



Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Promotional Film *Countdown: Beginning of Spring* for the Opening Ceremony of Beijing Winter Olympics

Yuehua Lu

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, China

E-mail: 929823820@qq.com

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Abstract

The promotional film “Countdown: Beginning of Spring” presented at the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics is a typical example of disseminating Chinese culture and shaping the image of China on the international platform. This paper takes the promotional film as the research object and explores the meaning of 24 solar terms in the film from the perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Apart from the elements of the Winter Olympics, the short film also vividly reflects the characteristics of the solar terms, the connotation of traditional Chinese culture and the national image of harmony between man and nature through visual, audio and text resources.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of global technology, the way of cultural dissemination has broken through the limitations of single language communication of information. It can form dynamic discourse through the combination of multiple modalities such as language, images, sounds, and colors to achieve comprehensive dissemination of cultural significance.

Being a global sports competition, the Olympic Games also acts as a medium that carries multiple values of dissemination. It has

become a consensus among previous host countries to showcase the national image and promote mainstream values through the Olympic Games, shaping the image externally and fostering emotions internally. The opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics amazed the whole world, in which the promotional film “*Countdown: Beginning of Spring*”, by selecting “24” as the timing number and taking the 24 solar terms as the narrative thread, showcased the beauty of Chinese traditional culture and modern science and technology. In a short span of 3 minutes and 29

seconds, the film demonstrated to the world the excellent culture with Chinese characteristics and created a “credible, lovely, and respectable” Chinese image, which caused an upsurge of watching and discussing on the Internet.

The present paper, by referring to the theory of Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Visual Grammar, is intended to conduct a discourse analysis of the film “*Countdown: Beginning of Spring*”, trying to explore how the visual and auditory resources reflect the meanings of the 24 solar terms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Definition of Multimodality

Before identifying multimodality, it is necessary to make clear what modality is. According to Systemic-Functional Grammar, modality refers to the semantic system of the speaker’s judgment of probability and attitude towards the necessity of things and events (Halliday, 1985). Van Leeuwen (2005) defines modality as a research skill of social semiology aiming at the question of truth and is an analytic tool of symbol equal to discourse, genre and style. We prefer the definition offered by Professor Zhu Yongsheng (2007) in China that modality is the channel and medium of communication, including semiotic systems like language, technology, image, color, etc.

As for what is multimodality, a host of researchers have made their contributions. Van Leeuwen (2005) states that multimodality is the combination of different semiotic modes, for example, language and music, in a communicative artifact or event. Baldry and Thibault (2006) holds that multimodality refers to the diverse ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resource systems are both co-deployed and co-contextualized in the making of a text-specific meaning. Regardless of the focus of each definition, it is widely acknowledged that multimodality can either be one sense with

multiple semiotics or multiple senses with multiple semiotics. Therefore, the multimodal discourse can refer to the discourse in which communication is achieved by various senses such as visual sense, tactile sense and auditory sense through language, image, sounds, actions and other semiotic resources.

2.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Its Development

Discourse analysis has experienced a series of development since the American structuralist Zellig Harris put forward the concept “Discourse Analysis” in 1952. At the initial stage, discourse analysis is confined to traditional sociolinguistics, represented by such scholars as Hymes (1972), Tannen (1984), Schiffrin (1994) and the like, who focused on the study of language use above the sentence, mostly on talk or interaction. Later on, Halliday and Hasan (1976) began to concentrate on the grammatical structure of language, which resulted in the two orientations in discourse analysis: one centering on conversation and the other on cohesion in writing. With the progressing of science and technology, discourse has surpassed language as a social semiotic and become a social practice by using two or more kinds of semiotic resources to realize meaning construction. Therefore, multimodal discourse analysis came into being.

The earliest paper about multimodal discourse analysis, *Rhetoric of Image*, came out in 1977, written by Roland Barthes, which mainly studied the interaction between different modes. The 1990s witnessed the rapid development of this research. The significant breakthrough was made by O’Toole (1994), who, in his book *The Language of Displayed Art*, classified the functions of images as representational, modal and compositional, extending systemic-functional concepts to visual fields. Later, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen(1996) put forward the idea that Systemic Functional Grammar can be applied to both verbal language and images in their book

Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design. In 1999, Leeuwen extended Systemic Functional Grammar to auditory modality, studying sound, music and speech as a whole. Since then, different kinds of multimodal discourses have been studied and multimodal discourse analysis has entered a new stage.

