

Comparative Study on Narrative of Social Issues in Chinese and Korean Films in the New Era: Taking "Burning" and "An Elephant Sitting Still" as Examples

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Abstract: *The narrative of social issues in films is a topic of common concern for Chinese and Korean films, but they present different styles of film language, theme construction, and cultural expression. The Korean film "Burning" and the Chinese film "An Elephant Sitting Still" involve similar social issues, and their differences are manifested in the destruction in an unsolvable spiritual dilemma and the escape with a sense of emptiness of survival. The explosive force of constructing and deconstructing between reality and virtuality and the parallel interweaving and aggregation of multiple clues, doubts, anger, and despair linked by the "puzzle" are faintly transmitted through the night sky. Although summarizing the full picture of social issue films in China and South Korea through the case of two films is difficult, this article compares the differences between the two from three aspects: the ideological connotations and cultural causes of the films, the narrative structure and image construction, and attempts to identify the significance of the narrative of Korean social issue films in the new century for Chinese films.*

Keywords: Social issues, Film narrative, Mental distress, Multiline interweaving, Puzzle.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the new era, a number of social issue films in South Korea have been impressed by their sharp social insights: "Burning" reflects social reality through the love triangle of three young people; "Melting Pot" exposes the layers of darkness in a dark town deaf school; "Suwon" involves questioning at various levels of South Korean society; "Taxi Driver" reflects the inner struggle in the process of reversing human nature; and "Defender" portrays a lawyer who goes from being profit driven to daring to stand up for justice; I Can Speak "cries out for the victims," Fish Man's Lament "reflects the current chaotic and deformed society, capturing the transformation of capitalism with fearless eyes; and "That Guy's Voice" restores a kidnapping, extortion, and murder case. As the industrialization of Chinese cinema intensifies, a number of films reflecting social issues have emerged: the low-cost domestic suspense crime masterpiece "Heart Maze", "I am not a Medicine God", which questions the doctor-patient relationship under the scarcity of medical resources; "Steel Piano", which depicts the family and friendship of laid-off workers in Northeast China; "Elephant Sitting on the ground", which depicts the survival of marginalized characters; "Ten Thousand Arrows Through the Heart", which depicts the ups and downs of the fate of the female pole Li Baoli; "We see You in the Sky", which includes delicate details; "Twelve Citizens", who explore the process of restructuring judicial cognition; "Destiny", which presents abnormal experiences of several ordinary people; "Blind Mountain", which reveals the problem of human trafficking; and "The Story of Forged Mining Accidents". Stories of murder and fraud, such as "Blind Shaft" and "Singles", occur in the context of both spiritual and material poverty. Such social issues in film and television works have the power of realism, facing reality squarely, revealing social problems, and often presenting modern people's concerns about reality, self, and their relationship with society on the

screen in the most intuitive visual images. This article compares and analyzes the differences between the films "Burning" and "An Elephant Sitting Still" in terms of their ideological connotations and cultural origins, image construction and practical implications, narrative structure, image style, and cultural appeal. This provides inspiration for the narrative of Chinese social issue films.

2. Ideological Connotations and Cultural Causes: Destruction in an Unsolvable Spiritual Dilemma and Escape with a Sense of Existential Emptiness.

In the core discourse of rationality, science, and subject consciousness after modern times, there is a sense of hypocrisy and oppression: this rational criticism is rapidly secularized and has declined into nihilism; the pursuit of true value is simply seen as meaningless, while the addiction to despair and self-destruction continues to spread. "[1] [Li Cangdong. Chunxi (translation). Luchuan has a large amount of feces [M]. Wuhan University Press. 2022:297.] Li Cangdong's works highlight a class of characters who are immersed in the constantly spreading dilemma of nihilism and struggle to pursue true value. The characters in Hu Bo's works also fall into the dilemma of despair and nihilism in their pursuit of their own value.

The Korean social issue film 'Burning' reveals the protagonist's deep predicament of emptiness, collapsing in an unsolvable mental state, and ultimately finding liberation through murder. The protagonist in the Chinese social issue film "An Elephant Sitting Still" believes that the emptiness of survival destroys people's will and courage to live but hopes for the faint light of "that place", realizes awakening and redemption, and ultimately chooses to escape with the emptiness of survival. In fact, 'Burning' highlights the survival

status of the youth group in the postmodern society of developed capitalism in South Korea and the nihilistic dilemma they face in society. It also has certain enlightening significance for Chinese youth, who are gradually entering modern postmodern society. The establishment of a positive worldview, outlook on life, and values should draw nourishment from excellent traditional Chinese culture, and the joint efforts of schools, families, and society are extremely important. People who lack excellent cultural education will inevitably be in the opposite direction. Moreover, the analysis and exploration of domestic films based on Korean films have valuable reference significance for promoting the international dissemination of domestic films.

