

# Analyses of Composition of Pandemic Films between China and the US

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## ABSTRACT

In the post-epidemic era, the “pandemic film”, which shows the outbreak, spread and impact of epidemic infectious diseases, has attracted extensive attention and discussion all over the world because of its strong correlation with real life. However, the epidemic films in China and the United States are far from each other in terms of internal spirit and external performance. This paper will take specific films as an example to compare and analyze the films of the two countries from multiple perspectives. The study found that the pandemic films of the two countries have many similarities and differences in characterization, narrative style and cultural differences. American films aim to show people's panic after the destruction of social order and the real human nature exposed at the critical moment, emphasizing individual heroism, while Chinese films aim to show the correct leadership of the country, the selfless dedication of doctors and the unity and mutual assistance of the people, highlighting collectivism.

**Keywords:** *Pandemic film, Cultural difference, Contagion, Chinese Doctors.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the global outbreak of COVID-19, many countries began to produce and pay attention to films based on infectious diseases. Because of its strong relevance to reality, it has caused widespread communication and discussion on the Internet. "Pandemic film" is a relatively new film genre so scholars have less research on it. Scholar Qin Xiqing believes that "pandemic film" is not strictly a type concept, but a retrospective classification of some previous film works triggered by the real epidemic. Its common point is that virus infection is the narrative core. Therefore, more accurately, it is a film genre named according to the theme elements [1]. Moreover, Tao Fuwen believes that "pandemic film" is a subtype derived from the disaster film, and has the exclusive formulaic plot of this type (virus infection-rapid spread- causing panic-emergence of heroes-rescue and self-rescue), stereotyped characters (infected people and rescuers) and graphic visual images (using human fear to create a terrible atmosphere of large-scale infection and bloody death) [2]. The concept of "pandemic film" has been relatively clear in the discussion between the two scholars. It refers to a film that takes the outbreak of an epidemic as its the narrative line and shows many stress reactions and chain reactions

produced by politics, the economy, medical treatment and culture in response to the sudden spread of the virus. It is a sub-type of the disaster film.

Pandemic films have been developed for a long time in the US, and there have been excellent works, such as *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1995), *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011). It has a variety of plots and can even be subdivided into science fiction films and nonscience fiction films, attracting audiences all over the world. However, the number of China's pandemic films is very small. The films are all in 2002 after the outbreak of SARS and after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, such as *City of SARS* (Steve Cheng, 2003), *Chinese Doctors* (Andrew Lau, 2021) and *Days and Nights in Wuhan* (Cao Jinling, 2021). The plot is based on the real situation, and there is a certain gap between its development history and artistic level and the US. *Contagion* and *Chinese Doctors* are two typical and representative pandemic films, both of which have won high box office and wide influence. Taking the two films as an example, this paper will analyze the similarities and differences between Chinese and American pandemic films, so as to summarize their advantages and disadvantages, and further explore the development possibility of pandemic films in the future. Understanding the different expressions of the same genre of film in different countries can not only promote

cultural exchanges between the two countries, but also promote the progress of film art.

## **2. CHARACTERIZATION**

### **2.1 Similarities**

The characterization in pandemic films has gradually changed from emphasizing a single protagonist to depicting group images and shaping multiple protagonists, because once an epidemic occurs, it will not only be a regional problem, but also a national and even global disaster. *Contagion* and *Chinese Doctors* both belong to the type that does not emphasize personal heroism. This kind of role-shaping can make the film more documentary and make more audiences find similarities in the film, making it is easier to empathize with the protagonist.

### **2.2 Differences**

The characters in pandemic films can be roughly divided into infected people, rescuers and others. Since there are strong similarities between the roles, directors should give characters different careers, personalities, and ages to achieve diversification. The role of *Contagion* involves multiple occupational categories, including doctors, WHO experts, CDC researchers, journalists, and so on. Most of the protagonists do not know each other, but connect several story lines through some coincidence, which belongs in the “weak relationship”.

Beth, an executive of an American company, cheated while traveling in Hong Kong, China and accidentally contracted the MEV-1 virus. After returning to Minneapolis, she and her son Clark died of the disease. Her husband, Thomas, and daughter Jolie struggled during the plague and assisted experts in finding the truth. After receiving the report of infectious diseases, Dr. Mills, an expert in infectious diseases for the CDC, was ordered to investigate the epidemic area and died while guiding the epidemic work. Her colleague, Dr. Ellie inherited her will and developed a vaccine. Dr. Orantes, a staff member of the WHO, was ordered to investigate the source of the virus in Hong Kong, China, but was kidnapped as a hostage by her Hong Kong assistant in exchange for a vaccine. The unscrupulous freelance journalist Allen manipulated public opinion with tens of millions of fans, used his popularity and influence to collude with pharmaceutical companies, and lied that forsythia could cure diseases and make a big fortune. The game between moral ethics and rules and jurisprudence is a common tram dilemma in western epidemic movies [3]. Thus, American pandemic films not only show the good and just side of human nature, but also show the dark and selfish side of human nature.