O'Halloran and her team published a collection called *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic Functional Perspective* in 2004, in which her paper *Visual Semiotics in Film* presented an important attempt to apply visual grammar to analyzing dynamic films. Baldry and Thibault published the work *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis* in 2006, in which the transcription and analysis methods of various multimodal discourses (comics, books, web pages, films, etc.) are introduced in great detail. With regard to interactive sociology, Norris (2004) developed a framework for analyzing human interaction, which acted as a practical guide to understand and investigate the multiple modes of communication. Jewitt (2009) elucidated that, other than speech, images, sounds, music and gestures are also efficient ways for people to communicate with each other. Forceville, a distinguished scholar in the field of metaphor, put forward pictorial metaphor and developed it into multimodal metaphor in 2009, as he believed that metaphor is a kind of thinking model. He conducted the research on the metaphorical meaning in the multimodal discourse.

2.3 The Application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

With the increasing maturity of the theory of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (abbreviated as MDA), more and more practical applications of MDA are being carried out by scholars. First, the application in static multimodal discourses, including poetry, advertisements, movie posters, magazine covers, websites and so on. Second, application in dynamic multimodal discourses, such as Power Points, television programs, films,

videos, etc. Third, the application in foreign language teaching. In static discourses, the main tactic employed to appeal the consumer is to create a delicate balance between immersion and distance through multimodal construction. In dynamic discourses, the deployment of various modes contributes to constructing the city image. Among them, promotional films are a typical example.

Promotional films used to be subject to politics propaganda. With time going on, promotional films are becoming multi-functional, as they are manifested in different forms, like tourism promos, scientific promos, educational promos and so on. Meanwhile, many studies on promotional films have been conducted from various perspectives, like the mode of transmission and the construction of meanings. However, studies on promotional films from the perspective of multimodality discourse analysis are rarely seen, which has provided room for our study.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systemic Functional Linguistics, proposed by J. R. Firth and developed by M.A.K Halliday in 1960s, regarded language as a system of social semiotics or meaning potential and also studied the functions of language. Chinese scholar Zhang Delu regards Systemic Functional Linguistics as the most suitable theoretical model to study multimodal discourse analysis. Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and also by referring to Lim's Integrative Multisemiotic Model, Prof. Zhang set up a framework for analyzing multimodal discourse in 2009, which consists of four distinctive levels, namely, culture level, context level, content level and expression level. Later, to meet the need of analyzing dynamic discourse, he established a similar synthetic framework, which expands the application of multimodal discourse analysis (Zhang, 2013). In this framework, context of

culture restricts context of situation. When he or she takes the context of situation into consideration, the speaker chooses the meanings that are realized by the visual modes and the auditory modes. Zhang(2023) also classifies the relationships between different modes into complementary one and non-complementary one, the former of which includes Reinforcement and Non-reinforcement and the latter of which includes Inclusion, Overlapping and Context Interaction. According to Zhang, it is necessary to conduct researches on the relationships between different modes in dynamic multimodal discourse.

Halliday’s concept of “grammar” is extended by some scholars to describe the Visual Grammar. Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996) consider that “visual grammar describes the way in which depicted people, places and things combine in visual statement of greater or lesser complexity and extension”. The meanings of images in Visual Grammar are composed of the representational meaning, the interactive meaning and the compositional meaning. The representational meaning pays attention to the composition of the internal relationships between the depicted participants, actions, things, and the setting of the surroundings,

which can be divided into two processes, namely, narrative and conceptual. The interactive meaning suggests that semiotic system, including images, has the ability to project the relationships between the producer and the receiver. Two kinds of participants are involved in this interactive process: represented participants and interactive participants, the former referring to the things and the people that are depicted in images while the latter referring to the participants who produce the represented participants, or view them. There are four aspects that create or keep the social relationships between the viewers and the images, which are contact, social distance, perspective, and modality respectively. The compositional meaning is concerned about the way in which the elements are integrated together to construct a meaningful whole. Three elements, information value, salience and framing, should be taken into consideration in the process of realizing the compositional meaning. The framework of Visual Grammar proposed by Kress & Van Leeuwen can be shown in the following figure (Fig. 1).

