

A Contrastive Study on Narrative Strategies between Chinese and American Epidemic Films-----A Case Study of *Chinese Doctors* and *Contagion*

Xiaoyu Liu

*The School of Media Science (Journalism School), Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China
530780336@qq.com*

Abstract: Under the background of the global epidemic, the epidemic films gradually attached wide attention. Among them, the Chinese film *Chinese Doctors* is based on the Covid-19 epidemic breaking out in 2020 and the American film *Contagion* is an adaption of SARS in 2003, both of which are inspired by real events. Thus, there are obvious similarities and differences, which are highly comparable, in their writing of epidemic stories. This paper takes these two films for example, from the perspectives of narrative themes, narrative structures, narrative approaches, and narrative space to explore the parallels and distinctions of the narrative strategies in Chinese and American epidemic films.

Keywords: Narrative Strategies; Epidemic Film; *Chinese Doctors*; *Contagion*

1. Introduction

Regarded as a sub-type of the disaster film, an epidemic film mainly presents the panorama of disaster caused by the epidemic to human society, the dilemma of choices for humanity between individual and collectivity, and the game among different power discourses. For instance, *The Flu* (2013, Korea), *Pandemic* (2016, America), and *Embrace Again* (2022, China), not only did they help us know better about the epidemic and warn us to respect nature, but showed multiple facets of humanity when facing the disasters. Besides, in the context of the global epidemic, differences are inevitable among the films produced in different countries and cultural contexts. Thereinto, *Chinese Doctors* and *Contagion* are representative of narrative strategies, showing their unique artistic styles. Exactly thanks to the free development of arts belonging to various forms and styles in their fields, we could see the prosperity of Motion Picture Arts.

2. Narrative themes: Chinese humanitarianism VS American ecological reflection

Theme is the soul and bond of film's narrative. *Chinese Doctors* emphasizes emotional effects to manifest the moral theme. While *Contagion* utilizes Powerful Spot which Americans are good at to reveal the ecological issues under the background of the human community.

2.1. Emotional-oriented narrative theme

Chinese Doctors is an epidemic film whose theme is driven by emotions and the development of all events serves the emotional effects. To highlight the theme of "humanitarianism", the approach by which the emotions of different ordinary characters run through the film is employed to move the plot forward. *Chinese Doctors* is based on the global Covid-19 epidemic breaking out in 2020, making use of a realistic image style to reproduce the events and to awaken the audience's emotional memory about "Outlook on Life" "Collectivism" and "Humanitarianism". The film begins by displaying the scene of Wuhan, where the epidemic first broke out in China, with a series of time points familiar to the audience and the fast-paced camera editing to create a sense of urgency. Later, it focuses on Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital where the real stories between doctors and patients are recreated. The true feelings including fear of infection, doubts of the sick, and compassion for the family of patients unfold the themes of relentless spirit and pure humanitarianism. What's more, with the characterization of doctors and patients in Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, different emotional factors like friendship, kinship, and love relationships are integrated into *Chinese Doctors* in order to show the individual growth of ordinary

people. For example, Director Tao Jun, played by Zhu Yawen, is a loner at first but then starts a friendship with doctor Wu Chenguang; Jin Zhigang, played by Oho Ou, becomes mature after experiencing part forever two times with his wife; Little Yang, played by Jackson Yee, establishes the sense of mission as a doctor after overcoming his psychological disorder.

2.2. Plot-oriented narrative theme

Contagion is an epidemic film whose theme is motivated by plots. The rhythm of the plots is fast and furious so as to break the dull daily life of the audience. Characters, thoughts and emotional effects all serve the plots, the ending revealing the theme of ecological reflection. First of all, Contagion uses the timeline of the main plots to create suspense, showing the overall value of the movie---ecological criticism: beginning with the appearance of the first American patient Beth Emhoff, the first time point is Day2, then the changes of the contagion from the first day to the 130th day are rolled out. With the linear progression of the narrative, the number of cases is increasing day by day as the virus spreads around the world. The ending scene, "Human felling trees and destroying bats' habitat leads to the spread of the virus", reveals the theme of "ecological reflection" in the film, which places human beings under the community, and breaks through the past issues of "apocalyptic imagination" and "invasion of alien species", which were the focus of American epidemic films. Secondly, Contagion employs the network narrative structure formed by several plotlines to reveal the cause-and-effect reincarnation of the intertwined human destiny in the era of globalization. The illegal late-night logging and deforestation of American and Japanese multinational companies in third-world countries lead to bats losing their habitat, flying into pig pens and transmitting the virus to pigs, which in turn become human delicacies, bringing the virus to the American executives of multinational companies, and finally spreading it to the world. Finally, Contagion makes use of parallel montage to demonstrate the space difference, implying that the uneven interest and class divide are incompatible, which is also the internal reason for the epidemic breaking out globally: Those villagers providing low-end raw materials are infected widely but at the bottom of the list for vaccination. Their forced resistance will only exacerbate the epidemic.