Li Cangdong is known as a master of Korean art films, and most of his works explore the meaning of individual existence, the relationship between individuals and the social and historical environment, and how individuals find their own order in the social system. In addition, his latest feature film, 'Burning', presents helplessness, despair, a sense of powerlessness and emptiness caused by the social pressure that individuals bear in the original pattern, which penetrates into people's hearts. The individual's difficult survival dilemma, indescribable anger, difficulty in materializing spiritual life, and sexual dilemma are all invisibly dissolved in the illusory situation. The film may seem like a normal linear narrative, but with Huimei's disappearance as the dividing line, it clearly divides the story into two contrasting parts that resemble mirrors. After the disappearance of Zihui Mei, the latter half of the film began to be shrouded in a thrilling and suspenseful atmosphere, with a sense of existence and nothingness even more blurred and vivid. Through the metaphors set by the director, we explore what truly exists and what is fictional. The appearance of reality does not equal reality; reality evades us and is constantly changing. Zhong Xiu is like a poorly skilled private detective. He tracks Ben and investigates the whereabouts of Hui Mei but makes no progress. Instead, the situation becomes increasingly mysterious and bizarre, and he himself becomes deeply trapped in the mystery, becoming increasingly confused and powerless. The trivial clues that appear in the search process provide evidence for the puzzle, but compared with the mysterious truth, the movie wants to show us the existence and emptiness of the evidence itself and the process of searching for evidence. Zhong Xiu is not only searching for the appearance of Huimei's traces but also exploring evidence of existence. Perhaps this evidence is similar to "peeling orange peels", which are all imaginary. The first half of the movie is very realistic and was developed on a logical basis of reality. Since Huimei disappeared, a mysterious atmosphere quietly emerged and was confused by various clues. "Existence" seems to occupy all thoughts as if they never existed, and young people are trapped in a sense of loneliness and powerlessness that seems to be nonexistent. Even though the two had struggled to survive, there was no trace of their existence at this moment, and after disappearing, everything about this person became completely untrue.

Nihilism has influenced the Western spirit for the past 100 years, and "contemporary nihilism is the revival of the traditional nihilistic thought in Europe under modern capitalism and its objectification." [2] [Zou Shipeng. Nihilism Research [M]. Beijing. People's Publishing House,

2016,2+191+89-90.] Martin Heidegger supports Nietzsche's view: "Nihilism is a process, a process of the highest value being degraded and lost. Nihilism is the masking and suspension of existence, Deng Xiaomang. European Nihilism and Its Overcoming - Notes on Reading Heidegger's Nietzsche. Jiangsu Social Sciences, 2008 (02): 1-8] Therefore, the shielding and cutting of existence make nothingness, as a form of existence, become nihilism. Essentially. Burning "reveals that in the fragmentation of modernity, marginalized people have a desire to pursue the meaning or value of life but also reflect on and realize the absurdity and meaninglessness of the life they are in. Young people lose their self-worth and become wandering" souls "of nothingness. In such an environment, a "raging fire" burns in their hearts, which is not only a rebellion against nothingness but also a process of seeking existence. This clearly marks the imprint of existentialist philosophy on the concept of nothingness.

The film "An Elephant Sitting Still" is adapted from the director's own novel. In the novel, there is only one line for Yu Cheng. The elephant sat on the ground because it broke one of its hind legs. Yu Cheng went to Hualien Zoo in Taiwan to pursue the elephant, which appeared to weigh 5 tons. He stepped on Yu Cheng's chest and looked at the caretaker running toward him at a distance. Yu Cheng closed his eyes. The novels are too desperate and give no hope, which has always been Hu Bo's creative style. However, in the film, the characters' goals are expressed through the reconstruction of the script, and in the multiline narrative, the author focuses more on explaining how the characters cannot survive in their respective lives. Why did they go to Manzhouli together to see elephants? The despairing figure collides in the asymmetrical and unbalanced image, bursting the suppressed melancholy and spreading widely in the low-cost production of rough scenery and hazy lighting.

