of communication. Carey argues that the ritual view “conceives communication as a process through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p18). Hence the ritual view of communication is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (Carey, 1989, p18).

The traditional view of communication, namely the transmission view, centers on the extension of messages across geography largely for the purpose of control, while the ritual view centers on the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality. Moreover, the ritual view of communication is also a ritual view of religion in the modern sense. As Carey states: “it downplays the role of the sermon, the instruction and admonition, in order to highlight the role of the prater, the chant, and the ceremony. It sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action” (Carey, 1989, p18).

Undoubtedly, Carey’s ritual view of communication is an epistemological breakthrough. For quite a long time, the transmission view has been the dominating object of study in academia. As a consequence, a majority of empirical research conducted in the field of communication studies are under the guidance of the traditional transmission view. However, Carey’s ritual view provides us with a novel research orientation. At least his theory reminds us that: 1) communication studies should not remain at the material and technical level—we should pay more attention to the symbolic significance that mass communication brings about; 2) the ritual view of communication has revealed the logic of order, periodicity, and repetition in the media context; and 3) communication is a realistic production of symbols. Media not only
represent reality but also construct reality. In addition, the ritual view of communication relies heavily on the participant’s recognition and sharing of feelings, and this is an internal satisfaction, which frees one from the instrumentality that the transmission view of communication exhibits.

3.1.3 The characteristics of ritual

The above has briefly outlined the concept of ritual, and has touched upon certain characteristics of ritual to varying degrees. In an effort to intensify the understanding of ritual, it is necessary to present the typical characteristics of ritual in detail.

i. Space-time nature and participation

Ritual has its own boundaries of time and space. Especially for traditional rituals, they are usually held in a given period of time at a specific place. The society is assembled periodically through rituals. In traditional rituals, participants’ presence at the ritual scene is an indispensable element. Only through presenting themselves at the ritual scene will the participants be able to feel the sanctity and authoritativeness of the ritual and then enhance their awareness of collectivity.

ii. Stylization and repetition

Stylization means that the ritual has to be held in accordance with specific rules, criteria, and sequences. Such codes of conduct have been stylized deliberately, so major changes will not take place spontaneously; only marginal changes will take place at most. Hence, the stylization of rituals also means the inheritance and repetition of traditions. As Paul Connerton states: “all rites are repetitive, and repetition implies continuity with the past” (Connerton, 1989, p45).

iii. Symbolism and performance

Symbolism and performance are two important characters of rituals. First, Steven Lukes defines ritual as the “rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of a special significance” (Lukes, 1975, p291). More briefly, Victor Turner generalizes ritual as “an aggregation of symbols.” Both of them emphasize the symbolic meaning of ritual. Second, ritual has the nature of performance. If the symbolic system of rituals is an external form of a core spirit of a community or a
nation, then the spirit needs to appeal to performance to present its meanings. In his later years, Turner uses “social drama” to essentialize the ritualistic character of cultural performance.

3.1.4 Ritual and social integration

Social integration is an important issue that all the secular states and religious groups have to deal with. Previous studies have shown that rituals are of great significance in sustaining the sense of belonging. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim proposes that ritual is a way to achieve social cohesion, and the development of ritual is closely bound up with the formation of social solidarity. Edward Shils and Michael Young applied Durkheim’s theory to their analysis of the coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II in 1952. They assert that the coronation was “a national communion, a ceremonial reaffirmation of the moral values that undergird the community” (Bell, 1997, p83). In a similar vein, William Lloyd Warner looked at Memorial Day activities in a small Massachusetts town, and he concludes that such rituals “amounted to a cult of the dead through which the nation could be worshipped” (Smith and Riley, 2011, p58). In a nutshell, ritual helps to reinforce social integration and national identity by relying on the following relationships:

1) Ritual behavior and social community. The prerequisite of creating and sustaining a social community is to be aware of the symbolic boundary between one’s own culture and other cultures. As a symbolic system of culture, the uniqueness of rituals is able to distinguish “self” from “the other,” by which a social community identity is able to be achieved.

2) Commemorative ritual and collective memories. Rituals, especially commemorative rituals, help to activate and sustain collective memories. Therefore, commemorative rituals have become a “national symbol” in many countries. Such commemorative rituals provide an opportunity to review important people and events in history and to link the past to the present.

3) Ritual process and common experience. The ritual process is simultaneously a process of performance. Durkheim argues that ritual is an enactment, or rather, a dramatic presentation of social relations themselves. Hence, participating in rituals is a
shared dramatic experience.

3.2 Media ritual and the construction of identity

3.2.1 Media ritual and ritualization

What is media ritual? In his book *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, Nick Couldry defines it as the “formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values” (Couldry, 2003, p29). According to Couldry, the “key media-related categories and boundaries” mainly refer to the differentiation of “higher status/in the media” and “lower status/not in the media.” In addition, Couldry argues that the media internalize such categories and boundaries through their formalized actions in order to copy the “myth of the mediated centre.” Thus media ritual has become the principal mechanism that naturalizes and legitimizes the myth. In a nutshell, Nick Couldry draws on Durkheim’s theory about the division of sacred/profane rituals, and he reveals the power and identity relationships among ritual participants and the functions that the media perform in the construction of social order.

Distinct from Couldry, whose angles of view focused on the media ritual’s external structure and its power mechanism, Sun Xinru and Zhu Lingfei pay more attention to the internal production of symbolic meanings or symbols in media rituals. They define media ritual as “a production of symbolic meanings or symbols in the process of audiences participating in common media activities” (Sun and Zhu, 2004, p60). According to Sun and Zhu’s definition, the following elements are indispensable to qualify as a media ritual: 1) the intervention of the mass media; 2) the importance and grandness of common activities; 3) the extensive participation of audiences; and 4) the production of symbolic meanings or symbols that will serve to deliver values and maintain order.

Hence, in accordance with the different definitions from domestic and overseas scholars, media ritual in this thesis involves two levels: 1) the medium is itself a ritual and; 2) media report in a ritualistic way; namely, the media’s ritualization. The term ritualization is a broad expression referring to rituals; hence, it can be understood as a
metaphoric employment of rituals.

In modern society, the mass media have integrated into individuals’ daily lives deeply. As a result, with the ritualized intervention of the mass media in daily life, the boundary between the public realm and private realm has become blurred. As Joshua Meyrowitz puts it, “our electronic media bring the outside world into the home, which has changed both the public realm and the family sphere” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p223). Hence, family media (especially television) and their regular daily behavioral patterns have become an important bond among families, communities, and nations. The contribution of media ritual to social integration can be embodied through two aspects: 1) the shift of the public realm and private realm and; 2) the presentation of symbols. The shift of the public realm and private realm means that the audience is able to enter a collective ritual scene in its private territory. The presentation of symbols means that through the media’s symbol production and repetitive dissemination, collective consciousness is able to be aroused.

3.3 Media event, ritual behavior, and national identity

As delimitated in Sun and Zhu’s definition, media ritual relies on the audiences’ participation in common activities. Hence, common activities are the prerequisite of media rituals. Without the occurrence of these common activities, there would be no media audience participation, let alone the production of symbols or symbolic meaning. As a result of this, the so-called “common activities” are worthy of further investigation.

3.3.1 How to understand the media event?

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz were the first scholars to conceptualize such activities as “media events.” In the very beginning of their collaboration, Media Events: the Live Broadcasting of History, Dayan and Katz state that “this book is about the festive viewing of television. It is about those historic occasions—mostly occasions of state—that are televised as they take place and transfix a nation or the world. They include epic contests of politics and sports, charismatic missions, and the rites of passage of the great—what we call Contests, Conquests and Coronations…we call them collectively ‘media events’” (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p1). In fact, we can call
such events “television ceremonies,” or “festive television,” or even “cultural performances.” According to Dayan and Katz, media events are qualified and characterized by the following criteria:

(1) the live broadcast, (2) the interruption of everyday life and everyday broadcasting, (3) the preplanned and scripted character of the event, (4) the huge audience—the whole world watching, (5) the normative expectation that viewing is obligatory, (6) the reverent, awe-filled character of the narration, (7) the function of the event as integrative of society, and typically, and (8) conciliatory

(Dayan and Katz, 2000, p158).

3.3.2 The characteristics of media events

According to Dayan and Katz, the most essential characteristics of media events can be summarized through three linguistic categories: 1) in terms of syntactics, a media event is a live broadcast, preplanned, non-routine, and long-distance; 2) in terms of semantics, a media event is presented with ceremonial reverence, in tones that express sacrality and awe; 3) in terms of pragmatics, a media event enthralls very large audiences and motivates the reintegration of society.

3.3.3 Media events and social integration

Because media events have connotations of religious rituals, from Durkheim and Tuner’s viewpoints of ritual, a media event is also able to integrate society through collective practice, as Dayan and Katz suggest: “These broadcasts integrate societies in a collective heartbeat and evoke a renewal of loyalty to the society and its legitimate authority” (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p9). Specifically, the media event’s integration function is reflected in the following: 1) media events have a commemorative function. They remind us what deserves to be remembered; 2) media events have an intrinsically liberating function and transformative function and; 3) media events go beyond journalism in highlighting charisma and collective action (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p21).

Media events and media rituals are both key concepts for understanding ritual
communication. They correlate with each other and sometimes overlap. With respect to their conceptual relations, generally speaking, the former emphasizes the event itself, such as its presentation and dissemination, while the latter focuses on the ritual’s symbolism, performance, and the participation of audiences. The former is a static representation, while the latter is a dynamic practice. Or rather, media ritual can be understood as a ritualized media event. The SFG is such a ritualized media event. It possesses not only most of the characteristics of the media event defined by Dayan and Katz, but also ritual’s space-time nature, stylization, symbolism, etc. The SFG’s ritualization is not confined to the contents and forms that the gala telecasts on New Year’s Eve; on the contrary, the pre- and post-telecast stages of the gala are also important constituent parts of its ritualization, albeit in an off-screen way. Additionally, as Durkheim claims, ritual is the symbolic enactment of social relations themselves, and accordingly, the roles that individuals or groups play in the media ritual reflect their social relations in reality. Therefore, the power relation among the SFG’s organizers, performers, and viewers constitutes a crucial aspect of the essence of the SFG’s ritualization. This will be analyzed in chapter five in detail.

3.4 Literature review

Although studies concerning the SFG only began in recent years, the angles on it are diversified. Geng Wenting’s 2003 doctoral dissertation, *Chinese Carnival: An Aesthetic Perspective on the Spring Festival Gala*, was the first published monograph on SFG studies. In this dissertation, Geng conducted an ontological study on the 1983-2002 SFG, especially from philosophical and aesthetic perspectives, and proposes that the SFG is in essence a Chinese carnival constructed by native cultural and aesthetic awareness. Traditional Chinese aesthetics advocate pleasure and harmony; thus, these two concepts have constituted the everlasting keynotes of the SFG’s artistic performances over the past two decades. Geng’s analysis mainly concentrates on the aesthetic and artistic dimensions, and her dissertation aims at demonstrating the unity of the SFG in the fragmented aesthetic era.

In her article, *Popular Family Television and Party Ideology: the Spring Festival Eve Happy Gathering*, Zhao Bin takes the 1997 SFG as an example, and
systematically analyzes how party-state ideology is inserted into popular entertainment. During the process of analysis, she specially discusses the convergence between the nationalist conception of the state and the traditional conception of the family in the era of electronic media, and Zhao points out that, as a widely-popularized propaganda instrument, television in contemporary China takes the role of connecting families and the state center; the SFG is just one of the connective forms of television. In other words, since the space-time distance between family and the state is compressed electronically, in a sense, the family and the state become one. Coincidently, this status corresponds with the Confucian political ideal that the state should be governed like an enlarged family. Therefore, Zhao describes the SFG as “a happy marriage between an ancient Chinese ideal and a modern western technology” (Zhao, 1998, p46). Under such a highly corresponding context, embedding the party-state ideology into popular entertainment, or, in other words, realizing ideological management in virtue of popular entertainment, thus becomes the SFG’s essential implication.

Based on the two core concepts of a “TV community” and “collective memory,” Wang Xiaoyu analyzes the interpellation mechanism behind the SFG’s high popularity. He proposes that the high popularity and high audience rating of the SFG since the 1980s can be partially attributed to the emergence of what he calls the “TV community,” a term borrowed from Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community.” According to Wang, the high audience rating represents the legitimacy of the TV community in society, and rejecting watching the SFG is not a mere rejection of a TV program—it is in fact a rejection of joining the TV community. The TV community consistently exerts an invisible pressure on individuals, thereby asking them to join the community and watching the gala collectively. Besides the TV community, Wang proposes that the SFG itself has become a kind of collective memory which serves the end of ideological interpellation. Wang argues that unlike regular programs which disappear as festivals end, the SFG can still exist beyond New Year’s Eve by means of its topic generation, rebroadcast, circulation, and so on. These productions and reproductions have invested the gala with an image of “never ring down the curtain,” by which the SFG becomes a space-time continuum, an eternal
symbol embedded into the collective memory of society.

Wang Liejun’s 2003 master thesis, *Power Practice under the Perspective of Relations: A Sociological Interpretation of 21 Years’ Spring Festival Galas*, analyzes the power relations in the SFG with a set of sociological methodologies. Wang begins his discussion with a strange social phenomenon—that the SFG has drawn extensive criticism in recent years while its audience rating has been surprisingly high. In the main body of his thesis, Wang lists three major power/discourse techniques that the SFG has employed from 1983 to 2003, including “contrasting the past misery with the present happiness,” “building typical positive and negative characters,” and “shaping sacred images and symbols.” Wang points out that these three power/discourse techniques are diffusive on the plane of operation, yet convergent on the plane of ideology. Because of the internal disequilibrium of power/discourse techniques (for example, excessive emphases have been laid on “present happiness” and “typical positive characters” in recent years), in a sense, the SFG’s programs and performances are contrary to individuals’ experiences in daily life, and therefore the gala has begun to come under fierce criticism in recent years. Nevertheless, Wang found that some self-mockery programs in the gala were able to partly counteract the criticism of the gala in an invisible way. Wang argues that such programs actually function as “relief valves” of the SFG, absorbing and dissolving strength against the SFG. In Wang’s view, these self-mockery programs are just where the SFG’s glamour lies—attracting hundreds of millions of audiences to wait by the TV set. Their indispensability in the SFG every year accounts for the SFG’s enduring popularity.