*Chinese Doctors* are focusing on the epidemic's rescuers. Most of the main characters in the film are

doctors in Jinyintan Hospital. They are familiar with each other and belong to a “strong relationship”. Zhang Jingyu, President of Jinyintan hospital, suffered from ALS and it was inconvenient to move. However, after receiving the first batch of infected patients, he immediately judged the danger of this infectious disease and transferred the confirmed cases of other hospitals to his own hospital. Under great pressure, he still insisted on reforming the ICU ward in case of serious budget overrun, ensuring the sufficiency of medical supplies, electricity and oxygen, and showed his responsibility and dedication as a doctor and president. Wen Ting, director of ICU, is so calm and brave that she can come forward in time to stabilize the patient's mood when there is a riot in the hospital. At the same time, she is so responsible that in the face of the patient's incomprehension, she patiently explains and takes the initiative to take risks to provide the best treatment for the patient. This role represents the brave and meticulous image of many female medical workers in the epidemic.

In addition to depicting experienced doctors, *Chinese Doctors* also depicts a novice doctor Yang Xiaoyang. As a young doctor who has just entered the hospital, he is not proficient in many operations, but he used his rest time to practice continuously, and finally succeeded in overcoming technical difficulties and psychological obstacles to intubating patients. In the midst of the epidemic, he has grown and gained experience. Xiaowen is a pregnant woman infected with the virus. It was Dr. Wen who proposed ECMO treatment to help her successfully give birth and finally recover. His husband Jinzai is a delivery man.who risked buying medicine for others and delivering food for medical workers during the epidemic. *Chinese Doctors* emphasized the selfless dedication of doctors and the government's contribution to the prevention and control of the epidemic, ignoring the display to patients and others in society. It mainly shows the positive side of people's kindness, unity and mutual assistance in the epidemic, but it does not show the ugly side of human nature.

## **3. NARRATIVE STRATEGY**

### **3.1 Classification**

According to the type of plague, the degree of involvement of imaginative elements and the difference in narrative focus, pandemic films can be divided into two narrative strategies: soft science fiction allegorical imagination and full documentary social conception [4]. The virus variation in sci-fi pandemic films is often exaggerated, and the infection speed is fast. Infected humans will complete the disease in a short time and form another form of species, which is often called “zombie”. Documentary pandemic films generally follow the principle of reality, and the selection of pathogens is scientific, which completely presents the whole process,

from the spread of the virus, the search for antibodies to the final victory over the virus. The narrative style is either the objective presentation of calm and introverted characters, or the adaptation of a real story to make it more dramatic. The plot design is very close to the actual situation. *Contagion* and *Chinese Doctors* belong to documentary pandemic films, both of which use time markers to enhance the rhythm and documentary sense of narration. In addition, the director of *Contagion* also indicated the name and population of each city in the film, which not only implied the potential scale of infection, but also increased the sense of reality of the film. However, the narrative strategies of the two films still have many differences which are embodied in the following three aspects.

### ***3.2 The narrative space***

In terms of narrative space, pandemic films are generally structured in the limited geographical space of a specific city, presenting the human urban landscape with a familiar and unfamiliar appearance [5]. *Chinese Doctors* set the narrative space as Wuhan, the city where the epidemic first broke out. Much of the footage in the film shows that the busy and noisy streets become empty after the outbreak of the epidemic. This comparison is extremely shocking. In order to show the global epidemic, *Contagion* has made the narrative space extremely scattered, including many countries and regions such as Britain, the US, China and Japan. Such a narrative way can better reflect the living state of mankind in the era of globalization and is more objective and true.

### ***3.3 The narrative background***

The virus in *Contagion* is MEV-1, is modeled on the real life and very deadly Hendra and Nipah viruses [6]. The plot is an imagination based on previous epidemics, while the plot of the *Chinese Doctors* is based on a real situation. The data in the movie strictly restored the situation of Wuhan COVID-19, and even some characters and plots in the movie had prototypes. For example, the director of the hospital suffering from ALS in the film has a character prototype, Zhang Dingyu. The advantage of this narrative is that the film is more authentic, which can awaken the memories of people who have experienced the epidemic and arouse more resonance. Furthermore, it can also more truly restore the situation of the epidemic and have educational significance for the prevention and control of the epidemic in the future. But the disadvantage is that the plot loses imagination, and the unknown fear that the epidemic itself can bring is covered up.

