

# The Shift of Realistic Social Significance of Domestic Funeral Films -- From Fitial Son And Fitial Piety to Lighting Up The Stars

Yangyushuang Mi<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Literature of Theatre Film and Television, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai, Shanghai, 200040, China

**Abstract:**As a subgroup of realistic films, funeral films have gradually begun to explore the funeral industry and death education in depth, arousing people's thoughts of the concept of death in recent years. By combing and studying funeral films and watching and learning related films, this paper selects two representative works, "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" and "Lighting Up The Stars", to carry out in-depth research and analysis of their realistic social significance. And it will based on the realistic social background of the funeral reform system changes and other factors to analyze the narrative features of domestic funeral films and the shift of realistic social significance.

## 1. Introduction

In the past two years, funeral-themed works in the film and television industry have been shown on the silver screen to meet audiences. This kind of film has broadened the subject matter of realistic films and discussed the living status of funeral practitioners in the minority industry and the death education of contemporary Chinese people. People are keen to make up for the long-missing death education lessons through funeral-themed films. According to the survey statistics, today's young people are no longer as taboo as the older generation about the topic of death. Two sets of data can reflect the change in the value of life of contemporary Chinese people. As of December 5, 2022, according to the official website of the China Organ Donation Administrative Center [1], more than 5.6 million people in China have registered as volunteer donors, among which the post-90s generation accounts for more than 54%. 2021 Chinese Wills Database White Paper[2] released by China Will Database also shows that the number of wills consultations continues to increase throughout the year, among which the number of the generation born in the 00s has increased by 14.42% in the past year.

However, at present, there is no clear definition of funeral films in the academic circle, and the funeral film is only discussed as a subtopic of realistic film. There are a lot of text research articles on funeral films in China, but most of them focus on the plot research of a single film. Other relevant research objects of funeral films are foreign films. For example, Zhu Qin's "The transformation and sublimation of Japanese traditional view of life and death from the film Departures" studies the transformation of the Japanese view of life and death based on the film content. In recent years, Luo Xinyi and Li Jingrui's A Brief Analysis of the Social Significance

and Function of reality-themed films analyzed the relationship between the topic selection of realistic films and social hot spots from the perspective of the social function of media. As for the research on the combination of funeral films and healing effects, the only research in China at present is "Funeral rituals in the film texts and its psychological healing effects—Take 'Seven Days in Heaven' and 'Zinnia Flower' as examples" by Lei-Xuan Xu, which analyzes the development and function of the funeral ceremony by film text.

To sum up, this paper will combine multiple disciplines and perspectives, firstly summarizes the definition of funeral films and the development period of domestic funeral films through the discipline knowledge of funeral culturology, and combine two of the classic funeral films "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" and "Lighting Up The Stars" to analyze the narrative characteristics of domestic funeral films. And then, the relevant knowledge of cinema therapy is used to study the transformation of their social significance.

## 2. Definition and period division of domestic funeral films

The Chinese word for the funeral has two characters, they mean Laying the coffin and interring and mean burying respectively[3]. Since modern times, the funeral refers more to the method of handling the body of the deceased and the form of mourning for the deceased. As for the definition of funeral films, in terms of content, the content of a film is that the protagonist engages in or participates in funeral activities, and the theme of the film is to discuss the views of life and death or funeral culture. Only those that meet the above two characteristics at the same time can be called "funeral films". In terms of form, even in today's diversified film

\* Corresponding author: Miyangys@163.com

and television, most funeral films in China are feature films. Although a 1989 documentary film "The funeral of Pyramid" can be searched, the video material is nowhere to be found. It is a social education film about funeral reform. This work records a real case -- the funeral of old Lady Chen, showing the various processes of the old funeral, which cost more than ten thousand yuan before and after, resulting in a large waste of money, goods and materials. It criticizes the disadvantages of earth burial and propagates the advantages of cremation. Other funeral documentaries were shot by amateurs and made with cursory Voice-overs and poor editing techniques.

Funeral films in China are closely related to domestic social policies. According to the division of the funeral reform period, since New China in the discipline of Funeral culture[4], the existing domestic funeral films can be simply divided into two periods.