In his article, *The Last Dinner: CCTV Spring Festival Gala and New Ideology*, Pan Zhichang follows the critical tradition of the Marxist school. He critically analyzes the SFG’s ideological operation by referring to theories from Gramsci, Althusser, Adorno, etc. By deconstructing the SFG’s name, Pan has subtly uncovered its internal logic. Pan points out, just as its name implies, “Chunjie” is the cultural

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7 The Romanized Chinese characters of the SFG are “Chunjie Lianhuan Wanhui.” “Chunjie” means “Spring Festival,” “Lianhuan” means “to celebrate together,” and “Wanhui” means “gala.” The “Spring Festival Gala” is a frequently-used equivalent of “Chunjie Lianhuan Wanhui,” but the meaning of celebrating together is not explicitly embodied in the English translation.
and psychological background of the SFG; “Lianhuan” is where the signification of the SFG lies, and “Wanhui” serves as the platform for performance. Pan argues that these three concepts constitute three pivots of ideological operation in the SFG. Meanwhile, through a series of discourse and rhetoric techniques, the SFG has gradually become a proscenium for identity interpellation, a “media mirror” of the “new ideology.”

Pan argues that the root cause of the SFG being criticized simply lies in the all-sided intervention of the “new ideology” in artistic narratives. He refers to Juan Linz’s theoretical model of totalitarianism and authoritarianism, and applies it to his analysis of China’s ideological transformation. According to Pan, the ideology before the Cultural Revolution was an old totalitarian ideology (party-state ideology); the ideology since the 1980s is a new authoritarian ideology (state ideology). The new ideology no longer emphasizes class, and instead it begins to focus on moving from class interests toward common interests. He concedes that it is political progress to replace party-state ideology with state ideology, whereas this new state ideology is still not a mature system of values in the modern sense. For example, Pan points out that the artistic narratives in the SFG basically follow the discursive logic of state-centrism: the state is the prerequisite of existence and development of the nation, and without the state, there would be no nation. Hence, only the state is the true leading role on the SFG’s stage. In Pan’s view, the inevitable outcome of putting “the state” (motherland) into a shrine is the expansion of statism, yet this is a type of narrowed and irrational patriotism.

Meanwhile, Pan argues that the daily life narratives in the SFG can be boiled down to a discursive construction centering on people’s livelihood. He argues that this kind of ideological discourse, on the one hand, liberates the people from the politics-oriented society; on the other hand, it incorporates them immediately into agendas preset by the state ideology. As he points out, “for a long time, the gala has always lacked attention to specific agendas, such as free election, independent judicial system, autonomous NGOs and equality of opportunity, yet paid attention solely to economic prosperity and improvement of people’s material life, this practice is in fact
extremely problematic” (Pan, 2007). In Pan’s view, it is just an ideological operation like this that has made the SFG gradually deviate from daily practices of the people and meet with increasing criticism in recent years.

Last, Pan discusses the rhetorical techniques of state narratives in the SFG, including “sacred images,” the ability to “touch audiences emotionally,” and “teaching through entertainment,” etc., and stresses anew that it is the new state ideology as well as its discourse and rhetoric techniques that distinguish the SFG from other celebratory galas.

Frankly speaking, Pan’s article has shed tremendous light on the ideological operation behind the SFG. He has laid a solid foundation for the present author to critically analyze the SFG’s text construction and meaning production. His many terminologies, such as “a tampered folkloric symbol,” “a carnival banquet of imagined China,” “the interpellation of the sacred will of the state,” “state totem,” etc., all incisively point at the state ideology behind the gala. However, Pan neglects an important fact—that the audience watches the SFG not always because it is interpellated by the sacred will of the state. In fact, as a state-level artistic gala, besides conveying the state ideological discourses, the SFG also assumes the task of spreading traditional national culture. In this sense, watching the SFG also stems from individuals’ natural aesthetic needs. Moreover, as a secular media ritual, the SFG itself takes the function of venting feelings via entertainment. This is also a motivation which cannot be ignored. All in all, the SFG is a complicated text construction, which mixes state ideological discourses with traditional folk discourses. These two discourses intertwine with each other, conjointly working on the production and circulation of specific meanings.

As a matter of fact, the construction of the national identity in the SFG is precisely embodied in the high integration of these two aspects. However, Pan has only criticized the narratives of the state ideology in the gala, thus ignoring the SFG’s artistic quality itself and its value for the collective memory. Especially in today’s era of globalization, the SFG also takes the role of shaping the national image and constructing a national identity, and to some extent, the SFG is itself a political ritual
of modern nation-states. Hence its ritual function should be explored in depth, yet this perspective is absent in Pan’s analysis. In addition, it is worth mentioning that although Pan has already realized that “an imagined China” is constructed in the SFG, he fails to further analyze how this image is constructed and maintained on the stage. Therefore, in consideration of this, the present study will remedy Pan’s neglect by looking for those concrete symbols that visualize this image in the gala.

Lu Xinyu analyzes the SFG from the perspective of media economics. She observes the gala’s advertising operation, and grasps the delicate relationship between the SFG’s marketization and the state ideology in changing China. She proposes that the concept of “global Chinese” is not only a nation-state concept but also a “market concept.” She argues that the market is a kind of depoliticized politics, and it often intervenes immediately in the reconstruction of new state ideology. She claims that after the traditional political ideology declines, the market works as the origin of both self-identity and self-division. The dilemma that the SFG faces nowadays is just a miniature of the ever-intensified conflicts between the market economy and the state ideology in contemporary China.

In the present author’s opinion, the most inspiring finding in Lu’s article is that she isolates the structural defect of identification mechanism in modern society; namely, “in an era of ever more fragmented interests and increased stratification, politics has lost its ability to bridge the gaps and create consensus. It is just the structural defect that creates an opening for the mass media, which unify the audience and manufacture consensus” (Lu, 2009, p124). From this point of view, this structural defect of modern society is just the entry point where media ritual intervenes in social life. It just happens that the SFG makes up this structural defect; hence, as a media ritual, it is naturally embedded in the Spring Festival culture, simultaneously reshaping the Spring Festival culture itself. In this sense, the SFG is simply the embodiment of James Carey’s “ritual view of communication.” In the following analysis, this point will be further explicated.
4. Methodology

Generally speaking, the paradigms of communication studies can be divided into the qualitative approach and the quantitative approach. Stemming from natural science, the quantitative approach now is widely used in various disciplines of the social sciences. It is based on numerical information or the quantitative method, and is intimately tied to statistical analysis. Scientific and cultural research in the 20th century was mainly conducted in quantitative ways. Influenced by mainstream research methods in the social sciences at that time, the quantitative approach has dominated communication studies since its birth in the 1940s. For quite a long time, communication studies have followed the tradition of positivism to conduct quantitative research on communication effects.

As opposed to the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach pays attention to the meanings and interpretations in the research. Its approach derives from literature studies and hermeneutics; hence it has the typical characteristics of the humanities. The qualitative approach begin in the 1960s. Influenced by different schools, the humanities began to employ various research approaches, including unsystematic and selective approaches, to study the meaning construction of the media in daily life and its significance in guiding social behaviors. Therefore, compared with the positivist quantitative approach, the qualitative approach serves to highlight the essential differences of phenomena. A detailed comparison between the qualitative approach and the quantitative approach is tabled as follows:

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Leads to an evaluation | Leads to a hypothesis or theory
---|---
Interpretation can be attacked | Methodology can be attacked

(Berger, 2010, p23)

John Dewey argues that “there is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common” (Dewey, 1930, p5). In this sense, the study of common things (such as culture) ought to be the fundamental proposition of communication studies. In relation to the study of culture, Clifford Geertz once wrote that “believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p5). In a similar vein, James Carey also suggests that a cultural studies approach “does not seek to explain human behavior in terms of the laws that govern it; rather, it seeks to understand it. Cultural studies do not attempt to predict human behavior; rather, it attempts to diagnose human meanings” (Carey, 1989, p43). From these viewpoints, the qualitative approach seems more suitable for cultural studies, inasmuch as it particularly seeks the elucidation of meaning. In light of this, the subsequent research will be conducted mainly in virtue of qualitative approaches.

To be specific, cultural hermeneutics working as the overall method, runs throughout the thesis. Carey points out that “the ritual view of communication emphasizes the production of a coherent world that is then presumed, for all practical purpose, to exist. It is to emphasize the construction of and maintenance of paradigms rather than experiments; presuppositions rather than propositions; the frame, not the picture. The objective of doing all this—of looking at the practices that organize communications, the concepts such practices presuppose, and the social relations they bring into existence—is a hermeneutic one” (Carey, 1989, p65). In terms of the research task of this thesis, it aims to interpret how national identity is actualized
through media ritual. Fundamentally speaking, this is a constructing activity of meanings; therefore, the focus of the research should be principally laid on the hermeneutic side.

Under the guidance of this overall method, structural analysis and (qualitative) content analysis constitute two sub-methods of this thesis. They are used to expound the construction of national identity from the angles of form and content, respectively. Structural analysis serves to demonstrate the SFG’s ritual characteristics, and this is accomplished mainly through theoretical interpretations of relevant concepts such as ritual, media ritual, Carey’s ritual view of communication, etc. Meanwhile, as a production unit of meaning, the SFG’s mechanism of meaning production will also be discussed critically, and this will touch upon the core proposition of ritualization behind the SFG; that is, how symbolic power and ideological discourse operate in the gala, and (qualitative) content analysis will serve to interpret the construction of the specific images and symbols in the SFG. The production of these symbolic texts, on the one hand, grows out of the modern mobilization of cultural traditions; on the other hand, it derives from the ideological reconstruction of political identity. These two discursive resources interlace with each other, jointly working on the construction and expression of the motif of national identity in the SFG.

From a methodological perspective, such a (qualitative) content analysis requires a research method which encompasses structural semiotics and ideological critique at the same time. Roland Barthes’ semiology, more specifically, mythology, is just the method that befits this type of analysis. His mythology has its own theoretical foundation and conceptual hypothesis; for critically analyzing mass culture in modern society, mythology is of great methodological significance. Hence, its concept, theory, and operation mechanism are all worthy of investigation in depth.

4.1 Semiological analysis

Roland Barthes’ semiology is an important methodology in contemporary cultural

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8 In the popular sense, "mythology" or "myth" can be understood from three angles: 1) it is an ancient tale of fabulous people and incredible places; 2) it is a false belief or untrue story; 3) it is a societal narrative that expresses prevailing ideals, ideologies, values and beliefs. The term "mythology" or "myth" in Barthes' semiology refers to the third implication.
studies. The quintessence of this methodology lies in “sign critics.” *Mythologies* is a collection of essays on mass culture studies. In this book, Barthes applies structural linguistics to the analysis of mass culture, and establishes a set of unique semiological analytic approaches: the mythological approach. The term “myth,” from its Greek etymology, refers to a type of symbolic stories about human being’s living situation. The essence of myth lies in imagination; hence, on some level, myth is a fictive reflection of social reality. The reason Barthes uses “myth” to refer to the modern social reality is that he keenly captures the commonality of the two in the idea of fictiveness. In Barthes’s semiology, myth refers to those “seemingly natural” phenomena in the modern mass culture. Barthes argues that these “seemingly natural” phenomena are, in fact, artificial and purposeful, and they are saturated with substantial ideological contents. However, the distortion and conversion of the dominant groups in society make these ideology-laden contents appear at once natural and innocent. Thus, masses are always consuming these ideologized contents without being aware of it.

In a nutshell, it is just this sort of fictiveness that manufactures modern myths. Hence, the research task of Barthes’s semiology is to crack modern myths (demystification); that is to say, to deconstruct the operation mode of ideology in the mythical system. In Barthes’s own words, “I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there” (Barthes, 1991, p10).

4.1.1 What is myth?

Barthes suggests that myth is “a type of speech,” “a message,” and “a system of communication.” “Since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse.” It needs pointing out that this type of speech is not confined to oral speech. In Barthes’s view, “it can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech” (Barthes, 1991, p108). Hence, “to discriminate among mythical objects according to their substance would be entirely illusory. Myth is not defined by the object of its message
but by the way in which it utters this message” (Barthes, 1991, p107). In other words, what “myth” is concerned with is “how to say” instead of “what to say.”

In terms of the semiological structure of myth, Barthes suggests that myth is constructed on a double semiological system. The first semiological system refers to the linguistic level of a myth. It consists of signifier and signified, and when the two combine together, they constitute a complete sign. This process is defined as signification in structural linguistics. As Barthes states: “signification can be conceived as a process; it is the act which binds the signifier and the signified, an act whose product is the sign” (Barthes, 1964, p48). The second semiological system refers to the mythical level. Here the signifier consists of the sign from the first system. The signified is assigned by the meaning or ideology from the outside. Barthes argues that the signified is “general, global and diffuse...it is a fragment of ideology...These signifieds have a very close communication with culture, knowledge, history, and it is through them...that the environmental world invades the system” (Barthes, 1970, p91). When the new signifier and the assigned signified combine, they constitute a sign afresh. In brief, “myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second” (Barthes, 1991, p113). The double semiological system of myth can be visualized as follows:

As is shown above, at the level of language, the structure of myth is “signifier+signified=sign;” at the level of myth, the structure of myth is also “signifier+signified=sign.” To put it precisely, at this stage, Barthes substitutes “form,” “concept,” “meaning,” and “signification” for “signifier,” “signified,” “the sign on the
linguistic plane,” and “the sign on the mythical plane,” respectively. In the meantime, Barthes points out that the first semiological system (the linguistic level) is a denotative system, and the meaning of the sign is literal, obvious and common-sense; the second semiological system (the mythical level) is a connotative system, and the meaning of the sign derives from its denotation but simultaneously transcends its denotation, such as with the symbol. John Fiske points out that Barthes understands symbol in this way: “an object becomes a symbol when it acquires through convention and use a meaning that enables it to stand for something else” (Fiske, 1990, p91).

After a series of terminological replacements, the aforementioned model of myth can be illustrated as follows:

To further explicate this new model, Barthes takes an example of a front cover of the magazine *Paris-Match*. On the cover, “a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor” (Barthes, 1991, p115). At the level of language, all of the visual images (a black soldier, a French uniform, a raised arm, uplifted eyes, etc.) constitute a signifier, and this signifier corresponds to an appropriate signified: “it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness” (Barthes, 1991, p115). The whole photograph constitutes a complete meaning: a Negro is giving the French salute.

At the level of myth, “a Negro is giving the French salute” becomes a mere signifier (or a form). As to the concept that this photograph conveys, it rests with the signification process. It is worth mentioning that “the repertoire of cultural codes available to Barthes and his contemporaries (which included French colonial history and their military involvement in Algiers) allowed them to interpret the image in a more ideological way” (Barker, 2008, p79). Hence, in the process of signification,
Barthes links this photograph to a broad, ideological theme about French colonialism. In Barthes’s view, this photograph attempts to imply the Afro-French loyalty to the French flag in order to mask criticism of French colonial activities in history. Thus, after such a signification process, a clear-cut concept of French imperialism is presented: “France is a great Empire, all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag. There is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors” (Barthes, 1991, p115).