### ***3.4 The narrative purpose***

*Contagion* reflects the most real human nature under the global epidemic. When the epidemic breaks out, the

barrier free communication between people created by modern society will be forced to stop, the intimate interpersonal distance will be reset, and the response measures such as isolation and epidemic prevention will disrupt social order [7]. In such a disordered state, the good and evil of human nature will be displayed to the extreme. *Contagion* shows a lot of social chaos and the ugly side of human nature in the epidemic, such as ordinary people's buying up and even looting of daily and medical supplies, the laboratory doctor who did not destroy the virus out of selfishness even after receiving the order to end the test, and the reporter who benefited from false information. *Chinese Doctors* also showed the chaos in hospitals and people's rush to buy supplies in the early days of the epidemic, but mainly showed the Chinese government's reasonable control and the dedication of doctors. It doesn't show the evil side of human nature because its narrative purpose is to praise the great unity of the Chinese people in fighting the epidemic.

## **4. CULTURE DIFFERENCE**

In fact, the epidemic disease in human civilization is not just a simple spread and control of the virus. Whether in real life or in fiction, epidemic disease has always provided a window through which to observe social development and the process of civilization [8]. As a knot or core, it will directly involve a series of problems such as society, politics, the economy, scientific research, and even the military.

The reason why the United States has made a large number of plague films is that in the Western cultural background, the pursuit of visual and psychological stimulation is the most important. "As long as you are not in danger, fear can produce pleasure" [9]. Susan Sontag once talked about the imagination of disaster, that is, a disaster not only "develops the spectacular potential of the screen, but also uses the scene of mass destruction to fascinate the audience" [10]. However, under the influence of Chinese Confucianism, people don't like to imagine that the future is disastrous and believe it's unlucky. Therefore, there are very few pandemic films in China, and only a few are based on the real epidemic situation. In addition, China attaches great importance to collectivism, emphasizing the "destiny community", so *Chinese Doctors* shows the concept of "life first, saving the wounded and the wounded" from the hospital and medical care itself, and also show the system's superiority and national confidence at the political and social level.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The epidemic is a disaster that all mankind will face in any era. The content that the film can show is only a small part. However, the film can review the history to

summarize the anti-epidemic experience of the predecessors, record the present to comfort the people in the epidemic, and predict the future to remind mankind to respect life and fear nature. By comparing and analyzing the differences between Chinese and American pandemic films, the films of the two countries can learn from each others' strong points and close the gap.

Chinese pandemic films can learn from the rich imagination of American films and make the plot more diversified, rather than being limited to adaptations based on the real epidemic. American epidemic films can learn from the romantic expression of Chinese films. They do not excessively promote personal heroism, but rather reflect the strength of groups and national unity. In the post-epidemic era, the world still has not restored its original order from the world disturbed by COVID-19. With the increasing number of variant strains, some countries will even face more severe outbreaks. COVID-19 will still coexist with humans for a long time. Countries should strengthen communication and exchange, because this is the genre most closely related to the current real world. On the one hand, the anti-epidemic actions and policies of various countries are shown in the film, which can be learned by other countries in order to better prevent the further outbreak of the epidemic. On the other hand, the artistic pursuits and cultural heritage of various countries are also integrated into it, so that we can understand each other's cultural and artistic achievements.

This paper has some limitations due to the fact that there are still few epidemic films in China. It is impossible to summarize the accurate characteristics of Chinese pandemic films from several films. Moreover, this paper only makes a comparative analysis from three aspects: characterization, narrative strategies and cultural differences. Future research will discuss more aspects of films and put forward some advice about specific development strategies for pandemic films in the two countries.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest gratitude goes first and foremost to Professor E.S, my supervisor, for his constant encouragement and guidance. He has walked me through all the stages of the writing of this thesis. Without his consistent and illuminating instruction, this thesis could not have reached its present form. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to assistant Du Yilin and my thesis instructor. They patiently answered all my questions and provided me with a lot of help. Last my thanks would go to my beloved family for their loving consideration and great confidence in me all through these years. I also owe my sincere gratitude to my friends and my fellow classmates who gave me their help and time in listening to me and helping me work out my problems during the difficult course of the thesis.

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