3. Narrative structure: Oriental emotional cohesion VS Occidental interlaced leads

Narrative structure is the frame of a movie and the support for the progression of the plots. In epidemic films, the setting of the narrative structure follows the cause-and-effect logic of the classic three-act structure. In Chinese Doctors it is demonstrated as the treatment to the patients: appearance of the disease-- treatment of the patients-- disease under control; while in Contagion as the seeking for the source of the epidemic: appearance of the outbreak-- search for the origin-- control of the epidemic. Both Chinese Doctors and Contagion utilize linear narrative, but they integrate, design and reconstruct based on it, making their narrative structure unique.

3.1. Oriental forking paths narrative

Chinese Doctors uses the oriental style of forking paths narrative which is characterized by the emotional cohesion of multiple protagonists. In this movie, the temporal logical order of a linear narrative is reserved in the whole structure, and the distinct restriction on main and supporting characters along the narrative arc of an individual is lifted. Compared with Contagion, Chinese Doctors tells the audience the source of the epidemic in the beginning because people pay more attention to medical personnel rather than the search for the origin of the outbreak. The treatment and care of the patients are highlighted in the narrative. As to the main storyline of "treatment of patients", the specific parts are disassembled, and the emotional tone-- "Oriental humanistic care" is branched. From the point of medical care, when the epidemic initially broke out, Doctor Wenting, played by Yuan Quan, tried her best to rescue patients in the isolation ward; Doctor Wu Chenguang cares for Zhang Xiaofeng who lost her parents in the epidemic; Leishen Mountain Hospital is constructed urgently with national support; Jin Zhigang in the mobile cabin hospital received treatment optimistically under the guidance of nurse Zhou Lan and the little girl patient; under the scientific and reasonable leadership of its head, Jinyintan Hospital broke through the difficulties and achieved the success of the fight against the epidemic. From the perspective of patients' families, due to the disease, Jin Zhigang must separate temporarily from his wife Xiaowen; needed by treatment, families of the patients have to donate the remains of grandma; because of the epidemic prevention work, president Zhang Jingyu was unable to take care of his infected wife; after the plight was gradually lifted, Jin Zhigang was reunited with his family after

recovery. Taking the medical personnel and the patients' families in Jin Yintan Hospital as the narrative perspective, *Chinese Doctors* unfolds the living condition, spiritual sustenance and emotional comfort of the common public by showing the relationship between medical personnel and patients, working relationship, family relationship and that among strangers during the epidemic so as to reflect people's humanitarianism and collectivism facing disaster. With the help of emotional cohesion in an oriental way, *Chinese Doctors* featuring unique oriental charm instills multiple feelings in the common public to show China's great concern for people under the context of Chinese culture.