In fact, this example that Barthes cites aims to manifest adequately the subjective purposiveness of modern myths: an artificial meaning is added on a natural sign, whereas this addition is completed under the circumstance that the public is unaware of it. Hence, when people “read” this myth, they can hardly perceive the addition of the meaning; instead, they argue that everything in the myth is a matter of course, that the myth depicts the reality just the way it is. However, it is just this kind of seeming naturalness that determines the operation mode of the myth and performs its ideological function in an unobservable way.

4.1.2 The operation mode of myth

Barthes argues that myths exist in every corner of modern society. It is exactly the business logic of capitalism and bourgeois ideology to manufacture a variety of modern myths. However, for readers, the existence and operation of the myths are almost insensible. Barthes attributes this to the anonymity of the bourgeoisie. Bathes suggests that the bourgeoisie is “a social class which does not want to be named” (Barthes, 1991, p137). In Barthes’s opinion, the unwritten norms of interrelationships of the bourgeoisie have already blended into the everyday life of modern society. Moreover, the bourgeoisie constantly absorbs into its ideology a whole section of humanity. By these means, the bourgeoisie effaces its universal existence in the societal structure. Thus, for the bourgeoisie, the reality becomes a representation and a fragment of its ideology.

The bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into a representation of the world, and Barthes argues that this is a process of passing from history to nature. This
transformation process constitutes not only the very principle of myth, but also its basic operation mode. To be specific, Barthes argues that the kernel of the mythical operation lies in the ambiguity of the signifier. He points out that in the mythical system, the signifier always presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form. In terms of meaning, it is full; in terms of form, it is empty. For instance, as meaning, the mythical signifier has its own rich, self-sufficient history: the saluting black soldier has his own personal experience; it belongs to a past, a memory. In a nutshell, as a totality of linguistic signs, the meaning of the myth is complete, since a signification is already built into the first semiological system.

However, when the signifier passes from meaning to form, the internal meaning has to give way to the external form. As form, the mythical signifier is nothing but an empty vehicle. As Barthes writes: “when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (Barthes, 1991, p116). The form impoverishes the meaning of the mythical signifier; thus, its newly-acquired penury calls for a signification to fill in. Through the signification, a whole new signified will be implanted into the signifier. Barthes uses motivation to explain the addition of signification. In his view, it is the motivation that causes the myth to be uttered. He points out that “myth is a type of speech defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense” (Barthes, 1991, p122). In this sense, the concept that the myth delivers is just able to reveal its very intention, inasmuch as the myth-creator always emphasizes a specific concept out of a certain intention.

In our case, “to mask criticism of French colonialism” is the fundamental intention behind the mythical speech. In order to evade this ideological content, between the saluting Negro and the French Empire, the mythical system subtly appeals to the common analogous feature of the two: excellence and greatness. Thus, the Negro that salutes is shaped as an exemplar, a symbol, naturally conjuring up the concept of French imperiality. When this concept achieves its natural state (like when it goes without saying), the very intention of the mythical speech thus comes true. On this ground, Barthes proposes that the essential function of myth is to naturalize the
concept which is constructed on a specific, socio-historical context, to make it appear to be intrinsic, universal, and non-ideological.

However, this sort of unknowing naturalization is just the way in which a dominant ideology codes texts. Barthes argues that the greatness of the French Empire is in fact constructed on the intentional distortion of its quality of colonialism. He points out that the image of the Negro itself contains the historical implication of colonial oppression from the French Empire. While in the process of ideological naturalization, on the one side, the colonial history of the French Empire has evaporated, the image of the Negro is hence purified as an “alibi of colonialism;” on the other side, this historical void is immediately filled with a laudatory display of imperialism (such as the French spirit of racial equality). Thus, by such a distortion of signification, the French Empire has not only gotten rid of any questioning of its historical complexity, but has also essentialized its greatness as an intrinsic, true, and immutable quality. Predictably, the further this quality is propagated in reality, the more naturalized it appears.

In conclusion, by deciphering the semiotic texts of popular culture, Barthes has observed the naturalization of ideology. In his view, it is precisely ideology that constructs texts and prevents the expansion of sign meanings. Meanwhile, he points out that once texts are infiltrated by ideology, in other words, once signs enter from denotative systems to connotative systems, they become “myths” at the service of specific social purposes. In light of this, John Storey concludes myth as “ideology understood as a body of ideas and practices, which by actively promoting the values and interests of dominant group in society, defend the prevailing structures of power” (Storey, 2006, p93).

**4.2 Application of semiological analysis in this thesis**

This thesis aims to investigate means by which the SFG has constructed national identity over the past three decades (1983-2012). Fiske points out that “the starting point of any study of television must be with what is actually there on the screen…However, the reading of television must progress from the manifest content to the latent content” (Fiske, 2004, p10). The SFG, as illuminated previously, is not only
an emerging folk custom during the Spring Festival, but is also an important platform where the state delivers mainstream ideological discourse. The SFG conveys its ideological discourse mainly through its ritualized structure and representational symbols. Thus, the study of these latent contents becomes the focus of semiological analysis. Gillian Rose suggests that to initiate a semiological analysis, four steps need to be taken. They are: “1) decide what the signs are; 2) decide what they signify; 3) explore their connections to wider systems of meaning; 4) explore the precise articulation of ideology and mythology” (Rose, 2011, p133). In order to highlight the operational process of semiological analysis, I label these four steps as sampling, categorizing, coding, and analyzing, respectively. Next, I will briefly explain how I have taken these steps to conduct a semiological analysis.

4.2.1 Sampling and Categorizing

I have stated in the introduction that each SFG broadcast lasts 4.5 hours on average, and the gala has been going on for thirty years. Therefore, the audiovisual materials of this study amount to over 130 hours, containing about 1100 episodes of various forms of performances. Undoubtedly, the quantity of samples for this study was sufficient. To turn these raw materials into symbolic texts for analysis, I first categorized them into different sets. By reviewing full episodes of the SFG since 1983, I teased out two major representational symbols that have been extensively and repeatedly mobilized to construct national identity; that is, ethnic symbols and traditional cultural symbols. Ethnic symbols serve to embody the inherent, primordial feature of national identity (by nature) while traditional cultural symbols serve to represent the feature of socio-cultural constructivism of national identity (by nurture).

As far as this study is concerned, I define an ethnic symbol as any image that reflects the common biological features of a group, such as common appearance features, common ancestry, etc.; similarly, I define a traditional cultural symbol as any unique image that embodies national ethos, whereby a group can be culturally differentiated from others, such as the dragon, the Great Wall, traditional Chinese opera, etc.

4.2.2 Coding
After the explicit categorization of the representational symbols, I then coded them as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Program Category</th>
<th>Symbol Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Descendants of the Dragon</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>Ethnic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Calligraphy of the Dragon</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>Ethnic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Long Great Wall</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>Traditional Cultural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.3 Analysis

Given the large number of episodes of the SFG, it was unrealistic to analyze each of them in great detail. In light of this, in the chapter where I present the study report, I only pick out the above-mentioned episodes from each category to conduct the detailed analyses. With respect to the representativeness of the episodes I chose, in fact, before these episodes could be staged, they all had been strictly selected and fully rehearsed. Hence, the artistic level and sociopolitical significance of these episodes are able to adequately reflect the mainstream culture at that time. Meanwhile, David Kertzer once pointed out: “without rites and symbols, there are no nations’” (Kertzer, 1988, p179). It is worth mentioning that national symbol, be it ethnic or cultural, is clearly expressed by the lyrics of the aforementioned songs, moreover, these specific songs are all widely known to the SFG audiences, since some of them have performed on the SFG’s stage more than once. Therefore, these songs are able to typically display how the state constructs national identity via music over the past three decades.

As far as the actual analytic process is concerned, I deemed that the SFG was a myth in the semiological sense. Each performance unit in the SFG constitutes a complete sign or meaning in the first system, and the aggregation of these signs or meanings constitutes the mythical forms in the second system. Nation identity is the core concept of the SFG, and in order to achieve this ultimate pursuit, the dominant
ideology of the state was implicitly coded into a variety of gala texts, albeit in an ambivalent way sometimes. In light of this, I will make every effort to analyze the various signs and discourses appearing within the SFG texts, thereby grasping how the concept of national identity is naturally expressed.

Meanwhile, as Fiske points out, “the relationship between the sign, its myths and connotations, with the user, is an ideological one” (Fiske, 1990, p171). By interpellating individuals to the subject position (in short, audience positioning), ideology leads individuals to “preferential reading,” namely, identifying with the value and belief that the myth conveys. On the other hand, as Barthes criticized, myth is usually a reflection of the dominant ideological position, wherein the unequal relationship of social power is quietly concealed. Taking this into consideration, I will also do my utmost to decode the SFG’s ideological operation as well as its power structure so that we can discern its essence through its complex appearance.

4.3 Reflection on the methodology

Holistically speaking, Barthes’s mythological approach belongs to an ingenious combination of structural semiology and ideological criticism. Hence, this method possesses a dual character of the empirical school and the critical school at the same time. In addition, it also has an operable technical character. All of these have provided me with a powerful analytic tool to comprehensively investigate the SFG’s meaning production and those backstage rules dominating this meaning production.

Nevertheless, Barthes’ semiology has its own methodological limitations as well. First, semiological analysis does not have full validity at the hermeneutic level. The semiological approach is basically operated by the researcher himself, and hence, the reading of signs is in a sense subjective and arbitrary. For example, the saluting black soldier is in Barthes’ eyes an “accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperialism” (Barthes, 1991, p117), whereas this image could also symbolize something else in reality, such as the military supremacy of France, France’s awe-inspiring majesty as a great power in the world, etc. In this regard, Barthes’s semiological analysis merely offers one of many interpretations. However, the true value of semiology lies in that it encourages individuals to read signs in a diversified
manner and to create new meanings in order to avoid the one-way indoctrination of the dominant ideology. In this sense, to disclose the operational process of symbolic power, to encourage individuals to join the struggle of meanings, is just where the social criticalness of semiology lies.

Secondly, Barthes’ semiology is apt to mechanically apply his theory to the practical analysis, thus leading to the neglect of the social milieu where specific signs are produced, especially when the symbolic texts highly correspond to readers’ subjectivity. Storey argues that an individual’s reading of certain texts depends largely on these three elements: “the location of the text, the historical moment and the cultural formation of the reader” (Storey, 2006, p95). As far as our case is concerned, the ritual scene of the SFG constitutes the location where the symbolic texts reside; the time-honored Confucian ethics and values constitute the common cultural background of audiences. As to the historical moment, unquestionably, the Spring Festival is just the historical moment where the audience is. In addition to this, it is also argued that the ideological adjustment has also played a pivotal role in affecting the audience’s reading of the gala texts. Therefore, in the subsequent analysis, particular attention will be paid to the adjustment of ideology during different historical periods. To this end, I partition the SFG into three historical stages, taking every decade as a unit. By investigating the transformation of modes of ideological operation, I hope to provide the symbolic texts in the SFG with a clear interpretation of the socio-historical context.
5. Spring Festival Gala’s strategies for national identity

5.1 Structural strategy: ritualizing the Spring Festival Gala

Ritualizing the SFG can be understood according to two dimensions: 1) the ritual characteristics of the gala; and 2) the essence behind the process of ritualization.

5.1.1 Ritual characteristics of the Spring Festival Gala

i. The uniqueness of time

The sanctity of rituals resides in their specific time and place. Only in this way, will we be able to separate rituals from daily life. Hence, the ritual typically has a clear-cut mark of time. Time includes two basic types: “daily time” and “sacred time.” “Daily time” is a physical concept. It accentuates the fact that time is an objective existence and flows linearly. According to Newton’s theory of classical mechanics, time is viewed as a certain homogeneous substance. In his book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, Newton states: “absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external” (Whitrow, 1982, p68). In addition, the invention of the mechanical clock has greatly affected individuals’ perceptions of time’s homogeneity and continuity. Hence, individuals’ perceptions of time are first based on its objectivity. As a result of this, the SFG is generally viewed as an outcome when time comes to a certain point (namely the lunar New Year’s Eve) during its continuous and linear flow.

Nevertheless, from another perspective, individuals’ perceptions of time are, in a sense, subjective. In other words, time is not entirely homogeneous and there exist certain sacred time slices. The Chinese carnival, the Spring Festival, is such a sacred time slice. Mikahail Bakhtin argues that the carnival is “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter, during which people were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations” (Bakhtin, 1984, p8). As Bakhtin states, during carnivals, “all hierarchic distinctions, barriers, norms and prohibitions of usual life’ are suspended…an atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity reigns” (Bakhtin, 1984, p15). On this basis, “an ideal and at the same time real type of communication,
impossible in ordinary life, is established” (Bakhtin, 1984, p92). In short, the Spring Festival temporally liberates people from the established order in secular life and provides them with a period of festive leisure time. Obviously, such a period of time is distinct from daily time, because it lacks certainty and cannot be measured by the mechanical clock. To sum up, daily time is a kind of physical time; it flows equably and cannot be cut arbitrarily. In contrast, sacred time can be cut artificially in order to fulfill people’s specific spiritual needs; hence sacred time belongs to a kind of psychological time.

The SFG is aired between 8:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. on every lunar New Year’s Eve. This is elaborately scheduled. Because lunar New Year’s Eve is the temporal junction between the old year and the new, traditional folk customs such as staying up all night and paying new year’s calls need to last until 0:00 p.m.; thus, this five-hour period constitutes the time basis of common activities. Lu critically proposes that “the concepts of heaven, earth, God, and human connected to traditional Han Chinese rites have waned in modern society, leaving a structural lack to be filled. Spring Festival Gala thus replaces the sacred time that used to be offered to God and the ancestors” (Lu, 2009, p113). In other words, the sanctity that the SFG obtains derives partially from the sacred time it has embedded in it. The fixed broadcast date (lunar New Year’s Eve) and time interval (between 8:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.) are not only the prerequisites of media rituals, but also the characteristics of media rituals.

ii. The extensive participation of the audience

The audience rating is a crucial indicator for the measurement of the degree of the audience’s attention to certain TV programs. Ratings refer to the percentage of the universe of households or persons viewing a TV program during a certain period. The SFG has topped the list of TV celebration galas in China by its extremely high audience rating. The list below shows CCTV-1’s yearly rating trend, from 2002 to 2006.9

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In this graph, the X axis records the same dates in different years; the Y axis records the audience rating. From the graph we can see clearly that CCTV-1’s yearly rating steadily remains at 20% more or less during ordinary months of a year. In stark contrast, during January and February (the Spring Festival period), the rating soon reaches over 80% at the startling level. Moreover, it is worth mentioning again that the 2012 SFG has attracted over 500 million viewers, making the gala the most watched national network TV broadcast in the world. Unquestionably, these data statistically reflect the audience’s extensive attention and participation. All in all, the behavior of national collective viewing constitutes the audience basis on which the SFG is able to be identified as a media ritual.

iii. Rigorous stylization

Throughout its thirty years’ history, the SFG has maintained more or less a fixed operational mode. In terms of stage decoration, the CCTV studio is elaborately decorated with various folk custom symbols such as the patterns of a dragon, phoenix, and auspicious clouds, spring couplets, the character fu (fortune), paper-cuts, red lanterns, and the like. In addition, the Chinese traditional auspicious colors—red and yellow—are also widely used for costumes to stage the decorations. In sum, by embedding a tremendous amount of folk custom symbols about the Spring Festival, the CCTV studio is no longer a site for gala broadcasting but a site for festival celebration.