### **2.1.Period of publicity and reflection on Funeral system (1985-2011)**

During this period, when funeral management was standardized and legalized, there were three comedy films about funeral reform and reflection on funeral customs. In order to actively promote the reform of the funeral system, several films were made to promote cremation. In 1993, "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" came into being, which is an early classic comedy film against superstition. The actors selected are all familiar actors who are engaged in comedy performances all year round: Chen Pesi, Zhao Lirong, Wei Zongwan, etc. The work revolves around a small incident in which an old woman in a rural area faking her death, and analyzes the malformation of funeral forms at that time. Then, in 2002, "The Crying Woman" told the story of a poor woman forced by life to make money by wailing at funerals, and discussed the relationship between expensive funerals and the traditional Chinese culture of filial piety. In 2007, "Going home" adapted from a real event and told a warm story of smuggling workers' bodies back to their hometown. The film also invited Zhao Benshan, a very famous comedian at that time, and triggered people's thinking about the rural complex of fallen leaves returning to the roots -- to revert to one's origin.

### **2.2.Period of exploring the spiritual Connotation of Funeral Culture (2012 -- present)**

As China's funeral reform has entered a stage of deepening reform and new development, the discussion on the theme of funeral films has gradually returned from the reform of the funeral system to the discussion on the inner spiritual connotation of Chinese people's concept of life and death. After "Fly with Cranes" (2012), "Laughing to die" (2015) and "The Farewell Girls" (2017) tried and explored this goal, and it was not until "Lighting Up The Stars"(2022) that we could see a film that confronts the funeral industry and death education directly. While telling the heartwarming story

of young Mo Sanmei and little girl Wu Xiaowen, the film focuses on the need for death education and the survival status of morticians, prompting people to reflect on life and death. In addition to continuing the narrative characteristics of the earlier films, these films also have essential thematic differences, and the realistic significance of the films also has intrinsic differences.

## **3.Narrative characteristics of domestic funeral films: Take "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" and "Lighting Up The Stars" as examples**

### **3.1.Comedy style**

Comedy is a type of film where realism is relatively easy to penetrate. For a long time, Chinese realism films are very good at telling the core story of critical satire through a relative comedy style of expression. In this kind of creative environment, domestic funeral films also carry out this feature, the seemingly absurd story behind the reflection of the real social reality, with both comedic effect and realistic significance.

Only from the director and actor configuration, it can be seen that "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" is a comedy film. It stands from the perspective of the small citizen class, and tells the harm of burial and the burden caused by big funerals, in the superimposed way of ethical comedy, misunderstanding comedy and comedy of scheme, combining teaching with entertainment. The rigorous treatment of plot details makes the film achieve a balance of seriousness and absurdity. For example, the old lady's decision to fake her death has three layers of motivation: to test filial piety, to break the disaster and to supervise her husband. It is progressive and convincing. "Lighting Up The Stars" is also a comedy, with a lot of childish things in the story that make people laugh. Both films have a "funeral for the living", but the combination of circumstances and consequences makes things absurd and believable. Under the premise that the audience believes it is true, they can easily enjoy "The Emperor's funeral". Because no one really died during the period, everyone will laugh freely when there is a funny point, without considering the sense of moral seriousness and reverence and respect for the dead for the moment. Even some of the comic baggage in this kind of film is set in the funeral, for example, the film dialogue of "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" is very humorous and the music of the plot of "Lighting Up The Stars" is also very light and cheerful, such as Xiaowen creates a tremendous uproar at the crematorium and draw on the urn.

### **3.2.Filial piety and funeral**

The Chinese concept of the funeral is profound and rich. For thousands of years, it has been influenced by the three families of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and the funeral is the traditional etiquette that Confucianism attaches great importance to Confucius