3.2. Occidental network narrative

Network narrative refers to that those multiple protagonists whose actions take place "within a common milieu or time scheme" may influence one another because their "projects are largely decoupled from one another, or only contingently linked", but "when paths cross meaningfully, they tend to remain distinct and of equal prominence"^[1]. *Contagion* employs the occidental network narrative featuring several crossed and dispersive storylines. The cause-and-effect logic belonging to the linear narrative is reserved in the individual storyline; the overall narrative structure breaks away from the interlocking restrictions on plot settings. In this movie, under the background of global epidemic, except investigation and treatment of the contagion, those protagonists can have occasional connection; there is no deep correlation and promotion of logic between them. The four narrative lines in the same time-space develop simultaneously and disperse independently. In terms of the relationship between multiple protagonists, it is embodied in the "weak ties" between the characters: Mitch--the husband of the first patient in Minnesota, Alan--a journalist from San Francisco in California, Orantes of Geneva in Switzerland, and Cheever--an executive in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Georgia, all of them are strangers before, but after Mitch's wife infected, returned home and spread the disease, characters in these four storylines establish the "weak ties"^[2]. These four plot lines progress independently but are intertwined with each other. With Beth, the first American patient as the driving point to control the whole movie--- Beth, the executive of an American enterprise, contracted the virus occasionally on a business trip and dies after returning home. Her son and ex-boyfriend who contacted her also died successively. Besides, as the epitome of most ordinary American families during the epidemic, her husband Mitch and daughter Jory struggled to live in isolation. With vaccination as a significant point for the development of the plots-- Dr. Erin Mears, an expert at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States, died while directing outbreak response and her colleague Dr. Ally Hextall followed her will to develop the vaccine; the journalist Alan along with the pharmaceutical company to spread the disinformation that forsythia can cure the disease, causing a series of disorder in public environment such as buying up all the goods of drugstores; wishing to help those infected villagers get the vaccine as soon as possible, Sun Feng in Hong Kong kidnapped Orantes, a worker in World Health Organization only to obtain fake vaccines. With the track of Beth as the pivotal point to tackle the problem-- Dr.Orantes goes to Hong Kong in search of the origin of the virus, with her helper Sun Feng assisting her to trace Beth. The repeated occurrences of the epidemic origin are connected by three nodes and four plot lines, forming a huge cross-network, connecting multiple interactive relationships among individuals, epidemics, government agencies, public welfare organizations, media, society and nature, showing a broad social background and complex relationships between people. Characterized by the logic and preciseness of western thinking, *Contagion* employs the multi-clue network narrative, interweaves different stories and characters in parallel, and implies the connection between stories on the unified theme^[3].

4. Narrative approaches: Chinese structure of group image VS Western classic suspense

Narrative approaches determine the direction and rhythm of the plot and lay the tone of the whole movie. As one kind of disaster films, epidemic films pay attention to creating a sense of urgency of unknown suspense and disasters. In term of narrative approaches used to create suspense, there are some differences between *Chinese Doctors* and *Contagion*: the former adopts the narrative mode similar to war to build the Chinese group image structure, while the latter utilizes the technique of western classic suspense under the general and partial suspense created.

4.1. War-like narrative

Chinese Doctors adopts war narrative as the narrative approach, depicting a panorama of the fight against the epidemic. Firstly, the movie uses the experience of one place to mirror that of the whole

country. There is also a correspondence between the narrative clue “appearance of the outbreak-- search for the origin-- control of the epidemic” and the important parts in war narrative “encountering a raid — dealing with enemies— achieving victory”. Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, medical staff and epidemic virus are used respectively as the battlefield, soldiers and enemies for a three-dimensional framework, and hospital directors, middle management and general medical care will also correspond to the three levels of an army. Molding the characters of ordinary people to illuminate collectivism and utilizing the scene of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital to image the response to the epidemic in China make Chinese Doctors possess factors of war narrative. Secondly, “heroes” in this movie foreground the spirits of collectivism, heroism and dedication in Chinese mainstream values: for example, the national medical corps in Hubei and the emergency supply of medical materials from all over the country; Yang Xiaoyang overcame his inner weakness and succeeded in intubating patients; Zhang Dingyu, the president of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, went to the front line with selfless love despite his illness. It shows a portrait of nurses by portraying the common public against a big backdrop. Eventually, as a film of war-like narrative, Chinese Doctors builds the tension of war on the basis of “speed” and “strength”. No matter the “contest with time” for the doctors in the hospitals or the fast-paced editing, both of them present rapid passage of time and point up the intense atmosphere of the outbreak response. Additionally, we can see the prudent reflection on the ethical aspects of technology: clear frames and pathetic atmosphere let us realize the cruelty of the epidemic, such as the mark of the mask on the doctor's face and the spray of blood in the operating room. Through 360-degree all-angle shooting, it reproduces truthfully the serious battlefield of the epidemic. To sum up, by fighting against the “epidemic” time after time, Chinese Doctors portrays one ordinary person after another, which not only comprehensively shows the tension and cruelty of the anti-epidemic battlefield, but also highlights the collectivism discourse and humanitarian spirit reflected by war-like narrative^[4].

