Analyzing Social Concerns in Contemporary Chinese Family Films: A Case Study of the Film *Across the Furious Sea* Directed by Cao Baoping

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Abstract. *Across the Furious Sea*, directed by Cao Baoping and featuring Huang Bo and Zhou Xun, is a poignant exploration of familial dynamics and traditional Chinese values. Released on November 25, 2023, in mainland China, the film delves into the themes of revenge, loss, and the complexities of family relationships. This paper adopts a social sciences lens to analyze the film's narrative, emotional expressions, and character psychologies. By examining these elements, this study aims to shed light on prevalent social issues within Chinese families, offering insights into the intersection between film narratives and societal realities, and enhancing the connection between film and reality. Furthermore, it discusses how filmmakers can leverage such narratives to deepen the audience's understanding of social issues and enhance social cognition. Ultimately, this research contributes to the advancement of the film industry by encouraging a nuanced portrayal of social realities and fostering meaningful dialogue between filmmakers and society.

Keywords: Chinese Film, Family Film, Social Care, Social Reality.

1. Introduction

Family film usually involves the theme and background of the family, including stories describing family life, the handling of relationships between family members, and family values. It mainly includes three aspects. First, the plot of the family film closely follows the family life, which may show the warmth and harmony of the family, but also reveal the conflicts and contradictions within the family. Second, family films pay more attention to the shaping of characters and relationships, and explore the interaction between individuals and family by depicting family members. Third, family films pay attention to the delicate expression of emotion and the construction of emotional resonance, so that the audience can feel empathy and resonate in the process of watching the film.

Across the Furious Sea, directed by Cao Baoping and starring Huang Bo and Zhou Xun. This film lasted for four years and finally passed the approval process. It was finally released in mainland China on November 25, 2023. The film is adapted from the novel of the same name, *Across the Furious Sea*, and tells the story of a father who takes crazy revenge after the killing of his daughter. Single father Lao Jin (played by Huang Bo) spends his days fishing to support his daughter Jin Lina (played by Zhou Xun) in studying in Japan. One day, there is news of her daughter's mysterious death with 17 knives in the body. The biggest suspect points to her boyfriend Li Miaomiao (played by Zhang Youhao). Angry Lao Jin embarked on the path of seeking revenge across the sea, while Li Miaomiao continued to flee under the protection of his mother Jing Lan (played by Zhou Xun). A profound exploration was conducted in this human mystery, where two deformed families created two deformed children.

Across the Furious Sea is the third installment of Cao Baoping's "Burning Heart series". The first two are *Burning Sun* and *Kill Her*. The three films constitute Cao Baoping's "Burning Heart series" trilogy. The film is the first collaboration between Huang Bo and Zhou Xun, and the second collaboration between director Cao Baoping and Zhou Xun after the film *Li Mi's Conjecture*. During the filming process, actor Huang Bo was involved in long hours at sea and experienced a lot of ups and downs. To enrich the character and become the character, Huang Bo experienced life in Dalian before the shooting, going to the seaside fishing village, chatting with different captains, following the fishermen to go fishing, and becoming familiar with the equipment on board, so that he could

accurately capture the status of the characters. The film's water scenes were filmed at the Underwater production Center of the Oriental Film Metropolis Film and Television Industrial Park in Qingdao, China.

According to statistics, the film *Across the Furious Sea* has grossed 549 million yuan at the box office. This film also won some awards. In January 2024, the fourth Golden Yuhua Award was announced in Laiwu, Macau. In the Chinese film section, Cao Baoping won the best director for *Across the Furious Sea*. In the 2023 Weibo Night, *Across the Furious Sea* won the "Weibo Annual Word of Mouth Film" award. In December 2023, Zhou Yiran, who played her daughter Jin Lina, was still nominated for the "Most Charming Actress of the New Era" award at the Golden Young Flower Award at the 4th New Era International Film Festival. In 2021, *Across the Furious Sea* won the "Expectation Film of the Year" at Harper's Bazaar's Annual Party.