believed that children should treat their parents with "When parents are alive, serve them with courtesy; After the parents died, they were buried according to the ceremony and sacrificed according to the ceremony." [5] Therefore, people link funeral standards and etiquette with the degree of filial piety, which is reflected in many funeral films. For example, in "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety", The woman was delighted to hear that her son had promised to bury her and praises her daughter for her filial piety in sending a coffin. This conventional thinking also results in some sons and daughters not showing filial piety to their parents at all, but pretending to spend a lot of money on the funeral ceremonies in order to show their filial piety to outsiders. For example, the monks in "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" are all pretended by the orchestra members. The relatives who come to pay their respects are in mourning one second and go to eat braised pork the next. In "Lighting Up The Stars", the funeral of Xiaowen's grandmother is the same, the daughter-in-law urges to finish the funeral process and even scolds the undertakers in front of the old lady's remains. In these scenes, the funeral either becomes a carnival for the living or a process of showing filial piety, which accentuates the ugliness and sadness of human nature, which is very ironic. On the contrary, the funeral of Mo sanmei's father is simple and open-minded but contains the filial piety of son and daughter. Mo Sanmei and her sister, who are the undertakers, personally coffin the old man, and those who participate in the funeral ceremony are reverent and respectful, especially when Mo Sanmei puts the old man's urn into the fireworks and bursts it into the sky, and he successfully completes the test question left by his father - don't be extravagant and wasteful, be unique. Although it was less formal and discreet than a traditional funeral, filial piety was more evident in the fulfillment of his father's last will, which is a kind of inner piety and filial attitude, rather than the stereotypical process.

### 3.3. Wedding and funeral

In "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety", a comedic technique is used in which the funeral procession and the modern wedding procession collide, causing a road blockage. Then both sides, not to be outdone, begin to clash, with guitars and other instruments in the wedding band and suona horns in the funeral procession, modern cars and coffins carried by man, the bride and the deceased, one representing joy and the other sorrow, in a series of contrasting groups, and finally the coffin is opened and the old woman who faked her death is forced to jump out of the coffin, scaring everyone away, and this absurd "match" ends with the truth being revealed. In "Lighting Up The Stars", the director places the store of the funeral business "Going to Heaven" next to a wedding store, using a number of overhead shots to examine the location of the two stores. The glittering and white narrow storefronts also show the gap between the two industries. The funeral industry is often seen as a symbol of bad luck, while the wedding business is a symbol full of beautiful yearning. The director combined these two

things with contrasting meanings to make a reverse metaphor. The wedding ceremony of funeral practitioner Wang Jianren and Yin Baixue walked directly on the red carpet from the wedding shop to the funeral shop. This dramatic arrangement is a metaphorical expression of the director's view of life and the objective law that good things will eventually come to death, allowing people to look at the funeral industry objectively. The wedding also shows the current state of affairs of the funeral workers - their marital problems, which they may end up having to digest internally, especially when Xiaowen's birth mother is called by the sanmei to work with him in the funeral business, and it can be deduced from the episode at the end that perhaps Sanmei and Xiaowen's mother will live together afterwards.

### 3.4. Children in the funeral

There are always one or two children in funeral movies, from grandson Xiaoxiao in "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety", to grandson Zhiwa in "Fly with Crane," to Wu Xiaowen in "Lighting Up The Stars". They're all six or seven years old, but compared to previous funeral films, "Lighting Up The Stars" is the first film to introduce a sober children's perspective, because the children's characters before that were very ignorant and didn't have a clear understanding of death. That's why XiaoXiao talked to his grandmother, but the adults thought he was dreaming. In "Fly with Crane," the grandson Zhiwa buries his grandfather alive like a sheep. In early funeral movies, children were often used as tool men, doing things that adults couldn't do but that such a character had to do in order to move the story forward. Adults may think that children do not know anything, so it is acceptable to do a lot of things, but through the film "Lighting Up The Stars", we find that in fact, children know everything. Xiaowen does not understand life and death at first and frantically looks for her grandmother. Later, she is given death education by sanmei many times, and in the school performance of the skit "filial son throwing a bowl" and so on. All said that children can actually perceive life and death, so the correct death education is very necessary.

### 4. The realistic significance shift of funeral films

Due to the difference in social background and the tasks of the times, the tendencies and themes of the story change considerably from "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" to "Lighting Up The Stars". Whereas "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" deals with the transformation of the elderly's view of funerals, "Lighting Up The Stars" is a two-stranded structure that intertwines the presentation of Xiaowen's slow understanding of life and death and Sanmei's maturity as a mortician. Both funeral films have educational and promotional significance, but the content and target audience of the education has changed, while from 'Lighting Up The Stars' onwards, there is also a new function of reflection and healing. One of the

meanings of the funeral industry's existence is to heal the living, so funeral films are imbued with this meaning.