4.2. Suspense narrative

Suspense refers to people's expectations about the fate of characters and the progression of plots in literary and artistic works^[5]. Whether the suspense of Master Hitchcock or Griffith's last-minute rescue, it's the classic suspense narrative enshrined in the history of western films, inherited and innovated from generation to generation. The suspense narrative in Contagion is divided into general suspense and partial suspense. The creation of general suspense uses the classic “MacGuffin” of Hitchcock, which is represented as a search for the source of the epidemic--the clue throughout the movie. When the first case appears in the United States at the beginning of the film, the source of infection affects the audience as an unknown and nonexistent “MacGuffin”. The search for the origin of infection is placed in the film as a clue. By flashback to the activities of the first case Beth before infection, the development of the narrative is constantly promoted so as to build up the suspense. In the end, the “MacGuffin” is revealed, that is, the disease originated from the bat virus carried by the chef who shook hands with Beth. Although “MacGuffin” is just one of the important points of the movie and is even interrupted by other more important events, it is the final answer sought by the characters and the audience. As for the partial suspense, it's the secondary creation of Griffith's last-minute rescue, which is displayed in the branches like the appearance of the epidemic and the treatment of the cases. The clue of vaccine development is interspersed in the other three narrative lines. After witnessing the death of her colleague from infection, Dr. Ally Hextall continues to develop a vaccine. After encountering several difficulties, a group of mice in the laboratory are lucky to survive. Simultaneously, the epidemic is becoming more severe so it's the priority to develop the vaccine. At this time, Ally does not hesitate to inject the vaccine into her body to test it. This cross-editing approach makes vaccine development more urgent. The cross and parallel montage breaking the time-space of the narrative, it keeps the audience in expectation of unknown events. Contagion forms constant dilemmas through one event after another in different time spaces. Until the problems are solved one by one, the final mystery is revealed, and the suspense in the film is ended.

5. Narrative space: The Ukiyoe in Wuhan VS The panorama of the global disaster

Space and time are crucial factors of narrative. They build up the whole background of the story. Chinese Doctors focuses on highlighting the happiness and misfortune in the small city so as to paint a Ukiyoe in Wuhan. However, Contagion lays emphasis on building up the image of a great power under the human community and unfolds a picture of global disaster.

5.1. The time of the narrative

5.1.1. Reproducing the real events like a mirror

It's hard to see the chronological equivalence between the stories narrated and those happening in reality. Chinese Doctors doesn't utilize complex narrative techniques deliberately instead of following the common linear narrative which is usually seen in disaster films and replicates the chronological sequence of real events. It uses the classic three-part narrative: occurrence of crisis, response to crisis and resolution of crisis. The chronological narrative like mirror-like restoration highly restores the real events. The opening scene of the film is the starting phase of the crisis, which takes the outbreak of the epidemic in Wuhan as the time node. A large number of infected people were sent to the hospital, and many patients died mysteriously. Caught off guard, doctors, Jinyintan Hospital and even the whole of Wuhan were thrown into chaos. Then it's the stage of response. After the whole medical staff decided to stay in the hospital, Jinyintan Hospital began to fight against the virus armed to the teeth and treat the patients. The film crosses the two clues that doctors treat Jin Zhigang and his wife. On the one hand, the pregnant woman who is dying of Covid-19 is about to give birth. On the other hand, the young and healthy Jin Zhigang will be killed by the virus. In the end, it's the crisis-resolution phase. From Jinyintan Hospital to Wuhan and even all parts of the country, security has been transferred, and the constant return to zero heralds the arrival of a complete victory. Although it's relatively monotone to motivate the plots according to the chronological order, it's identical to the actual events because in this way the time sequence of the real catastrophe can be reproduced^[6].