In this cold and estranged society, the four main characters achieved awakening and exile. Yu Cheng called his friend's mother at the end to explain everything, indirectly completing redemption. This character is the most special in the script, and he ultimately did not answer the reason for letting Webb go. Perhaps he did not know, and neither did Hu Bo. Then, a smaller or perhaps the most ridiculous character, Li Kai, stepped forward and shot Yu Cheng. At the same time, Li Kai also completed his own exile, while Yu Cheng endured the pain and completed the final accusation with a smile. The remaining three went to Manzhouli, to an extremely abstract future, or to an ideal other place to resist this silent world. The three of them seemed to escape from the present without any hesitation, but each of them knew in their hearts that Manzhouli was just a bubble that would shatter with a poke, yet they still fled without hesitation. Since life is so harsh or disgusting, why do we not choose to temporarily escape and see that elephant sitting on the ground? In the novel, Yu Cheng explains why elephants sit on the ground, but in the film, the director does not specify the point that confuses everyone. This elephant sitting on the ground is no longer a concrete object here but rather a more complex image. It may be the spiritual sustenance of three people, just like when a bus stops on the side of the road and three people kick shuttlecock under the bus at the end of the film, people hear the sound of the elephant, and all feelings are paused in those bursts of neighing, as if awakened in the neighing, and all

emotions are triggered. Perhaps from birth, we live with a certain sense of guilt because growth must be achieved after experiencing all visible or invisible hardships, and only then will we realize at some point that we have grown up.

The extreme sense of oppression in the film is the director of Hu Bo's consistent style. From his novels, we can better experience infinite sadness and depression beyond self-awareness. Whether it is a man whose ears have been cut off, a boy who suffers from kidney disease and is abandoned by his mother living next to a pigsty, or the "me" who eats "nutritional powder" and travels to the distant land to make a living, each character in the novel is even more tragic and desperate than in the film. In the film, at least we still have a longing. Even though reality is very cold and extremely disgusting, we still have thoughts and expectations, as well as the impulse and desire to move forward. This is a warm epitome.

In short, Hu Bo constructs emotional entanglements between characters in his films and achieves a unique aesthetic experience through the presentation of emotions and feelings. The unique application of these innovative elements forms Hu Bo's unique film style. Hu Bo uses his unique narrative and visual style to create a highly personal cinematic timeline. His films have greatly subverted traditional film concepts in both content and form. Faced with absurdity, the director arranged for the protagonists not only to commit suicide but also to escape—he believed that there would be powerful and mysterious forces there that would help regenerate. Therefore, Wei Bu Huang Ling and Wang Jin took a long-distance bus to Manzhouli to search for the legendary elephant. However, at the same time, he was uncertain, questioned, and even denied this way out, just as the old man Wang Jin said: 'You can go anywhere, but you find that there is nothing different there.' Escaping was useless.

The sense of emptiness created in the film is, as Kierkegaard once said, "The world and tranquility are in a state of purity, while there is something else at the same time... However, what exactly is this? It is emptiness. What is the role of emptiness? It stirs up fear. The film seems to tell the audience that a person's life is a futile struggle, and in the end, they cannot escape the calamity of fate, ultimately turning into nothingness, and everything becomes absurd, chaotic, and meaningless. The film reveals the philosophical significance that the emptiness of existence destroys people's will and courage to live on. As Heidegger once said, "Bringing death into ourselves, although terrifying, is also a form of liberation: it liberates us from the state of enslavement that may sweep through all of our daily lives and trivial affairs, thus enabling us to engage in essential 'planning', through which we can make our lives personal and meaningful." [6] [William Barrett, Duan Dezhi. *Irrational Man* [M] Shanghai Translation Publishing House. 2007:241. The director strives to explore the essence of the problem deeply and thoroughly, allowing the audience to re-examine their own lives in the seemingly absurd artistic reality.

The narrative of social issues in these two films intentionally empties the social and historical scenes carried by the characters, making life singular and extreme. It is an overly simplistic detachment and transformation of the rich and

diverse connotations of the spirit of the reform era. Detachment means extracting only one or two connotations from the rich and diverse connotations while omitting other diverse and rich connotations. In doing so, it is equivalent to a transformation of the spirit of the times, that is, a personal narrow understanding or misinterpretation. "[7] [Wang Yichuan. Detachment and Transformation of the Spirit of the Times - Cultural Value Construction in the Reform Era from "The Chinese Partner". *Contemporary Film*, 2013 (07): 38-40.] The core of excellent films is value, which can help people see light in the dark night and prevent dawn. Movies that subvert social values and promote them will have different impacts. In contrast, whether it is "burning" destroyed in an unsolvable spiritual dilemma or "An Elephant Sitting Still" escaping with a sense of existential emptiness, young people are seeking a true value system. The artistic conception of the film may be too oppressive, but only by facing the essence and experiencing the process of emptiness and despair can they find the distant "elephant" and truly find their own value.