As for program scheduling, although program quantities change every year, program types and sequences have remained relatively stable for quite a long time. For
example, every year, the gala begins with a grand-scale singing and dancing program in order to create a frisky and jubilant atmosphere. Take 2005 as an illustration; the opening performance in 2005 was considered the most spectacular in recent years in terms of the performer number in one single program. The opening performance of this year is *Red Phoenix in Morning Sun*. Around one hundred dancers wearing golden longuettes danced in the red lantern and paper-cuts decorated stage. The whole stage was enveloped in warm-toned, golden light.

Besides the grand-scale singing and dancing programs, cross-talks, mini-comedies, Chinese traditional operas, magic, acrobats, etc, are all scheduled as fixed performance items on the SFG’s stage every year. As Zhao observes, the gala “has involved into a more or less fixed formula with singing and dancing, mini-comedies and cross-talks as its three mainstays” (Zhao, 1998, p44). The table below shows the quantitative comparison of the SFG program types in the last ten years (2003-2012).10 As can be seen, singing-dancing, mini-comedies, and cross-talks account for the major proportion of performance items in the SFG’s program scheduling over the past decade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total programs</th>
<th>Singing dancing</th>
<th>Mini comedies</th>
<th>Cross talks</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From a structural functionalist viewpoint, ritual serves a certain end. In order to achieve this end, setting up a theme for rituals becomes a must. The SFG pays special attention to the selection of themes. Since 1983, each SFG is keynoted by a formal theme. The appendix displays the SFG’s themes over the past thirty years (1983-2012), and from it we can see that each of the SFGs has a clear theme. “Joy” and “solidarity” are the most frequently-cited words, and accordingly, they constitute the gala’s basic themes through 1983-2012. The constancy of program themes, on the one hand, reflects the SFG’s rigorous stylization; on the other hand, it reflects the gala’s function and end to a certain degree.

Shi points out: “the practice of setting a formal theme for each Spring Festival Gala is, from the perspective of meaning production, a technique through which institutions for state ideologies are able to strengthen the management of popular culture” (Shi, 2008, p35). It is worth noting that the two themes serve different functions and ends. To be specific, family reunion and festive leisure are two core connotations of the Spring Festival; hence the theme “joy” serves the folkloric function of jubilance and entertainment; on the other hand, the CCTV, as a mouthpiece apparatus, is duty bound to disseminate state mainstream discourses. Therefore, the theme “solidarity” serves the political function of propaganda and guidance. In the SFG’s context, the theme “solidarity” can be interpreted in two ways: one refers to the solidarity of different ethnic groups in China; the other one refers to the solidarity of Chinese (as an ethnological concept) worldwide. For example, throughout the gala’s history, the theme “the great solidarity of the Chinese nation” is often presented in singing and dancing performances by ethnic minority performers that wear ethnic costumes and play ethnic instruments. Such programs include: *Fifty Six Ethnic Groups Singing the Same Song* (1986); *The Chorus of National Solidarity* (1987); *Festival Night* (1988); *Chinese Style* (1989); *The Carol of Nationalities* (1997); *Singing in Sequence by Various Ethnic Minorities* (2001); *Ethnic Dances* (2005); *Grand Reunion*
of China (2009); Happy Family (2011); The Pursuit of Love (2012), etc.

In a similar vein, the theme “the great solidarity of Chinese worldwide” is often portrayed by pop singers invited from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas. Their songs in the galas include: My Chinese Heart (Hong Kong, 1984); The Descendants of the Dragon (Chinese American, 1985); The Cloud of the Homeland (Taiwan, 1987); Sentiment of Homeland (Hong Kong, 1988); Grandma's Penghu Bay (Taiwan, 1989); I Want to Have A Home (Taiwan, 1991); Walk Hand in Hand (Singapore, 1993); I love You, China (Taiwan, Hong Kong, 1998); Great China (Hong Kong, Taiwan, 1999); The Song of Macau (Macau, 1999); Happy Chinese New year (Hong Kong, Taiwan, 2007); Blue and White Porcelain; Chinese Language (Taiwan, 2008); Stand Up (Hong Kong, 2009); etc.

It needs to be pointed out that the theme of solidarity in the SFG is often expressed by these ethnic minority performers and overseas singers, and this practice actually contains strong symbolic implications. So to speak, on top of their program contents, the appearance of these performers on the stage is itself an expression of the theme of solidarity; or, in other words, they are themselves a kind of fixed symbol, consistently serving the gala theme of solidarity.

iv. Transnormal way of reporting

Dayan and Katz argue that media events are interruptions of routines. As they state: “they intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives. Television events propose exceptional things to think about, to witness, and to do. Regular broadcasting is suspended and preempted as we are guided by a series of special announcements and preludes that transform daily life into something special” (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p5). The SFG’s transnormal way of reporting reflects in both its pre- and post-telecast stages. To be specific, CCTV and provincial TV stations begin to report the gala’s preparations a couple of months before its telecast on New Year’s Eve. From then on, various reports centering on the SFG, such as the latest reports of rehearsals, gala previews, entertainment gossips, and even video episodes of previous galas, begin to appear in the media frequently; after the telecast, various award activities and social commentaries centered on the SFG begin to come into public view.
Additionally, it is worth mentioning that many follow-up cultural phenomena are also derived from the SFG, such as the buzzwords coined by each gala. Bernard Cohen points out that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p13). In this sense, through setting agendas, the CCTV has clearly drawn a line between festive activities and routine activities, and through its transnormal way of reporting, the CCTV has continually reminded and confirmed the significance of the gala, inviting the public to join in the activity of “festive viewing of television.” On the other hand, through media hype, a “pseudo-environment” has been constructed in which it is suggested to the public that “everyone is paying attention to the gala, and the whole country is joining in the jubilation.” Hence, motivated by such a carnival atmosphere, the public is apt to join in the “charismatic collective action” of viewing the SFG.

v. Symbolized expression

Mike Featherstone argues that “no society has ever been saturated with signs and images like this one…the triumph of signifying culture leads to a simulative world in which the proliferation of signs and images has effaced the distinction between the real and the imaginary” (Featherstone, 1991, p85). Further, Ernst Cassirer and Maureen Lukay define a man as an “animal symbolicum.” They claim that “no longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe” (Cassirer and Lukay, 2006, p25). Hence, it is through symbolization that man structures and shapes his perception of reality. Symbolization also plays a significant role in rituals. Victor Turner describes rituals “an aggregation of symbols.” In this sense, the ritual is a symbol per se. The significance of ritual symbolization lies in creating, as Turner states, “visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments, and psychological dispositions that cannot directly be perceived” (Turner, 1967, p50).

As a grand media ritual, the SFG has rich visual symbols that convey unique meanings. On the SFG’s stage, the audience is able to see various visual symbols that appear only during the course of the Spring Festival, such as spring couplets, auspicious clouds, character fu, paper-cuts, red lanterns, firecrackers, dumplings, etc.
These visual symbols appear either in the stage decoration, on the backdrop video screen or in program scripts, props and clothes. In his book *Art*, Clive Bell argues that the essence of art is “Significant Form.” He states: “…lines and colors combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colors, these aesthetically moving forms I call ‘Significant Form,’ and ‘Significant Form’ is the one quality common to all works of art” (Bell, 1914, p4). In this sense, “Form” is the signifier of the art symbol and the “Significant” is the signified. To be exact, the signifier includes the “relations and combinations of lines and colors;” the signified refers to the aesthetic emotions that the art symbol stirs.

The SFG is filled with tremendous visual symbols. These visual symbols constitute significant forms. For instance, as introduced in the folk legend of *Nian*, color red, spring couplets and firecrackers helped the villagers to drive away the beast eventually, thus, pasting red spring couplets and setting off firecrackers have been kept as fixed folkloric activities during the Spring Festival. In accordance with Bell’s analysis, the color red, spring couplets, and firecrackers act as forms, and what these visual symbols embody is the deep aesthetic emotions and cultural psychologies of the Chinese nation. Precisely, these signifiers symbolize individuals’ good wishes for the new year, such as jubilance, auspiciousness, and peace. From the gala’s stage decoration to its program content, traditional cultural symbols have been widely used. Such a practice, on the one hand, caters to individuals’ aesthetic needs and cultural psychologies; on the other hand, it accelerates the symbolization of the gala as a ritual site.

The symbolized expression of the SFG is in favor of promoting the national identity. This can be interpreted in two ways. In terms of the stage layout and decoration, the CCTV studio becomes larger and larger year by year, the actors’ costumes and props become more and more gorgeous, and the stage technologies become more and more dazzling, from which the gala appears increasingly magnificent on the TV screen. These concrete improvements in the gala provide the audience with a feast for the eyes. McLuhan views the media as “the extensions of
man,” as he writes: “any extension, whether of skin, hand or foot, affects the whole of the psychic and social complex” (McLuhan, 1964, p19). The SFG is the visual extension of man through which individuals are able to participate in the annual collective ritual.

In terms of the program content, the gala features various traditional artistic forms, such as singing, dancing, cross-talk, mini-comedy, Chinese traditional opera, martial arts, magic, acrobats and the like. In addition, the gala is filled with a myriad of native, folkloric symbols and symbolism in its performance. All in all, through displaying the extensive and profound national cultures, the sense of national pride as being Chinese is able to be greatly motivated among the audience. More importantly, through the SFG, these ancient artistic forms are transmitted through generations, by which traditional Chinese cultures are hence able to be consolidated and spread. In this sense, the SFG’s ritual communication functions of “maintenance of society in time” and “representation of shared beliefs” have been brought into full play.

5.1.2 Essence behind the ritualization of the Spring Festival Gala

Durkheim argues that the ritual is the symbolic enactment of social relations themselves. Accordingly, the roles that individuals or groups play in the ritual reflect their social relations in reality. In other words, the ritual represents certain cultural system and in the meantime, reflects its corresponding social power structure. In this sense, ritual works not only as a narrative of real life, but also as a channel through which the internal power structure of society is captured. The SFG is an elaborately orchestrated media ritual, and the participants in this medium ritual include the state, the performers, and the audience. They provide us with three different angles with which to investigate the essence of the ritualization of the SFG.

i. The organizer: “the state on the scene”

In traditional society, “state symbols” in folk rituals are not very clear-cut. It is alongside the rapid development of modern communication technologies that state power begins to intervene in folk rituals. However, in most rituals, state power does not exhibit its strength and authority overtly; instead, the state power intervenes in rituals mainly in an invisible way. In our case, state power intervenes in the gala
mainly through the censorship mechanism. The existence of this mechanism accentuates the fact that the state is on the gala scene in an invisible way.

The CCTV SFG, just as its name implies, is orchestrated and produced by the CCTV, China’s national TV station, as well as the propaganda apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Ostensibly, the organizer of the gala is the CCTV and directors at the CCTV. On the other hand, if we further investigate the SFG’s production mechanism prior to its live broadcast on New Year’s Eve, we can easily realize that the CCTV’s superiors, such as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), and even the CCP’s Propaganda Department, are constantly working as invisible hands, exerting an immediate but profound impact on the SFG’s production of program content.

To be specific, in order to ensure the political correctness of the meanings that the SFG conveys, the SFG has to go through a continuous censorship several months before its telecast on New Year’s Eve. The constitution of censors is very complicated and remains in flux every year, but usually they consist of top leaders at the CCTV, central leaders that are in charge of propaganda and ideology such as high-level officials from the SARFT and the CCP’s Propaganda Department, experts and professionals in all fields, and the gala directors themselves. Every year, the gala directors submit program proposals to a special committee of directors at the CCTV. The special committee of directors consists of top leaders at the CCTV. After their internal examinations in the first round, the program proposals are submitted to the CCTV’s direct superior, the SARFT, which is in charge of overseeing the CCTV’s routine operation directly. The CCP’s Propaganda Department also participates in the examination with the SARFT in order to avoid any politically inappropriate content staged on New Year’s Eve. The propaganda department and the SARFT have absolute and supreme power to make final decisions on whether a certain performance should be modified or even abandoned before its live broadcast on the stage. In a word, this is the most difficult examination phase. Only performances/proposals that pass their strict censorship are qualified to embark on formal rehearsals and be broadcast live eventually on the stage. Otherwise, they are likely to be banned from performing on
New Year’s Eve. “Usually, the examination before formal rehearsal continues five times or seven times. For example, the examination in 2004 was five times and the examination in 2005 was seven times” (Li and Li, 2007, p204).

On top of the censorship from the CCTV itself, and the SARFT and the propaganda department, state leaders also play a significant role. Since the 1990s, state leaders have often watched the gala and even appear in the gala to pay new year’s calls to the Chinese people, by which the symbolic implication of the gala has been advanced from an artistic level onto a new political level, as Aihwa Ong points out that “in China, the articulations of the leaders are very important in defining what is at stake for China as a nation” (Ong, 2005, p28).

Concerning the censorship criteria, they are very intricate and elusive. Besides the conventional criteria of political correctness and audience feedback during the rehearsal phase, some unexpected factors could also play an important role in deciding whether the gala should accept or reject certain performances. For example, a singer prepared a song for the 1990 SFG, and although she sang well in the rehearsal, her song was abandoned eventually. Because she was informed that “her song used fighter planes and cannons as background, which was likely to remind people of the recent outbreak of Iran-Iraq war, the leaders argued that the war theme did not tally with the atmosphere at that time” (Yang and Chen, 1998, p210).