5.1.2. Permuting and combing the story pieces

The process of story-telling is like a montage. If events are permuted and combined according to time, the ending will be unexpected. In Contagion, the episodes of the story are permuted and combined according to the time sequence of their occurrence. From the perspective of the whole stage of epidemic prevention and control that is "appearance of the outbreak-- search for the origin-- control of the epidemic", analepsis, flashback and sequential narration are used respectively. Analepsis is used in the phase when the epidemic origin appears. The timeline of the story is marked by the subtitle "Day X" of virus diffusion. At the beginning of the film, Beth was waiting at the airport for returning home on "Day 2". Since then, the time has been developing in a linear sequence of "Day 4, Day 5" until the epidemic origin--the virus carried by bats appears on "Day 1" at the end of the film. Flashback is used in the phase of searching for the origin. The World Health Organization (WHO) used surveillance video to check the personal track of Beth--the source of infection in casinos and hotels on "Day 1". Sequential narration is used in the phase of epidemic prevention and control. On Day 2, the Japanese man who contacted with Beth died in the bus, a man of Hong Kong died of infection at home, and a female star died after being infected in London. On Day 5, 2 men died in Hong Kong, 5 in London, 3 in Tokyo and Neal--Beth's ex-boyfriend died in Chicago. On Day 7, the epidemic broke out in Hong Kong. On Day 12, there were over 8 million people infected worldwide. On Day 21, the virus mutated and spread around the world. The mortality rate achieved 25%-30%... Through striking time points as well as their permutation and combination, Contagion advances the process of infection and constructs the picture of death.

5.2. Narrative space

5.2.1. The memory of Wuhan

Chinese Doctors evokes the audience's "collective memory" of characters and events from the perspective of recreating the real city. It focuses on the real scene of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, reflects the material space where the event happened, pays attention to the vivid characters, and manifests the common memory of the people to the epidemic. First of all, Chinese Doctors takes material from the events which happened in the real city Wuhan. In this way, it is an epidemic film built on the typical location and special background, through which the change of the city under the epidemic is reproduced, helping the audience to connect with the current society, and adding authenticity and realistic significance to the film. Starting with the subtitle to clarify when and where the epidemic happened, the film strikes a chord. In addition, the significance behind Wuhan keeps deepening the impression of the audience. Wuhan is a city of heroes. The main characters have prototypes in reality such as Zhang Dingyu-- the former president of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital is the prototype of the president who suffers from ALS played by Zhang Hanyu and the first person to report Covid-19 to the supervisors--Zhang Jixian is played by Yuan Quan who looks like her. As the key to awakening the memory about Wuhan, these real anti-epidemic heroes make the movie more convincing and deepen

the cognition of the audience towards the image of Wuhan. During the outbreak response, the construction of the scene in Wuhan like that of Huo Shenshan Hospital and mobile cabin hospitals is taken from the documentary directly. Through the movie screen, the audience relived the miracles witnessed by themselves on mobile phones or TV during the epidemic, which not only aroused their memory about Wuhan and their mood at that time but also stimulated their collective identity and sense of belonging to the country.

5.2.2. *The construction of global landscape*

With the help of landscape construction, Contagion pictures the background of the infection in the city where the outbreak and progression of the plots proceed and makes local culture and values embedded in it. In the beginning, the place where the epidemic breaks out is unveiled to the audience, from Hong Kong to London and Minneapolis, it portrays a picture of catastrophe brought by a severe epidemic. When constructing the space for virus transmission, the landscape construction of Hong Kong and London has relied on the path of patients. From ships to subways, from fairs to residential areas, various life scenes have created a modern urban life. Taking a private car from working place to the hotel makes the shift from public places to private living areas come true, which illuminates how the virus is transmitted. Moreover, when the virtual narrative space is constructed, cinematography and film language also play a role. When shaping the image of the city, Contagion employs a great number of deep-focus shots, high angle shots, fast-pacing editing and other technologies, letting the audience neglect the visual difference between the virtual and the real as well as making it possible for the audience to be personally on the scene. When building the city attacked by infectious disease, it uses empty shots to show the streets with litter, the tall buildings without people, the supermarkets that are looted, etc. The city gradually becomes out of order and out of control from the orderly operation. It presents the vivid visual effect through audio-visual language, realizing the reality of image presentation from the imagination of landscape construction.

6. Conclusion

By comparing the two epidemic films, Chinese Doctors and Contagion, this paper discusses the differences and uniqueness of their narrative strategies in relation to the realistic environment and cultural context of China and America, interprets profound connotations in them, seeks the narrative rules of epidemic films, and feels the beauty of the differences in film culture. Furthermore, under the background of the repeated epidemic, this kind of movie has immense significance, it can not only boost the creation of the movies, but more importantly it can guide the audience to reflect and let them know the knowledge of the epidemic as well as the prevention measures. Besides, it shows the happiness and unfortunate in the world and witnesses the memory of our time as well as the mission of heroes.

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