#### **4.1.The significance of publicity and education**

"Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" carries out to the end the function of promoting cremation funeral form and educating people to carry out funeral reform. It combines the harm of burial and the burden caused by extravagant funerals with comedy, and plays the role of comedy "combining education with fun". It takes the backward consciousness of extravagant funerals and overusing farmland as the theme to make people realize the harm of extravagant funerals and burials in the ground. So "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" has a very good social effect. With the change of the times and environment, the content of propaganda and education has also changed, from the external form of the funeral to death education. The line of Wu Xiaowen in "Lighting Up The Stars" has aroused people's attention to death education. Xiaowen's grandmother dies in the opening scene, but she doesn't realize this until a quarter of the way through the film. Mo Sanmei tells Wu Xiaowen what death is because of his outburst, but the education here is also Xiao Wen crying forced to accept, after being forced to accept the truth, adults and Xiao Wen re-education, through the use of "stars" this kind of romantic expression, to tell her where did the dead grandmother go. Although this is to protect children's psychology, the glorification of funeral supplies and the fact of death is a subconscious avoidance of death, and the inability to face and accept death. Therefore, only by popularizing correct death education can society and people not avoid "death" and discuss all aspects of "death" with a normal mentality.

#### **4.2.The significance of reflection**

"Lighting Up The Stars" also adds two layers of reflective meaning, aimed at the general public and undertakers respectively. The first one is the public's attitude towards the funeral profession. Xiao Wen is bullied and verbally attacked by his classmates in kindergarten because his family is in the funeral business: those who eat the food of the dead. As well as when Xiaowen gets into trouble in kindergarten and teachers call her parents, Sanmei's profession is also unspeakable in the eyes of the public. This makes audiences reflect on whether they had such prejudices before. Secondly, good and evil people are mixed up in the funeral industry, so morticians need to reflect. Apart from those who are dedicated to their profession, some have lost their humanity, just like vultures who stare at the dying in order to eat meat and have no professional ethics. Mo Sanmei has grown from the latter to the former. At the beginning, he was skilled and indifferent in funeral work, but in the end, he showed reverence and respect for everyone's life. He takes each funeral seriously with a pious heart, for instance, shouting funeral horns hard for the dead, and standing in the perspective of the bereaved family, so that the bereaved family members can get

relief, peace of mind, and satisfaction. All these growth and changes could not have been achieved without his father and Xiaowen's influence.

#### **4.3.The significance of healing**

Research on film therapy mentions the cathartic and soothing effect of films, which evokes a certain kind of emotional trauma in the viewer more visually and imaginatively, thus cathartically healing real-life emotions that cannot be released[6]. In addition to creating a warm atmosphere, the touching story of the funeral film, coupled with the film's soundtrack, also helps the survivors to release their grief and true emotions more quickly and completely, and the act of crying at this time really helps the survivors to express their emotions and thus to heal. These negative emotional reactions can lead to psychological illnesses and personality changes and distortions if they are not expressed in a certain way. Therefore, funeral films can revive the negative emotions about life and death that the viewer has stored at one time, thus releasing the repressed emotions in real life or even crying out, which is a more intimate way for the bereaved to heal their hearts than a funeral ceremony. By discussing the topic of life and death, funeral films can successfully communicate to audiences the basic guidelines for maintaining the dignity of life - reverence for death and respect for the value of individual life - thereby soothing the hearts of the bereaved and allowing the living to look death in the eye and cherish life. "Lighting Up The Stars" also portrays a characteristic of Chinese funeral culture: the healing of the hearts of the living, especially evident in the second and fourth funerals conducted by sanmei, where the grief caused by the death of a loved one is soothed or repaired as much as possible through funeral rituals. Seemingly about death, but actually about life, it explores the topic of how the bereaved person lives, and through the film makes up for some of the regrets people have about the loss of their loved ones and some of the lack of education about death.

### **5.Conclusion**

Through sorting and classifying domestic funeral films and analysing the narrative characteristics and thematic meanings of the films "Fitial Son And Fitial Piety" and "Lighting Up The Stars", it is concluded that: At present, as a hotly discussed film genre, funeral films should find a balance between comedy and reality in the narrative characteristics, especially in terms of style control, so as to grasp audience orientation while exploring the depth of the topic. Among the three levels of meaning analysis, there is still much room for exploration in the sense of reflection and healing, so there is still a long way to go in the study of funeral films.

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