Usually, ironic works in the gala (such as mini-comedies and cross-talks) have to endure the most stringent examination, as a well-known mini-comedy actor describes: “script examination is a tough barrier every year, especially for ironic mini-comedies, they have to not only entertain the audience but also abide by the principle of political correctness. The live broadcast is on the New Year’s Eve, but some programs are banned from staging just the day before the New Year’s Eve. Among all these banned programs, mini-comedies and cross-talks are the most” (Yang and Chen, 1998, p230). The reason can be explained from two dimensions. On the one hand, “the carnival, according to Bakhtin, was characterized by laughter, by excessiveness of (particularly of the body and the bodily functions), by bad taste and offensiveness, and by degradation” (Fiske, 1989, p81). The SFG is a Chinese carnival, and ironic works in
the gala offer the most laughter to the audience with their excessiveness (of body language) and exaggeration (linguistically); on the other hand, ironic works engender embarrassment. “Embarrassment is popular pleasure, because it contains the values of both the dominant and the subordinate, the disciplinary and the liberating, it occurs when the ideologically repressed clashes with the forces that repress it” (Fiske, 1989, p52).

In a nutshell, by investigating the censorship mechanism behind the scene, the state symbol implanted in the SFG can be clearly captured. For all of the programs, the realization of live broadcasting is nothing but the last result of the sophisticated censorship mechanism. Hence, it is safe to conclude that the SFG is filled with strong state power and political awareness; it is a fully ideologized media text and serves the end of conveying the state mainstream discourses. The SFG’s ritualization is characterized by the “state on the scene” from the beginning of its content production. On the other hand, the “state on the scene” provides the SFG with a unified and sacred ritual atmosphere, which is in favor of constructing national identity in turn.

ii. The manifestation mode: cultural performance

From its original sense, the SFG is a TV variety entertainment show. Its manifestation mode can seen essentially as “cultural performance.” Richard Bauman argues that in contemporary cultural anthropology studies, there exist two different perspectives on the term “performance.” One regards performance as an artistic mode of communication, while the other one regards performance as a particular event. According to Bauman, the former stresses the usage variance between poetic language and daily language; the latter touches on the concept of cultural performance. Although many anthropologists have used the term “enactment” or “performance” since Durkheim, the concept of performance is still confined to the theoretical framework of ritual studies, becoming a narrow expression.

Milton Singer first put forward the concept of cultural performance to generalize the historical types and traditions of human cultures in evolution. He defines cultural performance as “what we in the west usually call by that name—for example, plays, concerts, and lectures ... but also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and
ceremonies, festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic” (Singer, 1972, p71).

According to Singer’s definition, cultural performance includes rituals, by which the denotation of performance in cultural anthropology studies is broadened to a large extent. In addition, according to Singer, cultural performances consist of “cultural media.” Cultural media refer to “modes of communication’ that include not only spoken language but also nonlinguistic media such as song, dance, acting (and acting out), graphic arts and plastic arts” (Singer, 1972, p76). From this perspective, the SFG is able to be considered as a systematic “cultural performance,” as it employs varying cultural media to manifest themes and historical traditions, including linguistic media (such as mini-comedies and cross-talks) and nonlinguistic media (such as dances, magic, and acrobats).

The SFG’s cultural performance, on the one hand, constitutes the gala’s program contents; on the other hand, it facilitates the gala’s ritualization. This can be expounded in two ways: 1) cultural performance and power order; and 2) cultural performance and symbolism. First, cultural performance is closely interwoven with power order. Cultural performance is openly accepted only when it accords with the prevailing power order and mainstream discourse. In other words, cultural performance is a form of popular entertainment that has to be sanctioned officially by the power holders. This is a unanimous social consensus in modern nation-states. This also explains, from another point of view, why those rebellious, subversive cultural performances (such as avant-garde art, etc.) can hardly be recognized by their contemporaneous mainstream societies. In light of this, Don Handelman concludes that in modern nation-states, the existence of bureaucratic values constitutes the power pivot of aesthetic forms, and in turn, the aesthetic forms reflect the bureaucratic logic. He writes: “these aesthetic expressions often take the form of events of presentation, of spectacles. Modern spectacles actualize aesthetic practices of bureaucratic logic. In a sense, spectacles are the holidays of bureaucratic ethos, celebrating this while appearing to do something very different, usually in the shapes of colorful, dramatic, and exciting displays—in other words, entertainments that are thrilling to spectators”
Michael Herzfeld also notices the internal relation between cultural performance and state power. He points out that the primary characteristic of performance is visuality; namely, attracting spectators by image motions. Human vision is the most natural domain of use for performance. Hence performance contributes to national and political identification indeed. In this sense, visuality is not only a means of performance, but also a symbolic tool of power.

Second, cultural performance is filled with a great deal of symbolism. Cultural performance is a behavior or an activity through which routine life or non-routine life (such as the carnival) can be exhibited. According to John MacAloon, cultural performances are “more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more that cathartic indulgences. They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, and present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some way while remaining the same in others” (MacAloon, 1984, p241). All in all, cultural performance is deeply interwoven with state power. On the one hand, cultural performance reconfirms the state’s authority and power structure in reality; on the other hand, symbolism in cultural performance also provides the state with a good text with which to encode mainstream ideological discourse, thereby manufacturing certain consensus that sustains society.

Further, the performer’s role playing in the gala is another constructive angle from which to investigate the SFG’s ritualization. Let us take the gala hosts as an illustration. The SFG hosts assume a unique responsibility that other gala hosts do not assume; namely, they must celebrate the Spring Festival with hundreds of millions of TV viewers. Hence their positions are of great significance. In archaic religious rituals, the ritual hosts usually come from preeminent leaders. They are in charge of the ritual process and act as the medium connecting God with secular society. In the SFG’s ritual scene, the role that hosts play is similar to the high priests in archaic religious rituals. The gala hosts usually are the first to come onto the stage, and they give sacred orders, announcing the advent of the New Year’s Eve; when 00:00 p.m. approaches, the gala
hosts begin to launch a collective countdown; after the finale, the hosts officially announce the ending of the carnival. The countdown is a fixed episode of each gala. Although it belongs to a non-performance item, it enthralls all of the viewers, as it is the temporal junction between the past year and the upcoming year. When 00:00 p.m. is around the corner, the gala hosts come onto stage again and lead performers on the stage and the audience to count down together; when the new year bell sounds, the hosts begin to pay new year’s calls to the people of the country. In addition, as is analyzed above, the SFG is implanted with state symbols and state ideological discourses from its pre-telecast stage; hence, the state ideology in the gala works on the audience mainly through the hosts’ interpretations of texts. To summarize, all of these processes are centered on the gala hosts, by which the gala hosts constitute the power center in the ritual site. In this sense, the SFG hosts have reproduced the power relations structured in the archaic religious rituals; that is, they act as high priests, connecting the state and the audience.

iii. The audience: unconscious social control

The operation of the cosmos is rhythmized on the cycle of the seasons. Accordingly, a human being’s life journey also experiences a conversion of different stages. Centered on birth, adulthood, getting married and death, human society develops a multitude of rituals. Arnold Van Gennep conceptualizes these rituals as “rites of passage” and views them as a prevalent construction mechanism in human society in a broad sense. According to Van Gennep, “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another” (Van Gennep, 2004, p2). In addition, Van Gennep summarizes the structures of all these rites of passage. He divides these rituals of status transition into three phases: separation, margin (or liminal, Latin term for “threshold”), and aggregation. The first phase of separation refers to the isolation or segregation of the ritual subject, individual or corporate, from a status or position; the second phase of margin refers to transition from the previous status to a future status. During this period, “the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, 1995, p94).
The third phase of aggregation reflects the return of the ritual subject to his or her new, relatively stable, well-defined position in society. Van Gennep utilizes the term liminal to stress the dynamic factors in the rites of passage. Fiona Bowie argues that “the crossing of a threshold, real or symbolic, temporal or physical, is a key element in all rites of passage” (Bowie, 1997, p187). Hence, threshold working as a key element constitutes the most significant but also the most complex phase in the rites of passage.

Based on Van Gennep’s theory of rites of passage, Victor Turner puts forward the concept of liminality and communitas. He argues that liminality is a state of ambiguity and indetermination, and the ritual subject is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner, 1967, p95). During the liminal period, the ritual subject’s daily behaviors are either temporally forbidden or exaggerated to a certain degree. In a word, it is through such a process that liminal beings release their pressure from social morals and norms. In the meantime, class, rank and hierarchy are erased, and the ritual subject enters a state that transcends normal social relationships. He names this unstructured, relatively undifferentiated and equalitarian state “communitas” (Latin term for “community,” and Turner prefers “communitas” to “community” to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an “area of common living”). According to Turner, the state that liminality and communitas embody can be viewed as an “anti-structure.” As to the term “anti-structure,” Turner points out that “when I speak of anti-structure, therefore, I really mean something positive, a generative center” (Turner, 1975, p273). Liminality and communitas are anti-structural because on the one hand, they generate a spontaneous, undifferentiated and equalitarian status; on the other hand, structure is built up on the basis of binary opposition, while liminality and communitas require eliminating boundaries and distinctions.

Therefore, in Turner’s opinion, the model of “separation—margin—aggregation” is in essence a process of “structure—anti-structure—structure.” That is, before the phase of separation, the ritual subject is restricted by the existing social structure; in the liminal phase, the existing social structure is subverted. Under the status of
ambiguity, the hierarchy in the secular society is erased, and thus the ritual subject obtains a temporally equalitarian status (communitas); after the liminal phase, the ritual subject is incorporated into the social structure of secular life again.

For the audience, the SFG is a typical rite of passage. First, the Spring Festival per se indicates a temporal transition from the past to the future, and a psychological transition from nervous/serious to relaxed/joyful. The SFG offers a platform for meaning transition. Additionally, considering that the SFG has been successfully embedded into the Spring Festival culture for over three decades, no watching the gala on New Year’s Eve is likely to result in psychological discomfort, or rather, psychological crisis. Such a discomfort or crisis needs to be removed via a ritual. In other words, this situation is just the “structural lack” that Lu refers to. In this sense, the SFG satisfies individuals’ thirst for rituals and facilitates their psychological transition.

Second, the SFG has an obvious characteristic of anti-structure, especially in its liminal phase. The anti-structure provides ritual participants with a subverted power space where the less advantaged participants are able to share equality and make a mock of power. In the course of the SFG ritual, the audience has experienced the unprecedented pleasure of the carnival. Bakhtin claims that the carnival is a second world and a second life outside officialdom. As he states: the “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth, from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privilege, norms and prohibitions” (Bakhtin, 1984, p10). In this sense, the audience indeed obtains an undifferentiated and equal status as the social order in reality and power relations are subverted temporarily. In a nutshell, as a rite of passage, the SFG dissociates the audience from the social structure in which they live and then leads them to a liberal, equal, and even collectively effervescent liminal space.

However, it is worth noting that such a process of power subversion is temporal. After the anti-structure or luminal period, the power structure is soon restored, and the ritual participants are incorporated back into the original power structure afresh. More importantly, besides the structural return, the ritual participants’ mentality is also
reshaped. Hence, Turner considers the liminal phase as a stage of reflection. He writes: “during the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection” (Turner, 1967, p105). From this point of view, the rite of passage offers the audience the great pleasure of liberation, equality, and power subversion, and therefore, when the power structure is restored, the ritual participants are likely to submit to it willingly. In this sense, this is an unconscious social control; on the other hand, this integration mechanism also constitutes the essential connotation of the SFG’s ritualization.

In conclusion, over the long course of human history, ritual has been closely related with power all along. Therefore, ritual can be regarded as the optimum field for power to function. The SFG is a typical media ritual in the Chinese communication context. By investigating its stable mode of operation over the past thirty years (1983-2012), the power mechanism underpinning the gala can be clearly presented. To be specific, “state power,” “cultural performance,” and “social control” not only constitute three keywords to essentialize this extravaganza, but also “string” its internal logic; namely, the SFG employs “cultural performance” to express “state power discourse,, thereby realizing “social control.” Fundamentally speaking, the process of the SFG’s ritualization is simultaneously a process of the demonstration of state power. In other words, it is through the SFG’s ritualization that the power structure and social relationships in daily life are able to be represented. From this perspective, the SFG’s ritualization is a symbolic communication through which the legitimacy and authority of the state power can be reconfirmed. Such a process of reconfirmation, in turn, contributes to “evoking a renewal of loyalty to the society and its legitimate authority.”

In the meantime, the process of ritualization is also of great significance for the SFG per se. Along with the ever-deepening ritualization, the SFG constructs and consolidates its image as the center of the Spring Festival. The belief in this image is increasingly becoming “common sense” in society, affecting individuals’ understanding of the SFG itself, as Zhao remarks: “to be ‘Chinese’ in the age of direct
satellite broadcasting could mean one more thing—to share the joy of the Spring Festival Gala on the small screen” (Zhao, 1998, p44). In a witty way, Zhao’s remark actually delivers us such a revelation: in the construction of national identity, “self” and “the other” can sometimes be distinguished through simple media behaviors.

5.2 Textual strategy: mythologizing the Spring Festival Gala

In the first place, what I need to explain is that respecting the study of national identity, there exist two major theoretical paradigms in the present academic circles: primordialism and constructivism. Primordialists treat the nation primarily as an “ethno-nation;” namely, a community which unites individuals mainly through innate bonds, such as common biogenetic features, a common bloodline, and the like. For primordialists, ethnic membership is a God-given quality, and it is just this primordial affective power that propels individuals’ identification with nation-states; as opposed to primordialism, constructivism argues that national identity is a social and political construct for a certain specific purpose. Paul Brass even proposes that “[ethnicity and nationalism] are creations of elites, who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent, in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves” (Brass, 1991, p8).

As far as textual strategy is concerned, I argue that the SFG has utilized a mixed theoretical paradigm to construct national identity. This practice has, on the one hand, created a “big family” image of the Chinese nation, and on the other hand, stipulated who is the real master of this big family. Next, I will prove my viewpoint by analyzing the SFG’s operation of symbolization.

5.2.1 Highlighting consanguineous identity

Appealing to primordialism to produce a sense of oneness based on common genetic or biological features has long been an efficacious strategy of identity construction of nation-states. Unsurprisingly, primordialism as a strategy has also been extensively and repeatedly used by the SFG. The SFG mobilizes the symbolic resources of primordialism mainly on two fronts, including common physiological features and common ancestry. Let us take The Descendants of the Dragon, a song
performed in the 1985 SFG, as an example.\textsuperscript{11}

Faraway in the east flows a river,
Whose name is the Yangtze River;
Faraway in the east flows another river,
Whose name is the Yellow River.
Though I have never seen the beauty of the Yangtze River,
I dream of its water quite often.
Though I have never heard the roars of the Yellow River,
I dream of its surges quite often.