2. Literature Review

With family movies playing an increasingly important role in people's social lives, many scholars have studied family movies and their care for the current social reality. Family films are films that show the daily life of the common people and family affection as the main theme. Some family films are incomplete and broken, that is, family members are incomplete or partially missing [1]. For example, Junn observed that in films where the protagonists' parents are absent, it is often the mother who loses rather than the father [2]. According to the research of Su Pengwen and Wang Yuanyuan, they emphasize that the trend of emotional expression in contemporary Chinese family films is the concern for individual value and life. In the creation theme of family films since the 21st century, many films have begun to focus on the "individual" in the family and expounding the ups and downs of life in different environments. Generations of people have sought a solution to the conflict between different values, which has become the reflection of family films on the current society [3]. Zheng Dongxiao also proved that family films conform to Chinese culture and a mainstream value concept, and the selection of materials can truly reflect the current life of Chinese people and fit the universal value concept. Family ethics are deeply rooted in the hearts of Chinese people, which is one of the reasons why family films can become the new mainstream films in China [4]. Odin pointed out that family movies play a major role in strengthening family groups [5], and the power of social care in them enables the audience to reflect on the relationship between individuals and family groups, think about how to deal with family relations, and make changes. Family films also have the potential to serve as historical documents. Efren Cuevas recognizes that family films are recycled in contemporary documentaries, highlighting ethnic minorities and events marginalized by public history or mainstream media [6]. These studies all illustrate the role of social care in family films. Although each family film has a unique genre narrative and emotional expression, what they have in common is that they have a documentary-like function that realistically depicts many common family habits and family relationships. Family films often focus on social concern, exploring humanity, family ethics, and social reflection through stories. The audience can feel the complex human nature and unique aesthetic experience from the numerous individual tragedies in the film, which is full of humanistic care and often deeply touches the audience's soul [7].

Contemporary Chinese family films pay more and more attention to their social care. For example, the film Dear released in 2014 and Lost and Love released in 2015 have well completed the value orientation of films, generated social care, and let more people understand the increasingly serious social problem of child trafficking [8]. In Chinese family films, the parent-child relationship is always a topic worth discussing and reflecting on. The film mostly reproduces the relationship between all kinds of families and children in a real and realistic way. In the film "Einstein and Einstein" released in 2018, Cao Baoping focused on the Chinese "love education", using the plain and real lens narrative, showing the complex inner and emotional world in the growth process of their children, bringing the pain and emotional resonance to the audience [9].

Across the Furious Sea directly takes the "attitude" of a suspense drama, continuing the type shell of Cao Baoping's "burning Heart series" and the extreme struggle of human nature to show, deconstructing the "silent father love" in the traditional concept of Chinese society [10]. The film seems to be about the emotional problems within the family, but it is about a social problem. In *Across the Furious Sea*, Cao Baoping vividly shows the complexity of the characters, magnifies the typicality of the two types of deformed family relationships, establishes a contrast between the mother-son relationship and the father-daughter relationship, and describes the influence of the family of origin on the children with anti-social personality. Cao Baoping once mentioned: " We have found such problems, so we cannot avoid showing such characters. If these social issues are not seen or discussed in the film, it may become a reverse eventually [10]. Director Cao Baoping transforms a revenge story into an ethical story that examines family relations in contemporary China. Chen Xiaoyun pointed out that Li Miaomiao, who is in a family without a "father", has formed an ethical joint force in his growth process caused by the original family and the reorganized family, which directly points to the common problems in contemporary Chinese society. It seems that director Cao Baoping does not care about the "truth" of the case in the crime story, but pays more attention to the consideration of the human heart and humanity behind the crime story, as well as the social problems reflected by it. Through the surface-type narrative, he conveys human inquiry, social care, and cultural reflection beyond the meaning of the subject matter [11]. Cao believes that many films today tend to show the warm, happy, happy, and sunny side of life, but few films reflect the darkness of human nature and the complexity of the world. But the truth is that only when people are aware of the darkness of human nature and the complexity of the world, they can better face the world. In his view, the problems of the family of origin are very common in China's cultural environment. He hopes to use the film to make people face the family and family damage, and then start the real action and change the [12].

Today, family films have gradually become the new mainstream film in China. Although there are many scholars in this field, for various reasons, few articles have studied social care in the contemporary Chinese family film directed by Cao Baoping *Across the Furious Sea* as an example.

The above studies and theories can help to understand the background information in advance. However, some research gaps remain. Although there are many documents focusing on family films, there are few studies on social care in contemporary Chinese family films and the analysis of social care *Across the Furious Sea*. In addition, as a mass media, the film needs to pay more attention to its role of caring for society. After analyzing the film *Across the Furious Sea* directed by Cao Baoping as an example, it helps to promote the development of the film industry and promote the interaction between film creation and social reality. By paying attention to social reality problems, film creators can have a deeper understanding of social needs and psychological state, so as to create film works more in line with social reality. At the same time, the audience can also understand the social reality through the film, and improve their own social cognition level. This interaction helps to promote the development and innovation of the film industry and also provides an effective means of communication for the solution of social reality problems. In order to achieve the expected purposes of this study, and let the significance of this study can be put into practice. This research will use the content analysis method to study social care in contemporary Chinese family films, taking the film *Across the Furious Sea* directed by Cao Baoping as an example.