The above mentioned theories have laid the theoretical foundation for the present study.

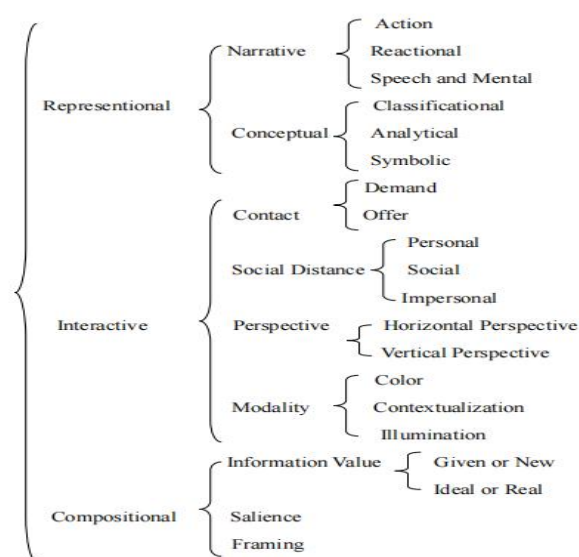


Fig.1 the framework of Visual Grammar by Kress & Van Leeuwen

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Research Object

On February 4, 2022, the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics kicked off at the National Stadium in Beijing. The day of the opening of the Winter Olympics coincides with the first solar term “Beginning of Spring” in China’s “24 Solar Terms”, which represents the time cycle of one year, and also the way people get along with nature and the world. In thousands of years of cultural accumulation, many folk activities related to beliefs, etiquette, taboos and rituals have been formed around the 24 solar terms, which have deeply influenced the Chinese people from the institutional and spiritual levels, and also gave birth to the unique scientific concept and value orientation of “life science” on this land (Yao, 2022).

At the beginning of the opening ceremony, a promotional film “*Countdown: Beginning of Spring*” was presented to the audience, which amazed the whole world by selecting “24” as the timing number and taking the 24 solar terms as the narrative thread. The film only lasts 3 minutes and 29 seconds, but it demonstrates to the world the perfect combination of the excellent traditional Chinese culture and the modern technology.

The present paper, by referring to Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar Framework and Zhang Delu’s Multimodal Discourse Analysis theory, takes this promotional film as the research object, trying to analyze the various modes and related meanings of the film. To conduct this research, we hope to find out the significance of different modes in promoting culture and shaping the national image.

4.2 Research Questions

The present study aims to address the following two questions:

(1) How are meanings of the 24 solar terms conveyed through visual, audio and text

resources in the short film?

(2) Through the multimodal discourse analysis, how are the visual, audio and text resources employed to establish the combined theme of Chinese culture and the Winter Olympics and to build the national image?

4.3 Research Methods

The study mainly adopts the qualitative method to investigate the promotional film presented at the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. The research can be generally categorized into three phases: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing.

4.4 Data Reduction

The film selects the 24 solar terms in Chinese traditional culture as the narrative thread. At the beginning of the short film, it briefly explains why the film uses 24 solar terms as a countdown. That’s because the date of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, February 4, 2022, coincides with the first solar term “Beginning of Spring”. It is used to count down the last seconds before the ceremony, reflecting the Chinese people’s understanding of time. The short film not only provides the English translation of the solar terms in the form of subtitles, but there are also Chinese poems related to solar terms as supplements and embellishments. Text resources can be extracted from it.

The short film starts with the solar term “Rain Water” and ends with “Beginning of Spring”. The short film presents a panoramic view of traditional Chinese culture and the great achievements in Chinese modern society: Chinese architecture represented by the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven; the high-quality development represented by China’s high-speed railway and steel manufacturing industry; the folk activities like dragon dance, drama, and lantern; the elements of the spring festival such as dumplings and reunion dinner. It also contains

various elements related to the sports of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

4.5 Data Display

The film was transcribed and studied. Among the 99 story boards used in the film, the average length of the solar terms from “Rain Water” to “White Dew” is 11 seconds, 6 story boards for each on average. In the last 10 seconds, from “Autumn Equinox” to “Beginning of Spring”, one number corresponds to one story board. This paper is intended to analyze the group portraits, natural and cultural environment, the frames related to 24 solar terms, and “water drop” that has appeared many times. Based on the theory of MDA, an analysis framework is constructed to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of the film, taking the frame as the unit and using qualitative research as the main analysis method. Firstly, the visual modal analysis of the video is carried out mainly from the perspectives of group images, and natural and humanistic environment, combined with the Olympic elements and Chinese elements. The emotional expression of the characters, the creation of the environment atmosphere, and the information transmission driven by the 24 solar terms are also analyzed. Then, from the perspectives of volume, tone and rhythm, the corresponding auditory and visual modes work jointly to construct the overall meaning of the dynamic discourse.

V. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1 Visual Modality in the Film

In this paper, the visual modality focuses on the image, that is, the frame in the film. The following is the analysis of the selected typical frames from the perspectives of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning.

5.1.1 Representational Meaning

The representational meaning indicates that

visual images are able to represent objects and their relations. Two processes are considered to carry the representational meaning, namely, narrative process and conceptual process, depending on whether there exists a vector.

(1) Narrative Process

Narrative process is characterized by the presence of a vector, which is in the form of a diagonal line formed by depicted elements. There are three types of narrative process: action process, reactional process, and speech and mental process. In this short film, narrative process is mainly embodied in the form of action process, in which bodies, limbs or tools in action can be vectors. The participant from whom or which the vector sends out is considered as the “actor” and in some cases the “actor” itself can be a vector. “Actors” may be the most conspicuous because of size, color, layout and so on. The “goal” is whom or which the vector directs at. The following are the examples of action process taken from the promotional film.



Frame 1



Frame 2

As you can see, Frame 1 and Frame 2 depict the solar term Grain in Ear, which shows the relationship between people and elements of

traditional Chinese festivals. In Frame 1, the muscular man is shouting the horn, while the other three men next to him are doing some actions. The element of the dragon boat explains that this frame is closely related to the Dragon Boat Festival. Frame 2 shows a large family preparing festive food at the table. The characters include males and females, young and old, and their activities reflect the happy life of Chinese people as well as the diverse culture and vitality of China. Their eye lines form vectors, and the smiles on their faces reveal their joy and satisfaction from the bottom of their hearts.

(2) Conceptual Process

Different from the narrative process, the conceptual process does not involve actions or

events, but represents participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning. There are primarily two processes involved, namely, analytical and symbolic. Analytical process relates “participants in terms of a part-whole structure” while symbolic process is about “what a participant means or is” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) .

In the promotional film, some frames related to solar terms can be regarded as analytical processes representing the part-whole relationship. Frame 3 is the End of Heat, Frame 4 is the Winter Solstice and Frame 5 is the Beginning of Spring, each reflecting the natural climate and natural landscape of its corresponding solar term.



Frame 3



Frame 4



Frame 5

There are also some frames related to the Winter Olympics, which can also be regarded as analytical processes, as exemplified in Frame 6 and Frame 7. Frame 6 shows a group of people painting the number “2022” with their ice hockey sticks over the National Ski Jumping Center. Frame 7 presents a group of people trying to climb to the top of the mountain, with a huge snowflake symbol and a bunch of vertical skis in front of it. These frames convey to the audience when and where the Games will be held and that athletes are ready to compete for the Olympic summit.



Frame 6



Frame 7

In the film, the audience can notice that the image of water droplets has appeared several times, as demonstrated in Frames 8-11. These frames can be analyzed as the symbolic processes. Frame 8 highlights the sweat of a hockey team over the course of a game. Frame 9 gives a close-up shot of the dewdrop on a lotus leaf. Frame 10 shows a dancer’s tears of joy and Fame 11 shows a boy sweating profusely but gritting his teeth and persistently running forward. Water droplets symbolize unity, harvest, joy and persistence. It is also a symbol of the Olympic Games, where people can see the spirit

of team unity, appreciate the athletes' efforts and perseverance, and enjoy the entire competition

process.



Frame 8



Frame 9



Frame 10



Frame 11

5.1.2 Interactive Meaning

The social relationships between participants can be realized in the interactive meaning, which is reflected in four dimensions: contact, social distance, perspective and modality.