Faraway in the east flies a dragon,
Whose name is China.
Faraway in the east live a group of people,
They are all descendants of the dragon.
At the foot of the dragon, I am growing,
Growing as a descendent of the dragon.
Black eyes, black hair and yellow skin,
I am forever a descendent of the dragon.
……

Although the lyrics are terse, the ideological connotations that this song conveys are extremely complicated.\textsuperscript{12} Besides the background of its creation, the selection of

\textsuperscript{11} It needs to be pointed out that the majority of my examples are drawn from singing-dancing programs, because, as I have statistically illustrated, this category accounts for the largest proportion of the program constituents of the SFG. Moreover, Simon Frith once analyzed the value of popular music, and he proposed that music is able to “construct our sense of identity,” thus enabling us to “place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith, 2007, p309 ). From these two aspects, we can safely conclude that the singing-dancing program is the most representative form of expressing identity. Therefore, most of my discussions will be concentrated on the textual analysis of the lyrics of singing-dancing programs.

\textsuperscript{12} If we disregard the socio-historical context of this song, we could easily read this song as praise of China, or more precisely, of the Chinese nation. However, as Barthes points out, the operation of ideological myths results from “the privation of history;” thus, it is here necessary to explain the background of the creation of this song. In fact, this song was composed in the 1970s, a period when the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) was first ostracized from the United Nations, and then forced to break off diplomatic relations with the United States of America. A series of diplomatic crises subjected the ROC (Taiwan) to an unprecedented blow, the whole island sinking into a state of extreme despair. It was under such a socio-historical context that the then Taiwanese college
the signers also has strong symbolic meanings. As stated previously, solidarity is one of the basic themes of the SFG and this theme is mainly presented by ethnic minority performers and overseas Chinese singers. Compared with the mainstream Han Chinese, this special group of “Chinese” has always been in a marginal position; hence, the emphasis on them is in essence a demarcation and declaration of the boundaries of the nation-state. As far as The Descendants of the Dragon are concerned, this song is performed by Dr. Huang Jinbo, who is a second-generation Chinese American and the then mayor of the city of Cerritos in California. Here is a literal translation of Huang’s opening remarks after he was ceremoniously introduced by the gala host and before he began to sing:

I am an American citizen born in Hong Kong, but I never forget that I am Chinese. The Chinese are the descendants of the dragon!

By Huang’s affirmative statement and the elaborately-planned performance, the identifier of Chinese membership is presented clearly, that is, with consanguineous identity. In other words, what qualifies one to be Chinese is determined, partially at least, by a series of primordial genetic/genealogical indexes, such as the common phenotypic features (“black eyes, black hair, and yellow skin”) and the common national origin (“the descendants of the dragon”). As a matter of fact, the Descendants of the Dragon has laid a solid foundation for the construction of a Chinese primordial identity, because the practice of consanguineous identification has been widely referred to by a vast number of episodes performed in the same gala or in the galas of later years. These references appear in a variety of performance or non-performance items, including lyrics, dialogues of cross-talks and mini-comedies, the host’s scripts,,

student Hou Dejian composed this song to express his indignation, frustration, and self-motivation. Hence, this “China” can hardly be read as the People’s Republic of China (PRC, mainland China), and it is not as literally “pro-China” as it seems to be. Nevertheless, this song still spread to mainland China and soon came into vogue, though many mainlanders were not truly aware of the multiple implications of the lyrics. Instead, this song is popularly read as a patriotic one in mainland China, for it praises Chinese bloodline, ancestors, and the land ancestors used to live on straightforwardly. Admittedly, this song has indeed stimulated Chinese national pride and confidence, especially when Chinese people just cast off the political suppression of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). For this reason, this song was hence able to be circulated in society and come onto the stage of the 1985 SFG.
stage decorations and the like. In other words, the ethnic symbols for identification have been continuously accentuated by the SFG since its incipient phase. Up to this day, appealing to primordial ethnic symbols is still an important strategy for the project of identity construction in the SFG. Let us take *the Calligraphy of the Dragon*, a recently-composed song performed in the 2010 gala, as an illustration.

......
In front of my bed glistens the bright moonlight,\textsuperscript{13}
The history of thousands of years is just like a long dream,
We stay consistent in all ages, like the eternally immutable dragon and phoenix,
We are black-eyed, black-haired and kind-hearted.
......
Deeply loving this land,
Silk Road connects to the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes,\textsuperscript{14}
Our ancestors are the Yellow and Flame Emperors,\textsuperscript{15}
We offspring share the same blood.
......

As is shown above, this song also appeals to the common phenotypic features (“black-eyed.” “black-haired”) and the common national origin (“our ancestors are the Yellow and Flame Emperors”) as the primordial symbolic membership in the Chinese nation. Over the past three decades, such ethnic symbols have been widely disseminated in day-to-day discursive practices, by which the general idea of biologically-based commonalities as distinguishing criteria of Chinese identity has

\textsuperscript{13} This is the first sentence of a famous Tang poem which depicts the poet’s homesickness. The whole poem is: “Before my bed, there is bright moonlight/So that it seems, like frost on the ground/Lifting my head, I watch the bright moon/Lowering my head, I dream that I'm home.”

\textsuperscript{14} The Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, is a system of temples located in Dunhuang, the then religious and cultural crossroad on the Silk Road.

\textsuperscript{15} The Yellow and Flame Emperors are two legendary leaders who first united primitive tribes inhabited in the Yellow River basin and then conquered those rival tribes in south China. By incorporating those defeated tribes into their own, the basis of Han ethnicity and the succedent Chinese nation thus formed. For this reason, Chinese are also described as “the descendants of the Yellow and Flame Emperors”. It is worth mentioning that compared with the Flame Emperor, the Yellow Emperor usually enjoys a greater prestige both in official rhetoric and popular discourse.
gradually rooted in the hearts of the people and has ultimately become naturalized as “common sense” in society.

However, in my opinion, such a manufacture of common sense or consensus is in essence an ethno-symbolic myth which takes on a dominant ideological cast. As far as the identity construction of primordialism is concerned, neither genetic frames of reference (such as the common appearance features) nor genealogical frames of reference (such as the common ancestry) can adequately encapsulate the multi-ethnic reality of the Chinese population. In brief, not all Chinese have “black eyes, black hair and yellow skin,” and not all Chinese deem the dragon, the Yellow and Flame Emperors, as their own ancestors. Take the dragon as an example. Sautman once pointed out: “myths of origins among China’s ethnic minorities are not centered on the dragon, but include a variety of other animal progenitors, e.g. the wolf and the dog among Mongols; the monkey among Tibetans; the bear among Koreans” (Sautman, 1997, p78). Meanwhile, he also observes that in ancient times, the dragon was the progenitor of the royal family exclusively: “only since the 1970s have ordinary people begun to identify themselves with the dragon” (Sautman, 1997, p77). In this sense, the discursive production of “the descendants of the dragon” is in fact an “invented tradition,” which, on the one hand, serves the interior integration of the Chinese super-family, but on the other hand, serves the dissimulation of unbalanced discourse power between the Han majority and ethnic minorities.

Nonetheless, for most TV viewers, because they have been habitually misled by such a familiar ethnic symbol, they can hardly realize the naturalization of the dominant ideology and power structure. On the contrary, they affirmatively believe that nothing is more appropriate than the dragon to epitomize the national ethos of the entire Chinese nation. Thus, through such a covert operation of symbolization, not only has the image of the dragon as the common progenitor been naturally justified in people’s minds, but the Han-centric ideology which shapes this symbolic discourse has also been tacitly legitimized. At least, throughout the SFG’s thirty-year history, the practice that passionately highlighted the consanguinity as a common point of primordial identification has never failed to emotionally interpellate as many viewers
as possible to join the imagined community of the Chinese super-family.

5.2.2 Constructing cultural identity

In order to incorporate all Chinese into the whole of the Chinese nation as a super-family, the SFG spares no effort in mobilizing a variety of physiologically based ethno-symbolic resources to highlight the primordial bonds of global Chinese. However, just as I have demonstrated, the practice of appealing to primordialism has its obvious limitations. Hence, besides the emphasis of physiological commonalities of Chinese as natural beings, the SFG also has invested considerable efforts in constructing and representing the shared beliefs and values of the Chinese as cultural beings. Nonetheless, as a compensatory measure of primordial identity, the construction of cultural identity in the SFG is still not without problems. Let us take a traditional symbol of Chinese culture, the Great Wall, as an illustration. The Great Wall has long been considered as one of the most representative symbols of Chinese civilization. Hence, on the SFG’s stage, from program scripts to stage settings, the image of the Great Wall has been repeatedly displayed year after year.

However, as a household cultural symbol of Chineseness, the image of the Great Wall is in fact a modern construct as well. Sautman observes that: “throughout most of Chinese history, the Great Wall was portrayed negatively, ‘as a symbol not of national greatness but rather of dynastic evil’” (Sautman, 1997, p89). In other words, in Chinese historical narratives, the implication of the Great Wall is mostly associated with the despotic rule of feudal dynasties. Nevertheless, in modern narratives, more often than not, the image of the Great Wall is officially propagated as a national symbol which epitomizes the spirit and strength of the Chinese nation. Through such a conversion from historical meaning to symbolic meaning, the image of the Great Wall has thus been mythologized and ultimately, essentialized as an important representational symbol of Chineseness. Once mobilized, this symbol will naturally conjure up a series of sacred concepts at the service of nation-state narratives, such as

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16 For example, in the national anthem of the People’s Republic of China, the lyrics indicate: “Arise, you who refuse to be slaves! With our flesh and blood, let us build our new Great Wall!” This song was composed in the middle of the 1930s, when Japanese militarists were gradually expanding the war of aggression against China. This song aims at appealing for nationals’ unity and perseverance in the war of resistance against Japan.
“Chinese civilization,” “national solidarity,” “resisting foreign invasion” and the like. Let us take a specific Great-Wall-themed performance as an example. In the 1994 SFG, a famous songstress performed a classic song entitled *The Long Great Wall*. The lyrics indicate:

People say that both sides of the Great Wall are hometowns,
Do you know how long the Great Wall is?
Its one end uplifts the moon gleaming over the frontier pass in the midst of desert,
The other end connects to the hearts of sons and daughters of the Chinese nation.

People say that both sides of the Great Wall are full of fragrance of flowers,
Do you know how much the Great Wall withstands wind, snow and frost?
It aggregates the blood and flesh of millions of heroes and patriots,
It strives for a red sun over thousands of miles of mountains and rivers.

The shining sun, the long Great Wall,
The valiant spirit of the Great Wall carries forward through the ages,
If you ask where the Great Wall is,
Look at those green military uniforms.

The shining sun, the long Great Wall,
The valiant spirit of the Great Wall carries forward through the ages,
If you ask where the Great Wall is,
It resides in the hearts of our people.

In a montage manner, this song has adequately showcased the multi-layer symbolism of the Great Wall and thus subtly delivers a set of complex ideological discourses. To be specific, first, following the official discursive tradition, the Great Wall is portrayed as a symbol of national unification and solidarity in the very beginning of the lyrics (“both sides of the Great Wall are hometowns”). Second, either explicitly or implicitly,
the Great Wall is constructed as a trinitarian embodiment of the Chinese state, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Through such a process of semantic conflation, the Great Wall thus becomes the optimal object wholly at the service of state narrative.

As far as the narrative logic is concerned, after a short description of the traditional literary image of the Great Wall (“its one end uplifts the moon gleaming over the frontier pass in the midst of desert”\(^\text{17}\), the lyrics soon enter the narrative frame of state ideology, wherein the masses of the people (“sons and daughters of the Chinese nation”) serve as a starting point of ideological narrative. By shaping the Great Wall as the aggregation of “the blood and flesh of millions of heroes and patriots,” the lyrics metaphorically paint a picture of how the “new China” was founded. Meanwhile, the decisive role that the CCP plays in this process is also metaphorically accentuated (“red sun”\(^\text{18}\)). Further on, the lyrics unreservedly praise the PLA’s dedication in defending the motherland (“if you ask where the Great Wall is, look at those green military uniforms”), by which the Great Wall naturally becomes a sacred symbol of the PLA, simultaneously suggesting the sacred legitimacy and authoritativeness of this state apparatus. At the end of the lyrics, the Great Wall echoes the first paragraph, and is portrayed as “residing in the hearts of our people.” Thus, through such an elaborately-planned text construction, the circular structure of the state narrative is hence presented holistically; the perception of the Great Wall as a national symbol is also further reinforced among audiences. Meanwhile, the image of the CCP and the PLA as the defenders of the common interest of the Chinese people also takes firm root in audience’s mind.

In actuality, because of semantic conflation, the tripartite symbolic meanings of the Great Wall (the state, the Party, and the army) are never clear-cut; more often than not, they appeal to the audience in the manner of a converged whole. In other words,

\(^{17}\) In Chinese ancient literature works, narratives about the Great Wall are mainly centered on depicting the misery of doing corvee labor or garrisoning the border regions. “The moon gleaming over the frontier pass in the midst of desert” is a traditional literary image about the Great wall narratives.

\(^{18}\) In Chinese political paens, the CCP is often compared to “red sun” so as to emphasize its brilliant image and good relations with the masses of the people, such as The East Is Red, whose lyrics indicate: “the Communist Party is like the sun, wherever it shines, it is bright.”
the image of the Great Wall functions mainly through its ambiguity as a mythical signifier. As mythical form, the Great Wall has always been there, from ancient times to the present; on the other hand, as mythical meaning, the connotation of the Great Wall is often in change, whether a change from “dynastic evil” to “national greatness,” or a change within the tripartite connotations of the state, the Party, or the army. In a nutshell, it is just the incessant alternation among meanings that invests the Great Wall with a nebulous feeling of the sublime, thus awakening the audience’s identification with the nation-state, at least on the cultural and aesthetic plane.

In conclusion, by mobilizing a wide variety of representational symbols of traditional Chinese culture, the SFG continuously delivers to its audience such an explicit message: if biologically-based primordialism is inadequate or unacceptable, one can still be incorporated into the super-family of the Chinese nation as long as he/she identifies with these cultural symbols claimed to be of universal significance for all Chinese. However, as I have demonstrated in the example of the Great Wall, the representation of traditional cultural symbols in the SFG is basically accomplished through the mythical operation of the dominant ideology. During this process, the dominant ideology has anonymously mastered the production of symbols, the definition of symbols, and meanwhile has monopolized the power of interpretation of symbols in an indisputable way. In this sense, myth is substantially a matter of knowledge hegemony, as Barthes points out: “myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us” (Barthes, 1991, p115).