3. Methodology

The film *Across the Furious Sea* is a family ethics film disguised as a suspenseful drama. Its release once again sounded the alarm for families, schools, and society to pay attention to the mental health of teenagers. This film cares about reality from three aspects: narrative, emotional expression, and character psychology. Specifically, the film portrays social reality through its narrative structure of criminal suspense and its tumultuous plot, while the emotional expression in the film is another perspective of its portrayal of social reality. As emotional expression becomes more diverse, the

psychology of characters also becomes more complex, thus caring for the psychology of real-life audiences.

4. Results

Firstly, from a narrative perspective, the story of the film is very simple. It has two lines. One line is the story of Huang Bo, who plays a boatman named Jin Yunshi. After learning that his daughter Jin Lina was gang raped, he was stabbed 17 times and died in Japan. He crazily seeks revenge and explores the truth about his daughter's boyfriend Li Miaomiao. During the process of seeking revenge, he engaged in a battle of wits and courage with Li Miaomiao's mother and father and learned about another storyline in the film. The other line depicts the story of Jin Lina the deceased, who was emotionally neglected during her childhood after her parents divorced, as well as falling in love with a pathological and promiscuous boyfriend due to a lack of love in adulthood, unable to establish a normal intimate relationship, and ultimately committing suicide with love for her father. Although *Across the Furious Sea* extensively uses elements of "violence" and adopts a suspenseful crime narrative structure, its core is about the tragedy of family ethics. This film is like a sharp sword, cutting through the traditional Chinese family's veil of shame. The surface story is about the mental health issues of a teenager, but the deeper exploration is about the "face of love" in traditional families. This is like Cao Baoping's other work "Einstein and Einstein". The numerous family scenes in "Einstein and Einstein" vividly depict the hidden issue of male superiority and intergenerational communication among family members. *Across the Furious Sea* is a suspenseful drama that allows the audience to experience the exhilaration of revenge through the twists and turns of the plot.

Across the Furious Sea adopts an emotional narrative, which expands the narrative subject beyond the protagonist to a broader emotional level. This approach not only enriches the connotation of the film but also considers reality, allowing the audience to pay more attention to the expression and handling of individual emotions when thinking about good and evil issues. The biggest reversal of the film is the emotional epiphany of Jin Yunshi. He always thought that his daughter was killed by Li Miaomiao, so he tried his best to become the one who avenged his daughter with all his might. One is for love, for women; One is for oneself, for the identity of being taken away as a "father" and for the rights taken away. Both are present within the body of the Jin Yunshi, but it is evident that the latter is much higher than the former. His madness when setting fire to save himself in the basement, as well as his smug smile after finding his self-proclaimed killer, all pointed to a sense of victory rather than hatred out of love. In the end, he realized that his daughter had committed suicide, and the reason for her suicide was related to her lack of personal care during her upbringing. The film deconstructs the traditional concept of "silent fatherly love". Like "Einstein and Einstein" the film appears to be about emotional issues within the family, but it is about a social issue. The concern that films bring to social reality is a way to help audiences establish connections and emotional resonance with films. Creators use films as a medium to raise questions but do not provide clear solutions, leaving room and space for audience reflection. Through exploring emotional expression, *Across the Furious Sea* provides audiences with a new perspective on how to view this society.

From the perspective of the character's psychology, Jin Yunshi is a ship owner who controls more than 30 ships and works hard, even fighting foreign coast guards, to maintain his career. His reason was that he worked hard to support his daughter's education, and his daughter Jin Lina did manage to go to Japan to study, but that was clearly not her primary concern. Jin Lina's parents divorced from a young age and became a tool for their parents to seek revenge on each other, which is not uncommon in divorced couples in the real world. During her teenage years, Jin Lina was pushed back and forth by her parents, enduring the loneliness of growing up for a long time. Because she loves her father, she can only hide her true side, and she can only paint her longing for love as a little sun in a cabinet. And in the film, Jin Yunshi discovers through the child's words and his pursuit of the truth how much his daughter loves and needs him, yet he never gives up regret. Finally, he released Li Miaomiao and chose to surrender, which became the starting point for his redemption. The subtitle at the end of the

film states that after his release from prison, Jin Yunshi fully devoted himself to public welfare and paid attention to the mental health of teenagers. Director Cao Baoping is telling the audience in this way that intervention in adolescent psychological crises must start with their families. In addition, before the death of their daughter Jin Lina, Jin Yunshi and her daughter relied on each other in their family. Without the role of a mother, the film will directly point its finger at a typical social problem - the impact of the absence of maternal love in the family of origin on children. In this story, Jin Lina is the only one who has a poor family environment, and Li Miaomiao's infidelity also stems from the divorce of his parents when he was a child, the unconditional indulgence of his mother, and the absence of fatherly love. Both children have experienced the absence of either the father or mother, which to some extent is also the creator's concern for the social issue of "bereaved parenting". However, the film sets a more extreme situation for this: what will happen to children after "bereaved parenting" in the absence of the father or mother role.