(1) Contact

Contact is about the imaginary relationship that is set up by eye line between participants and viewers. The demand act and the offer act are included in contact. Most of the participants in the short film do not make direct eye contact with the audience, but their facial expressions and behaviors show that they are concentrating on their work. As you can see in Frame 12, a man is painting on a curling ball. The patterns on the curling ball are quite similar to those on blue and white porcelain, which implies that the man is doing some innovative work to integrate Chinese cultural elements into sports. In Frame 13, a little girl seems to be talking with someone who is not on the screen. She is wearing a ski suit and comparing her height with her ski. It conveys a message that lots of children start engaging in ice and snow sports from a young age.



Frame 12



Frame 13

However, in Frames 10 and 11, the represented participants have direct gaze at viewers. They seem to establish an imaginary relationship with the audience by addressing them with a visual "you". In this way, the audience may be more empathetic and vividly experience the athletes' hard work and happiness in their competition. Meanwhile, a lot of eye contact in the film also expresses the expectation of Chinese people for the Winter Olympics and the warm welcome for foreign guests from all over the world.

(2) Social Distance

Social distance is another important aspect in realizing the interactive meaning, which indicates the social relations between the participants and the viewers. It is relative to the size of frame reflected by how much can be seen of the represented participants by the choice of shots. The close-up shot suggests intimate or personal relation between the presented participants and the viewers. The medium shot indicates social relation and the long shot presents the impersonal distance.

From Frame 10, we can see that the shot is so close to the viewers that the girl's delightful facial expression is vividly presented to the viewers. Therefore, the personal relation is realized, which denotes the girl is weeping with joy for her success and she is positive about her future to be an athlete. Frame 11 is also a close-up shot, from which the audience can sense the strong determination and perseverance of the little boy. Frame 12 and Frame 13 adopt medium shots, which establishes a kind of social relation between the participant and the viewers. Frame 12 reflects the integration of traditional Chinese culture into sports while Frame 13 indicates that lots of children start engaging in ice and snow sports from a young age. The vast fields in Frame 3 and herds of horses running on the snowfield in Frame 4 show the natural landscapes of China in different solar terms. These images form impersonal distance between the participants and the viewers.

In short, three kinds of shots interact with each other dynamically in the film with the close-up shots playing the major role, mainly concentrating on the athletes and children who are passionate for winters sports. From all these shots, the Olympic spirit, the competitive atmosphere and the enthusiasm for the winter sports are felt by viewers.

(3) Perspective

Perspective is about the selection of angles, which also brings about the relations between the participants and the viewers. It can be classified into horizontal angle and vertical angle. The former includes frontal and oblique one, while the latter indicates power relationships between viewers and represented participants, which are realized through high angle, eye-level angle and low angle respectively. The following are some examples.

Frame 14 is videoed from the frontal angle, which depicts lanterns for the Mid-Autumn Festival. The audience might be immersed in the lively atmosphere of the festival. Frame 15 is videoed from the oblique angle, which shows that two figure skaters are gazing affectionately at each other and reaching out to touch each other. As a matter of fact, this frame depicts the famous legendary story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. The couple could only meet each other once a year across the Milky Way on Qixi, which coincides with the solar term of Beginning of Autumn.



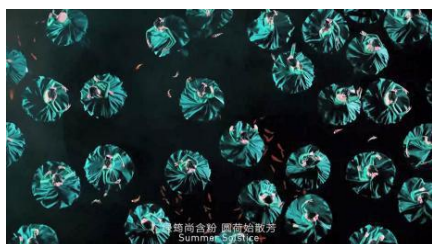
Frame 14



Frame 15

Frame 16 is a shot taken from a high angle, which demonstrates that the dancers are twirling and the hemlines are spreading out like lotus leaves. Through a high angle, it is more intuitive to see that the hemlines of the dancers are similar to the lotus leaves in summer, which

is a symbol of the solar term Summer Solstice. Frame 17 is a shot from a low angle, which demonstrates the strong will power of the hockey players before the match.



Frame 16



Frame 17

(4) Modality

The concept of modality is also essential in the visual communication where images can represent the depicted participants as if they were real. High modes are achieved through the use of fully saturated diverse colors, fully clear and detailed backgrounds, and high reproduction of image detail, deep perspective, lighting, and brightness. Take Frame 18 as an example. In the frame, the color saturation and the brightness are high and the colors are diverse, which generates a strong visual impact. It shows the image of Chinese workers working day and night as “craftsmen of a great nation”.