3. Narrative Structure: The Explosive Power of Constructing and Deconstructing between Reality and Virtuality and the Parallel Interweaving and Aggregation of Multiple Clues

As a social issue film, 'Burning' writes about life through individual memory and experience and brings the real picture of personal life into reality, achieving harmony between individual experience and the real picture. The narrative of 'An Elephant Sitting Still' starts from the narrative of group images, focusing on viewing social issues from the perspective of the collective of 'youth', 'youth', and 'old age', attempting to draw a life scene of 'wilderness' and 'hopelessness' by emphasizing shared experiences. However, the result is a distorted and deformed picture of life.

Siddhartha Field believed that "characters are the foundation of your film script; they are the heart, soul, and nervous system of your story. Before you start writing, you must understand your characters. In Li Cangdong's films, his narrative always stands away from the grand crowd and focuses more on the marginalized people at the bottom of society. Focusing on the display of images of vulnerable groups, this choice of creative themes coincides with the creative trend of China's new generation of directors. Focusing on the individual survival of people at the bottom and edge of society not only highlights Sartre's existentialist philosophy but also follows the documentary nature of cinema, which is similar to Italian neorealism's advocacy of "returning me to the common people". The focus of marginalized corners and disadvantaged groups has always been on Li Cangdong's style. These humble individuals' anger and rebellion against the distorted social order ultimately led them to become marginalized and marginalized due to their weak self-power. These 'lower class' individuals are not only economically disadvantaged and politically disadvantaged but also psychologically affected by the marginalization of their social status. They experience a decline in life, gnawing on loneliness and pain.

The movie "Burning" is adapted from the short story "Burning

the Warehouse" by the famous Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. Some thought-provoking dialogs and abstract intentions in the original work, such as "burning the warehouse" and "peeling orange peel", are preserved in the movie. The novel itself exhibits a unique Eastern artistic charm of silence, emptiness, and nothingness, and its language is concise, complete, and impressive. The film further enriched the theme, accompanied by metaphysical philosophical thinking. The director focuses on the young people of contemporary Korea, exploring the various difficulties they face when entering society, as well as the confusion and anger brought about by the cold social reality. The director perfectly blends "Burning the Warehouse" and Faulkner's short story "Burning the Stable" together, expanding the film into a suspenseful film that gives people a sense of mystery. In the original novel, the protagonist's father was not mentioned, but the director clearly grafted the father-son relationship from Faulkner's novel "Burnt stable" into the film with his literary literacy, enriching the character image of Li Zhongxiu and laying a certain foundation for his subsequent behavioral motivations. The father was imprisoned for a major mistake caused by his lack of control, which set the stage for the protagonist's imagination to flood uncontrollably and ultimately kill Ben with the knife left by his father. In his childhood, his mother fled, and his father asked him to burn all the clothes left by his mother. This raging fire contained his father's anger and his son's helplessness. His father's anger was transplanted into his son's heart so much that many years later, Zhong Xiu, who had grown up, could still often dream of that raging fire. This hidden anger was rooted in his heart, and the extremely destructive fire eventually became Zhong Xiu's tool for burning Ben's body and luxury car. Burning "leaves a lot of ambiguous swirling space, with Li Cangdong's narrative constantly constructing and deconstructing, shuttling back and forth between virtual and real, fiction and fact, imagination and existence. Movies are created through the interplay of light and shadow, immersing the audience in unsolvable confusion and guiding them to contemplate life and humanity.

The story development of "An Elephant Sitting Still" does not follow a linear temporal and spatial sequence but rather a nonlinear narrative mode of interweaving and dispersing four main characters through four stories and four lines and then gathering them together. The four main characters are connected to each other, and the four human tragicomedies are mapped to each other, depicting a bleak and cold winter day. Here, we group the stories of these four characters for analysis. We assume that the film has four stories, A, B, C, and D. Each story is cut into several paragraphs by the director, who gradually connects the four characters until the end of the film, using the excuse of everyone going to Manzhouli to see An Elephant Sitting Still. During the gathering process, there were also minor entanglements and connections between their respective characters. For example, Webb and the old man Wang Jin lived in the same building, and the two had met before but later became intertwined due to their billiard clubs; Huang Ling and Wei Bu are set as students of the same school, Wei Bu has feelings of admiration for Huang Ling, and the two also have an inner connection; and the connection with Yu Cheng was formed because Wei Bu accidentally pushed his younger brother Yu Shuai downstairs. The director did not