5. Discussion

The film *Across the Furious Sea* cuts opens the section of reality, reveals human nature, and penetrates the "net of redemption" of the family of origin. Cheng Qiang and Wang Youning pointed out that *Across the Furious Sea*, by showing the battle of wits and detour between the characters, uncovered the parent-child relationship hidden under the shell of revenge, pointing to the profound social issues and complex humans behind it [13]. The film has a lot of influence, good and bad.

It has aroused social attention and thinking from the aspects of adolescent mental health intervention, the influence of "widowed parenting" on children, the good and evil of human nature, and the lack of education of traditional Chinese family of origin love. Through the film narrative, emotional expression and the focus of characters to guide social attention, *Across the Furious Sea* has successfully aroused a wide discussion on the topics such as family of origin and adolescent mental health intervention in real society. At the end of the film *Across the Furious Sea* the subtitles said that "Jin Yunshi devoted himself to adolescent mental health work after being released from prison", which reflects the whole film and the director's concern and concern for adolescent mental health.

At the same time, *Across the Furious Sea* also inspired a sympathetic audience, a sense of justice, and emotional resonance, prompting it to act. Promote social and family intervention work on adolescent mental health. In the younger generation in the film, Jin Lina is obviously a pleasing personality. To get love, she cannot have self-esteem, give up the bottom line, and even hurt herself to retain her lover. From Li Miaomiao, the audience can also see an antisocial personality. The common denominator of these two people is that they escape from their parents, yearn for warmth and a home in the game world or the love world, and finally live as suspended individuals in the real world. At the end of the film, the sentence "the love of parents is the safe island for children's lives" shows that family is very important to the mental health of teenagers.

The film also allows audiences to reflect on the way they get along with their families, and encourages real audiences to improve the way they get along with their parents. Let people form the correct understanding and cognition of the way of "love" in the traditional family, to construct a healthy family relationship. Whether it is rich families or ordinary families, the lack of love education is a great problem. Each of us is a child, and each of us can be a parent. This film makes us face the problems of the family of origin and introspection. In fact, the estrangement or bond between parents and children is often caused by the misunderstanding of "love". Everyone loves others in different ways, and everyone has different standards for being loved. As a result, *Across the Furious Sea* can also help audiences face the generational gap of "love". In addition, the film *Across the Furious Sea* is China's first restricted-level (quasi-R level) film scheduled for release. It is a large-scale film, at least in the current domestic film market, in all the films that can be released, the scale of the film is unprecedented. So, after the announcement of the release, *Across the Furious Sea* added a hint that " viewers under the age of 18 are advised to watch carefully. "It is because of this reminder that the film is called a "quasi-R film". The "R", also called "restricted", is a level in Hollywood's film rating

system, in which audiences under the age of 17 must be accompanied by their parents or other guardians to watch it. This is like the hint of *Across the Furious Sea*. However, because there is no film rating system in mainland China, it cannot be marked by the "R rating", so the "quasi-R" rating is used to describe the film. Therefore, the film *Across the Furious Sea* provides a model for the establishment of the film rating system in mainland China.

However, China's film censorship system is very strict. As a result, movie fans or film practitioners often describe making films in the Chinese mainland as dancing in shackles. It can only be shot in a fixed frame, not out of line, if the scale is slightly larger, it may not be released. Therefore, the film *Across the Furious Sea* seems to be a challenge to Chinese film censorship.

6. Conclusion

Although many scholars have studied family films, there are few studies on the social care in contemporary Chinese family films and on analyzing their social care from the entry point of Cao Baoping's film *Across the Furious Sea*. As an important mass media, the film needs more attention. The film *Across the Furious Sea* explores the relationship between family and children and asks about family ethics in contemporary China. From the narrative aspect of narrative, the narrative structure of violent crime is used to expose the traditional Chinese family of origin, deconstruction of "silent father's love" from the level of emotional expression, and examine the social reality of "widowed parenting" from the psychological aspect of characters. The film also has a positive impact from three aspects: arousing social attention and thinking, inspiring the audience resonance, and providing a model. It cares for the mental health of teenagers, human nature, the lack of education about love, the generational difference of "love" and many other aspects. It also poses a challenge to China's film censorship system. The social problems exposed by *Across the Furious Sea* are the empathy problems of most audiences, because each audience is in the environment of the traditional Chinese family of origin. Audiences can vent their emotions and find inner comfort in such a film that truly reveals the social problems they face. In short, the deeper the film's attention to the social reality, the more it can trigger the resonance of the real audience and the extensive social discussion, increase the social discussion, and heat of the film, and make the audience gain emotional value, comfort, and improve their cognitive level, to achieve a win-win situation.

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