Allow me to take the dragon as an example again. In addition to being a genealogically-based ethnic symbol, dragon is also able to be viewed as a man-made cultural symbol; after all, there does not exist such a creature in the natural world. The dragon, as I have mentioned previously, is extensively propagated as the common progenitor of Chinese nation and thus repeatedly displayed in the SFG, almost on an annual basis, whereas, for the masses of ethnic minorities that do not necessarily consider the dragon as a totemic animal or ancestral symbol, the prevailing discourse of the dragon as the common progenitor of all Chinese is no other than the ideological
projection of what Sautman phrases as “racial nationalism” (Sautman, 1997, p75). In this sense, in the SFG’s construction of the national identity, ethnic minorities are not only racially othered, but culturally othered as well. Moreover, in the English culture, the image of the dragon often stands for evil. Hence, for those diasporic Chinese that were born and brought up on English cultural soil, they likely have cultural barriers in identifying with the dragon as the national totem and ancestral symbol. After all, their cultural memberships have long been transnationalized and localized.

To summarize, as much as the primordial/consanguineous construction of identification fails to give full consideration to China’s multi-ethnic reality, the cultural construction of identification also overlooks China’s multicultural essence and the complexity of the cultural memberships of diasporic Chinese. Nevertheless, despite their contradictoriness as interpellation strategies, in highlighting the distinctiveness of the Chinese nation as a conglomerate whole and delivering the authoritativeness of power discourse among social members, the consistent employment of primordialism and the continual naturalization of dominant ideology in the cultural identification have indeed projected an enduring and amazing affective power, magnetizing Chinese all over the globe to join the imagined community of the Chinese super-family.

5.3 Transformation of ideological operation of the Spring Festival Gala

For thousands of years, the Spring Festival has been the most ceremonious festivity in China. The only difference is that it is celebrated within scattered families or family clans in ancient times, while in contemporary society, this time-honored festival is celebrated collectively by thousands of millions of TV viewers. Hence, the Spring Festival is no longer a simple and pure folk custom; instead, it has gradually evolved from a traditional folkloric activity into a modern state political ritual. Especially with the intervention of state ideology, the Spring Festival has gradually become the state’s identity interpellation to its people. In his book *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*, John Thompson distinguishes five modes of operation of ideology; that is, “legitimation,” “dissimulation,” “unification,” “fragmentation,” and “reification.” Over the past thirty years, the social background of China has greatly evolved, and so have the SFG’s
modes of ideological operation.

The SFG has been continuously produced over three decades. Each of the decades reflects a specific mode. To be exact, the 1980s reflects the party-state’s ideological construction through reification; the 1990s reflects the ideological construction through legitimation; and the new millennium reflects the family-nation’s ideological construction through dissimulation.

The festival is one of the most stable components of social life. It epitomizes a nation’s spiritual and ideological contents, such as thought, world outlook, ideal and the like. The Spring Festival reflects the Chinese nation’s common ideal of praying for good fortune, harvest, auspiciousness, etc. However, with the all-sided intervention of state ideological discourse, the CCTV SFG has “gradually replaced individuals and families’ yearnings for good life with prays for the state and nation’s prosperity and peace, by which the gala has completed its interpellation of ‘an imagined China’” (Pan, 2007).

As a political concept, the nation-state is a highly abstract and complicated entity. It can hardly be immediately felt by individuals due to its broad boundaries. Michael Walzer points out: “the state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (Walzer, 1967, p194). Therefore, the collective imagination of the modern nation-state has increasingly played a leading role on the SFG’s stage. To be exact, the gala replaces the presentation of the individuals daily lives with a display of the nation-state’s achievements over the past years; the gala replaces families’ yearning for a good life with prayers for the nation-state’s prosperity and peace, and in the meantime, the gala converts individual emotional space into a public space. Thus, the Spring Festival has become a sacred time for the state’s identity interpellation to its people in the construction of national identity. As a result of this, the production of the SFG has become the most important task of the CCTV in each latter half of the year. The theme and cultural connotation that the SFG demonstrates each year are intimately associated with the state ideology and specific social context. No matter how the ages change, “solidarity” has always been one of the basic themes over the past three decades,
which reflects the gala’s lasting desire for identity interpellation for its people.

“In the 1980s, the social resource allocation presents a diffuse trend. Generally speaking, each of the social strata is able to attain an equilibrium point in the imbalance during this period. During a certain period of 1980s, the social reform had once brought about a short-term effect of equalization” (Sun, 2004, p165). According to Sun, although the social welfare level was not high in the 1980s in China, the social security system was comprehensive, by which individuals were able to lead a stable life. In other words, people did enjoy certain outcomes that the Party-state ideology had promised; hence the state was able to integrate various social groups and social strata by sharing a common ideology. In such a context, the discursive expression of “without the Communist Party, there would be no new China” was able to appear on the SFG’s stage and be transmitted throughout the generations. Throughout the whole of the 1980s, the SFG extolled the party and the state both enthusiastically and directly, regarding them as its own mother. Songs like Dear Party, My Dear Mother (1984); My Country, the Loving Mother (1985) coincided with the social psychology at that time. As a result of this, these songs were able to coexist with other critical and ironic works on the SFG’s stage in the 1980s, both of which expressed themselves from different perspectives in the era of ideological emancipation. “The gala has a strong sense of the times…It not only grasps the pulse of the times accurately, but also embodies strong social significance” (Yang and Chen, 1998, p98). Such perceptions towards the SFG were quite common in the 1980s, which reflected that the dominant ideology had indeed obtained acceptance of the masses of the people at that time.

The reification of ideology refers to the narration of a transitory or contingent historical event as though it were natural and permanent. The process is described as a naturalized thing, by which its social and historical properties are concealed. Consequently, the function of ideology reification, as Claude Lefort phrases “involves the re-establishment of the dimension of society ‘without history’ at the very heart of historical society” (Lefort, 1986, p191). Over the past century, China had deeply suffered from oppression and turbulence; therefore, “without the Communist Party, there would be no new China” had become a naturalized discourse. Similarly, in the
later social development, “only under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, will China be able to move towards prosperity” has also been constructed as an inevitable historical choice.

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the international situation experienced a gigantic upheaval. At the same time, the domestic situation was also in a state of flux. Confronted with the ever-complicated problems that emerged in the process of social reform since the 1990s, the state resorted to reinforcing its ideological guidance on radio and television, in the press and publications, literature and the arts, etc. Hence, new strategies have appeared in the SFG’s construction of political legitimacy.

Habermas holds that “legitimacy means a political order’s worthiness to be recognized. This definition highlights the fact that legitimacy is a contestable validity claim; the stability of the order of domination. (also) depends on its (at least) de facto recognition” (Habermas, 1984, p178). That is to say, any social system must be established on the basis of recognition. Legitimation means that political order should obtain sufficient reasons before it can be recognized and accepted. Further on, Max Weber distinguishes three ideal types of legitimate political authority: 1. Legal-rational authority (the legitimacy of the authority comes from laws, regulations, rules, etc.); 2. Traditional authority (the legitimacy of the authority comes from tradition or custom); 3. Charismatic authority (the legitimacy of the authority comes from the personal charisma or the strength of an individual personality).

John Thompson proposes that three typical symbolic construction strategies serve the end of ideology legitimation: rationalization; universalization; and narrativization. According to Thompson, the strategy of rationalization refers to the “chain of reasoning” which the producer of symbolic forms employs in order to “persuade” others that existing social relations are justified and worthy of support (Thompson, 1990, p61); the strategy of universalization refers to the signifying of “institutional arrangements which serve the interests of some individuals...as serving the interests of all” (Thompson, 1990, p61); the third legitimating strategy is narrativization. It is through narrativization that traditions and “stories which recount the past” are presented as if “part of a timeless and cherished tradition.” In addition, it is worth
noticing that these traditions may be “invented in order to create a sense of belonging to a community and to a history which transcends the experience of conflict, difference and division” (Thompson, 1990, p62).

The SFG employed the aforementioned three strategies in its construction of political legitimacy in the 1990s. First of all, the SFG employed the strategy of narrativization to construct its political legitimacy. In the late 1990s, singing became a fixed performance item, and meanwhile songs began to present a modeled tendency. The stably-appeared contents in such modeled songs were nearly entirely about lyricizing the new regime and the new life. Such songs included *Everlasting Friendship* (1997); *The Revolutionaries Are Still Young* (1997); *New Faces of Motherland* (1998); *The Red Star Accompanies Me to Fight* (1998); *Osmanthus Bloom out Brings Happiness* (1999), etc. These songs were mostly created at the age of the revolution and gained tremendous popularity ever since then in China. Singing these old revolutionary songs on the SFG’s stage, on the one hand, can take the audience back to the old days; on the other hand, it is also a quiet reification of the discourse of “without the Communist Party, there would be no new China.” Furthermore, this practice also serves to legitimize the regime’s inheritance by retrospecting the legitimate foundations for the establishment of the communist regime. The mini-comedies during this period also followed the same logic. For example, Zhao Benshan’s mini-comedy *Three Whips* (1996) calls for constructing the current political order through the party’s good revolutionary traditions in history; the 1998 mini-comedy *Positive Characters vs. Negative Characters* was another impressive performance. This mini-comedy was performed by well-known actors that had built classic movie roles since new China was founded. These old artists reenacted their hero or villain roles on the SFG’s stage. In fact, this is a very typical political strategy: creating a periodical reenactment mechanism. It is through repeating the “traumatic scene” periodically that the strength of unity is able to be summoned.

In the late 1990s, the handover of Hong Kong and Macau exerted a profound historical impact on the Chinese nation. Hence it soon became important material for the SFG in those years. Besides the news frame of “the wanderers returning home,”
nationalism also became a primary narrative approach. For example, the 1998 mini-comedy *His Royal Highness and Postman* told a story like this: a royal member and his postman get a chance to participate in an international competition on behalf of China. For fear of being punished by foreigners, the Empress Dowager asks them to give up winning a prize in virtue of the negative acts in the competition. However, his royal highness and postman decide to go against the Empress Dowager’s will and do their utmost to compete with foreign athletes. At last, they defeat all foreign competitors, winning the first prize for China.

Although the story is simple, the underlying texts contain rich implications: the individual’s cowardliness derives from the weakness of China’s comprehensive national strength in the late Qing Dynasty; the SFG is willing to demonstrate China’s sports achievements, which implies the improvement of China’s comprehensive national strength. Thus, the underlying texts of this mini-comedy have built up two causal links: 1) fall behind, national humiliation, weak sport; 2) national independence, reform and open up to the outside world, strong national strength, national revival, and strong sport. The turning point of these two causal links lies in the establishment of the CCP’s leadership. It is through such a discursive construction that the CCP’s leadership has become an inevitable historical choice for the whole of the Chinese people. Lee Chin Chuan has analyzed the discursive construction of Chinese nationalism since the 1990s, and he holds that the Chinese media employ the discourse frame of nationalism in order to fulfill various needs. This discourse frame contains not only huge commercial attraction but also party-sanctioned themes. Therefore, in such a complicated discursive construction, the Chinese media are given full scope to practice nationalism (Lee, 2004, p95).

The SFG in the 1990s has also employed a rationalization strategy to construct political legitimacy. For instance, in the documentary program *Family Portrait* (1994), the hostess vividly introduced life changes in a common peasant family since the new China was founded. At the end of the program, the hostess concluded the following: “friends, these four pictures have been collected by the Museum of Chinese History. They are valuable historical testimonies of our young Republic moving from poverty
towards prosperity.” This program reflects the state’s historical vicissitude under an individual perspective, which links not only the state and the individual, but the past and the present as well. By demonstrating social progress since the foundation of new China repeatedly, the realistic significance of adhering to the CCP’s leadership is able to be perceived by the audience. Under this discursive construction system, “only under the leadership of the CCP, will China be able to move towards prosperity” is succeeded by “without the Communist Party, there would be no new China” and becomes a naturalized and legitimized logic, which provides sound evidence for public support.

The rationalization strategy can also be found in mini-comedies. Zhao Benshan’s mini-comedy *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1998) demonstrates the vast life difference of Chinese peasant class between the past and nowadays. In Zhao’s mini-comedy, the material prosperity serves to prove the rationality of the current political order. In the meantime, the international current affairs mentioned in the mini-comedy serve to prove the superiority of the socialist regime.

The third strategy that the SFG employed in the construction of political legitimacy is universalization. Since the 1990s, the practice of extolling the state has directly faded away and the idea of “Homeland” has been gradually superseded by “China.” The state is no longer personified as “a loving mother” in order to highlight the equal relationship between individuals and the state. Moreover, a vast number of pop songs reflecting people’s happy life came out during this period, such as *Joy Enters Ten Thousand Families* (1992); *Good Omen for A Good Year* (1993); *Today Feels So Happy* (1995); *Good Day* (1998), etc. These songs blend state ideological discourse with folkloric discourse, universalizing the benefit group of social reform as the whole society. Alarmingly, although these songs promise people a bright future, which caters to the psychology of praying for a good life during the Spring Festival, the hardship in real life, especially regarding certain sensitive issues such as polarization of wealth and social injustice, are purposely understated on the SFG’s stage. Consequently, an unordered life scene is endowed with a meaningful and optimistic form by the SFG, and meanwhile, joy has been universalized as a common
festival mood of audiences nationwide, regardless of their differences in identities, professions, and social positions in reality.

On top of that, unlike the direct expression of “the loving mother” in the 1980s, the party and state were extolled in a more implicit way during this period. Songs such as A Spring Story (1997) and Step into A New Era (1998) exemplify this strategic transformation. Taking A Spring Story as an illustration, in early 1997, Deng Xiaoping, the former Chinese leader and chief designer of China’s modernization project, passed away. Under the leadership of Deng, China begun to open up to the outside world in 1978 and established a market economy system in 1992. Relying on these policies, China has experienced high economic growth in subsequent decades. Therefore, in memory of Deng’s contributions, the 1997 SFG especially staged a song for him—A Spring Story. The lyrics follow:

In the spring of 1979,
An old man drew a circle by South China Sea,
Fabulously rising up cities,
Miraculously piling up gold mountains.
Spring thunder woke up both sides of the Great Wall,
Spring sunshine warmed both banks of the Yangtze River.
……
In another spring of 1992,
An old man wrote a poem by the South China Sea,
Spring tides rolled between the heaven and earth,
Sail was hoisted on the voyage,
Spring breeze greened the oriental land,
Spring raindrops nourished the ancient China.
Ah, China, China,
You have unfolded a new picture scroll of this century,
You have unfolded a new picture scroll of this century,
Giving us a colorful spring.
Since its debut, this song has greatly changed the composing pattern of serious political paeans in China. This song praised Deng and the CCP’s policies implicitly by embedding tremendous metaphors and colloquial words into the lyrics. To be specific, in the lyrics, “spring” is generally interpreted as the beginning of the reform and opening up policy; “spring thunder” and “spring sunshine” metaphorize the encouraging ideological emancipation after the ten-year social havoc of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); “a circle” refers to Deng’s decision to establish special economic zones in southeast China and “a poem” refers to Deng’s speeches in favor of a market economy system. Interestingly, this song praises Deng, while Deng’s name has not appeared anywhere in the lyrics. Instead, Deng’s name is substituted by the colloquial wording of “an old man.” This can be seen as a significant sign which marks the transformation of discourse strategy in contemporary China, because Chinese state leaders were once extolled as “the great savior” or “the red sun” in the political paeans during the Maoist era. The shift in wording implies that Deng is nowadays being extolled as a (remarkable) human being instead of being extolled as a god.