Frame 18

5.1.3 Compositional Meaning

As is mentioned in Section 3, the compositional meaning in Visual Grammar is concerned about the way in which the elements are integrated together to construct a meaningful whole. Three elements, information value, salience and framing should be taken into consideration in the process of realizing the compositional meaning. However, dynamic discourse is different from static discourse. Therefore, compositional meaning cannot be analyzed in the form of static frame alone in the video, as the images are progressive and keep changing. Each shot is an inseparable unit to generate new information to construe visual meanings as a whole.

Take the solar term End of Heat as an example. Altogether there are five shots. The first presents an endless golden rice field, with the name “End of Heat” in both Chinese and English being highlighted. The second is a group of children receiving training; the third is a close-up of a girl doing exercise; the fourth shows the coach is encouraging a boy to persevere; and the fifth is a close-up of this little boy, who is gritting his teeth to persist. From the transformation of the picture and the passage of time, combined with the meaning of the solar term End of Heat, the audience can read out the message that only through hard work can harvest be achieved. The dynamic picture completely reflects the process of the little boy’s persistence. At the same time, it implies that many athletes have practiced hard since childhood. The text resource in this segment is “春种一粒粟，秋收万颗子”，which literally means “Planting a grain of millet in spring and harvesting ten thousand seeds in autumn”. This is also one of the great traditional spirits of the Chinese nation: “hard work”.



Fig.2 the presentation of the solar term End of Heat

5.2 Auditory Modality in the Film

Apart from the visual modality, the importance of the auditory modality to construct meaning can not be ignored. The auditory modes in the film are mainly natural sound, drum, chanter and effect sound. Whenever the solar term changes to the next one, the sound of drumbeat can be heard. The background music changes according to the specific natural or cultural environment. The rhythm of the whole work changes from fast to slow or vice versa. For example, when the frame presents the cultural landscape like the rapid development of China, the rhythm of the background music is very fast. When the frame shows slow-motion of athletes doing difficult moves, the rhythm slows down. When cheerful scenes are presented, like people playing with snow happily, the melody becomes light-hearted.

During the last 10 solar terms of the short film, the sound of countdown by a group of people from 10 to 1 can be heard, which will make the audience spontaneously participate in the process. The background sound doesn't disappear until the last solar term comes out on the screen. The sound of the orderly countdown is full of happiness and joy of the Chinese people for the opening of the Winter Olympics, as well as the infinite expectation for the arrival of spring.

5.3 Other Modes in the Film

Images and texts cooperate with each other

in the sense of text composition. Subtitles, though not too many, are presented throughout the short film as a supplementary mode. In addition to the numbers and the names of the solar terms, there are also some Chinese verses related to the solar terms as resource supplements. For example, when the solar term White Dew is presented, there is Chinese subtitle “露从今夜白，月是故乡明”，which means that from the very night, the White Dew is coming and the moon is still the brightest in the hometown. In fact, this is the famous line written by Du Fu, a great Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty. The poem expresses the yearning for hometown and family. Another example is the Chinese character “中秋”，meaning “mid-autumn”，on the lantern in the frame, indicating the arrival of the Mid-autumn Festival. The message conveyed is that Chinese value family most. Only when family harmony is achieved can we realize national harmony and unity. The historical and cultural origin has shaped the concept of “integration of home and country” and “homesickness”.

5.4 Summary

From the above analyses, we can see that the promotional video is a dynamic multimodal discourse, in which the visual and the auditory modalities are two major ones. The visual modality consists of various semiotic resources such as gestures, facial expressions, colors and

the like; the auditory modality mainly consists of three forms, the human voice, natural sounds, and the background music. In the promotional film, the visual modality plays a dominant role, with the auditory modality taking the auxiliary function. Through close collaboration of multiple modalities, the construction of the complete meaning of the film is able to be achieved.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper, by taking Visual Grammar and Zhang Delu's framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis as its theoretical basis, examines how the visual, audio and verbal modes construe meanings and how they work together to create synergy in the promotional film "Countdown: Beginning of Spring" of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Combined with the elements of the Winter Olympics, the short film vividly reflects the characteristics of solar terms, the connotation of traditional Chinese culture, and the national image of harmony between man and nature. It can be concluded that the deployment of various modes in this dynamic discourse contributes to constructing the image of a powerful country with cultural characteristics, high speed development and the spirit of national sports.

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