allocate average time to each person according to a fixed nonlinear narrative rhythm but rather pieced together these scattered memory fragments in a seemingly scattered and jumping temporal and spatial layout, forming a unique and highly personalized film style. It is precisely this scattered narrative that allows us to deeply appreciate that each person in the film is like a spring, gradually pushed to a breathless state during these four hours. However, if we dissect and examine these stories separately, the accumulated and suppressed emotions will lose their power, leading to the final point of explosion losing its original impact. Therefore, this seemingly chaotic multi clue narrative is actually the most appropriate way to interpret this story.

I hope that future Chinese social issue films can connect life experiences with economic and social changes, see the warmth of family and the warmth of human nature, shoulder historical responsibilities, learn from the advantages of Korean films, explore the depth of social issues, and pay attention to the breadth of changes over time.

4. Imagery Construction and Expression: Linking Doubt, Resentment, and Despair through "Puzzles"—The Faint Light Transmitting through the Night Sky

The outer shell of the film "burning" appears to depict the inequality between the rich and poor classes in real society, as well as the struggles and confusion of young people entering society. However, it actually starts from the surface of reality, incorporating dreams and illusions to construct a mysterious society. The boundaries between reality, illusion, existence, and extinction cannot be clearly defined. The director attempts to establish a connection between doubts that are difficult to obtain truth and the resentment of young people today, constructing a "mysterious" connection and exploring the value that exists in nothingness. At the beginning of the story, various metaphors and blank spaces are constructed and created throughout the entire film, giving people endless questions and imagination.

The imagery in the film successfully creates the burning theme. The visual matrix of fire is also the appearance of the burning theme in the film. The image of "fire" is repeatedly emphasized in the film, and all the details respond to it. From Zhong Xiu's childhood experiences, Ben's lighter experience, the burning of the greenhouse, the scene of fire in the art exhibition, to the angry fire contained in Zhong Xiu's extreme behavior in the end, Zhong Xiu's empty emotions and desires that are difficult to fill, and the search for "existence and nonexistence" brought about by Huimei's mysterious disappearance, all provide the premise for this "burning". In the film, Li Cangdong calls Huimei's cat BOIL, which is called boiling water or extreme anger in English. In other words, extreme anger is burning hatred. Therefore, in the film, the cat is both a cat and a noncat, which can be understood as the director concretizing the burning hatred in the protagonist's heart. The crayon drawings of firefighters in the "Longshan Tragedy" in the art museum, as well as the strong light and glaring sunlight that repeatedly appears behind the protagonist's cheeks in the film, are all intentional creations of the film's burning theme. In fact, at the beginning of the film,

Huimei's performance of the mime "peeling orange peel" already revealed the existence and emptiness of imagination that the entire film aimed to explore. Li Cangdong intends to construct a crisis ridden and oppressive contemporary society, using extremely restrained techniques and the protagonist's calm and introverted performance to uncover the most intense internal chaos beneath seemingly calm daily life. The mystery of the movie also continues until the end without a final answer, but it leaves us with much blank space and triggers the audience to have another understanding of the real world.

The symbolic technique is a narrative method used in "An Elephant Sitting Still", also known as "Golden Fleece", which comes from a fable in Greek mythology and symbolizes the treasure that people are pursuing; the elephant symbolizes both despair that cannot struggle and a faint glimmer of hope. These are naturally integrated with the style of the film, constantly accumulating the characters' inner emotions in subtle detail. Like the horse in "The Turin Horse" and the leopard in "The Snow of Kilimanjaro", the elephant used by Hubo can be considered a transformation of the image of a horse or a leopard. They all make the audience see themselves, or the common destiny of humanity, in them. Elephants with a broken hind leg can only sit on the ground, or horses mercilessly whipped and leopards inexplicably dead, they evoke the compassion of philosophers and possess powerful emotional power. When a few dull and rough roars broke through the night, they continued to move toward the Manzhouli giant. Whether they arrived or turned back, the movie ended in a beam of lights that lit up in the dark night.

The narrative of social issue films requires both the courage to face harsh realities and perseverance to grasp the course of life; not only should we expose the evil of human nature, but we should also present the beauty of human nature. Chinese social issue films can draw inspiration from Korean films and move forward with a more stable posture, as they not only reflect the difficulties of life but also project the light of the times and the path of life.

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