In the new millennium, the strategy that the SFG employs in the construction of ideology is dissimulation. With the establishment of a market economy system in China, China is now undergoing the stage of social transformation. Social conflicts have become more intensified due to the differentiation of interest groups. How to balance these different interest demands and resolve social conflicts has thus become the major challenge of ideological construction.

Although there exist gigantic gaps among different interest groups in China, the SFG aims to target all of the audience. In order to integrate the different interest groups into the common imagination of the nation-state, the ideological strategy of dissimulation becomes the SFG’s best choice in the twenty-first century. Dissimulation refers to re-describing an action, an institution or a relation in order to receive a positive recognition. For China, the longstanding tradition of integrating state and family, politics and ethics into the same social structure is an effective
method to coordinate with different interest groups. In this way, within the context of family ethics, many social contradictions and conflicts can be resolved in a benign way. Although modern society has shocked traditional family structures in China, the blood-tie-based social system remains intact. Why has Spring Festival became the most ceremonious festivity in the Chinese calendar is precisely because it is able to reinforce blood ties and identity to the full extent. Thus, the SFG takes advantage of blood ties as a starting point in its ideological construction, and then expands it into national sentiment and even patriotic zeal. Under this ideological construction, “family” is gradually replaced by “state,” or rather, family and state are too closely integrated to be separated. As a result, identification with family becomes identification with the state (and the state ideology) synchronously, by which “the classical Confucian notion of the state as an enlarged family is brought into full play” (Zhao, 1998, p43).

Family love has been one of the main contents in the SFG’s programs in the twenty-first century. Thus on the SFG stage, the relationship among different social strata is mainly coordinated through family love as well. For example, in the song Dear China I Love You (2001), the following lyrics appear:

I choose you as soon as I come to the world,
There are billions of people, who are the same with me,
Leaders or civilians,
They are all your children.
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The lyrics’ dissimulation has shaped a group of homogeneous viewers by according them with a common collective identity—“children of China.” Such songs have increased dramatically in recent years, for example with China’s Great Reunion (2000); My Home Is in China (2002); Family Portrait (2002); Beautiful China, Amiable China (2003); Sisters and Brothers (2004); Chinese New Year Reunion (2005); We Are Family (2008) Harmonious Homeland (2008); Moving towards the
With the sustained economic growth and the smooth handover of Hong Kong and Macau, the political discourse of “national revival” and “the advent of China’s flourishing age” has to prevail in the mainstream media in China. As the national celebration ritual, the SFG spares no effort in depicting the theme of a rising China through its splendid performances. Undoubtedly, the Chinese Communist Party is the founder of the rising China. Hence, in order to highlight this gist continuously, the gala programs numerous grand-scale singing and dancing shows each year. In these singing and dance shows, video episodes of the party and state leaders are elaborately inserted. This practice can be found in singing and dancing programs such as Be with the People (2004); Peaceful China (2005); Bring Joy to Families (2006); Return (2007); China on Stage (2008), etc.

In an article that praises the 2003 SFG, the integration of family and state in the gala is articulated clearly. This article wrote: “in this gala, friendship and family love have been successfully sublimated to national sentiment and patriotic zeal, making ‘small feelings’ and ‘big feelings’ stay in perfect harmony…the gala has naturally presented the spirit of the 16th CCP congress and the theme of the times” (Zhong, 2003). Moreover, Zhao has also pointed out the following: “the Spring Festival Eve can thus be seen as a unique situation in which families are wired via television to the central state. The ancient Confucian ideal of the state governed like one huge family suddenly appears more real than ever” (Zhao, 1998, p54).

Family love not only contributes to the integration of family and state, but also serves to provide spiritual support for the maintenance of the current political order. This technique works especially with the disadvantaged groups in society. For instance, the peasant-worker or migrant worker is an important emerging group in the process of social transformation in contemporary China. However, they are now in a strange position. As Zhao has pointed out, “they are experiencing multiple contradictions and embarrassments in the course of urbanization. On the one hand, they are role switchers from peasants to industrial workers; on the other hand, they are mediators between urban dwellers and rural residents. Meanwhile, they are also a
marginalized group who can neither be accepted by urban dwellers nor be recognized by traditional peasants” (Zhao, 2008, p119). The existence of this social group epitomizes the unbalanced development of urban and rural areas at present in China.

Peasant-workers guest in cities, and they make a living by working part time. Their social securities, social welfares and socioeconomic statuses are all inferior to those of the urban residents. Thus, in order to placate peasant-workers’ strong sense of loss in the city, appealing to family love has become a trump card for the SFG’s ideological construction. *The Song of the Peasant Worker* (2008) exemplifies this, as the lyrics indicate:

Mud on the body, sweat on the face,
For one dream, I am going to town to carve out a niche,
Yesterday I was a peasant, today I am a worker,
As the new master of the city, I feel high-spirited and vigorous,
Sisters and brothers, chin up and chest out,
We fear no hardship,
Trust your strength, trust in future,
Our life is wonderful.

You have longings, I have longings, too,
Have been away from home for one year, everyone feels homesick,
For our parents, for our children,
And for more high-rise buildings,
Sisters and Brothers, sing loudly,
Polish up the rainbow with our sweat,
Trust your strength, trust in future,
Our life is wonderful.

Sisters and Brothers, sing loudly,
Polish up the rainbow with our sweat,
Trust your strength, trust in future,
Our life is wonderful,
Our life is wonderful.

As mentioned previously, the peasant-workers’ social status is inferior to that of urban residents, and they are in a marginalized position in mainstream society. However, in this song, they are re-described as “the new master of the city,” by which their social status is (illusorily) equated with that of urban residents. Thus their huge socioeconomic discrepancies in reality are concealed (at least) on a literal level. As to the theme of family love, it is also reflected in this song. Specifically, in order to call on peasant-workers to work harder, “homesick,” “for our parents,” and “for our children” are clearly written into the lyrics. To sum up, family love has enacted the source of motivation and as spiritual ballast in this song. Moreover, since the late 1990s, a myriad of songs with exhortation content has appeared on the SFG’s stage. Such songs usually tell people that attitude adjustment is the key to a happy life, and such songs include You Are Happy, I Am Glad (2000); A Beautiful World (2002); Believe in Love (2006); Good People Around Us (2012), etc. The Song of Peasant Workers also contains such exhortation contents. Although the socioeconomic discrepancies between urban and rural areas are being increasingly intensified, the existing pattern of unbalanced development has not been self-examined in depth by the state policy; instead, the dominant state ideology has hastily attempted to shift focus of public concerns by indoctrinating disadvantaged groups with a belief to “trust your strength, trust in the future—our life is wonderful.”

Through dissimulation, the SFG in the twenty-first century has for audiences re-described a harmonious social relationship as well as a rational political order. The high integration of the family and the state, and the prevailing discourse of “China is in full flourish,” can be viewed as the positive results that the dissimulation of ideology has brought about. Through such ideological strategies, the political legitimacy of the ruling party is emphasized and maintained in an imperceptible way. In a nutshell, as a media text of mass culture, the SFG has mirrored the social
transformation over the past thirty years in China. By investigating its transformational trajectory in its modes of ideological operation, the SFG’s essence—that it is an integration of traditional folk custom and state ideological discourse—can be better grasped.
6. Conclusion

With the ever-increasing intervention of the mass media into daily life, individuals’ ideas, values, behavioral norms, and aesthetic tastes have all been deeply influenced. Hence, conducting further media studies, especially regarding the ritualistic role that the media assume, is of great practical significance. The SFG is a special media product with obvious Chinese characteristics. From its first broadcast in 1983 to the present, the SFG has adequately played a secular ritual role. By elaborately designing and structuring texts, the gala has concentratedly displayed a series of quintessential resources for identification, such as festival, cultural, national, and the like. These symbolic resources stem from the deep cultural psychologies of the Chinese nation. They constitute a cultural and social basis for the construction of national identity.

Under the institutional framework of contemporary Chinese media, the SFG demonstrates these symbols in a mainstream, ideological way, thus creating a myth of a united and happy Chinese super-family. As a consequence, in the SFG ritual, individuals subconsciously associate this discursive construction with the society in which they live, by which the authoritativeness of the mainstream ideological discourse is hence established and maintained. The guidance of mainstream state ideology in the SFG ensures the legitimacy of power discourse. In this sense, the operation of the power logic of the SFG can be generalized—that the SFG utilizes spectacular cultural performances to express its power discourse, thereby realizing social control and integration.

The SFG is a variety entertainment show rooted in the Spring Festival, but it does not function as a pure TV program for amusement. It contains tremendous state ideological connotations at the same time; hence, the SFG has gradually been transformed from a traditional folk custom into a sacred political ritual of contemporary China. In terms of the construction of political identity, the SFG first inherited some of the traditional Confucian political ideals, such as “governing the
country like an enlarged family,” “great unity,” etc. In order to mobilize these ancient political ideas in contemporary practices, the long-standing state-centrism thus becomes the overriding ideology in the gala. Under such ideological guidance, the gala has mobilized a series of strategies to emphasize the theme of solidarity, such as highlighting the construction of an imagined community of the Chinese nation, presenting a variety of nation-state symbols and the like. Although these methods have contributed to the reinforcement of national identity at the formal level, their flaws are evident as well. Fundamentally speaking, these strategies are essentially ideological myths constructed by an unbalanced power discourse—only the state is the true leading role in the SFG. Artistic, cultural, and folk discourses should all succumb to state power and wholly serve the ideology of state-centrism.

Under such a narrative background, the SFG has successfully constructed myths about unity and strength of the Chinese state. The construction of these myths, on the one hand, provides individuals with a “blissful clarity,” and on the other hand, represents and sustains the prevailing structure of power discourse. Barthes argues that the outcome of mythical naturalization is “blissful clarity,” as he states in the following: “in passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (Barthes, 1991, p143). In this sense, through a series of narrative strategies and ideological operations, what the SFG has represented to audiences is just such a blissful clarity, an illusionary picture rather than a binary-oppositional reality (such as official vs. civil, Han Chinese vs. ethnic minorities, the poor vs. the rich, etc.). The SFG is, so to speak, in itself a cultural carnival and festival utopia within the scope of state ideological discourse.

Last, I want to say something about the reactions against national identity in media rituals. National identity is never invariable; instead, as stated in the introduction, it is a socially constructed product. This means that the actualization of
national identity is in effect a dynamic process. Hall points out that “identity is not transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1993; quoted in Garner 2010, p629). Hence, as opposed to the holistic national identity, there also exist certain sub-identities in society, such as group identity, self-identity, etc. Meanwhile, with regard to the coerciveness of national identity, individuals use various strategies and means to react. Fiske has discussed the control of popular culture on individuals and their resistance against this kind of control. He writes: “the youths consumed images and space instead of commodities, a kind of sensuous consumption that did not create profits. The positive pleasure of parading up and down, of offending ‘real’ consumers and the agents of law and order, of asserting their difference within, and different use of, the cathedral of consumerism became an oppositional cultural practice” (Fiske, 1989, p17). Just like the repression of dominant state ideology (such state-centrism) against individuals, individuals use various strategies to react and dissolve this repression. For example, nowadays, more and more provincial channels have begun to launch their own vernacular-speaking Spring Festival galas. Language is a symbol for national identity, whereas, in this case, it is also a resource for reacting identity.

From the perspective of text reading, individuals’ reading of the SFG is also diversified, including dominant, negotiated, and oppositional modes. Television is a sort of communicative medium, and this sort of communication is not only between the members of the audience, but also between these members and the SFG organizers. Individuals’ oppositional reading of the SFG has exactly reflected their reaction against the macro, collective identity. However, it is worth noting that there is an implicit precondition here—even if people adopt an oppositional reading and criticism strategy to resist social identity or national identity, they have to participate in this collective ritual in the first place. As a consequence, an interesting phenomenon has emerged; as ritual participants, audiences criticize the gala every year while they
watch the gala self-consciously. Because of watching the SFG, the audiences’ sense of identity and belongingness is hence able to be reinforced, and in the meantime, because of their criticism of the gala, or in other words, because of resisting the collective identity under the context of “great unity,” their self-identities are instead maintained.
References


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Spring Festival Gala Themes 1983-2012

1983  Reunion, Joy, Hope
1984  Patriotism, Unity, Solidarity
1985  Solidarity, Progress, Vivacity, Cheer
1986  Solidarity, Progress, Cheer, Colorfulness
1987  Solidarity, Progress, Jubilation, Prosperity
1988  Joy, Solidarity, Progress
1989  Solidarity, Joy, Progress
1990  Solidarity, Joy, Auspiciousness
1991  Solidarity, Joy, Colorfulness
1992  Solidarity, Joy, Auspiciousness
1993  Joy, Auspiciousness, Pride, Progress
1994  Solidarity, Self-Esteem, Progress, Anticipation
1995  Auspiciousness, Joy, Tenderness, Warm
1996  Joy, Auspiciousness, Cohesion, Inspiration, Glory
1997  Solidarity, Progress, Proud Chinese
1998  1998 Great Reunion
1999  Great Unity, Great China
2000  Millennium Gathering, Sharing Happiness with People
2001  Flourishing China, Harmonious Society
2002  Jubilation, Auspiciousness and Progress, The Landscape Is Beautiful Here
2003  New Folk Custom, Happiness, Innovation
2004  Blessing, Peace, Happiness
2005  Golden Rooster Crows at Dawn, China’s Flourishing Gathering
2006  Love and Harmony, Harmonious World
2007  Happy Harmonious Chinese New Year
2008  Flourishing China, Harmonious Society
2009  Chinese Great Gathering
2010  Jumping Tiger and Flying Dragon Herald Spring
2011  Harmonious Family
2012  Go Home to Celebrate Spring Festival