

Based on the Theory of Agenda Setting – Analyzing the Propaganda of Films during the Pandemic

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Abstract. Now that China has entered the post-epidemic era, with the normalization of the epidemic, should the Chinese film industry continue to uphold the purpose of political propaganda? How can films better achieve political propaganda's effect rather than numb the audience? This research hopes to answer these questions. This article analyzes the role of political propaganda in different types of films in China during the COVID-19 epidemic (2020-2022) and makes relevant recommendations. Based on communication psychology, agenda setting, and symbolic interaction theory, the effects of audiences watching movies are classified and analyzed, and it is concluded that the means of propaganda include direct or subtle propaganda. This paper finds that when a crisis event occurs, the film's narrative logic should serve politics, to achieve the purpose of persuading the public and gaining recognition, to get rid of the crisis. Subtle propaganda methods are more used in movies other than the main theme movies during the epidemic to promote the recovery of the epidemic and strengthen the role of national cohesion. It indicates that after the normalization of the epidemic, the development of the Chinese film industry should further develop this kind of subtle propaganda.

1. Introduction

Since 2019, China has entered the epidemic period, the market has been depressed, and the economy has been sluggish. Chinese films significantly restored the people's livelihood and the economy and brought the country's development and operations back on track during the epidemic. During that time, realistic-themed films and many themes and types achieved good box office results and social recognition. After three years of the epidemic, the film industry has developed. Conversely, the Chinese films released during the three years of the epidemic will still bring some reflection and thinking. For instance, how movies during the epidemic can restore the public's momentum and attract people in depression. Whether the Chinese government has used film to carry out related political propaganda activities, most people criticized that movies should be an art form rather than a political tool, whereas movie is often used to assist with politics during the pandemic in China.

However, for the post-epidemic period, there are a large number of researchers to consider, including reflecting on the modern online theater [1], thoughts on Film promotion strategy [2], film as cultural consumption [3], and more. The 17th China Changchun Film Festival summarized the films during the epidemic and provided constructive suggestions for the development of the film industry. It believes that film art is ideological, and at the same time, films during the epidemic period should pay more attention to the public's perspective and impress the audience from the

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perspective of people's emotions [4]. At the same time, the new mainstream film production is a film form recognized by the market under the normalization of epidemic prevention and control [5]. Since 2020, "the traditional Chinese film industry has been deconstructed", and the premiere of online movies has followed the release of online premieres [6].

This paper aims to explain the propaganda function of movies with the agenda-setting theory, besides figuring out the communication effect that the movie has on the masses. On this account, there is almost no analysis of film announcements during the epidemic period. Based on the analysis of the dissemination effect of Chinese films during the epidemic period in this study, it is hoped that Chinese films, as an art industry, can be better developed not only as an art form, on the other hand, to play a political function.

2. The Analysis of Different Types of Pandemic Movies in Propaganda

2.1. The agenda setting of war films

As an art form that seeks to convey emotions and aesthetics, movies inevitably possess a political function. Film propaganda can be traced back to World War I, which started in 1914 [7]. During this time, central powers, governments, and allied forces began to recognize film's power as a propaganda tool. Films were used to create idealized versions of a particular nation or

military force, demonize the enemy, and inspire patriotism and support for the war effort [8]. Propaganda films were also used to shape public opinion and influence government policy. The first major propaganda film was "The Battle of the Somme" in 1916, which the British government produced. It was designed to help fundraise and recruit soldiers for the war, and it was hugely popular, with an estimated 20 million people seeing it in the UK alone. They noticed that film had the propaganda function in the second world War and The Cold War period. During the Cold War, the film industries of the Soviet Union and the United States focused their political propaganda on sports. They produced a series of Cold War films that used sports as propaganda, such as the best-selling "Rocky IV" [9]. It can be seen that movies have always played a role in political propaganda and are not only limited to China. At the same time, this kind of propaganda effect will be particularly prominent in particular periods, such as the period between the two world wars. This study of Chinese films during the epidemic period hopes to reveal that during the specific period of the epidemic, the role of this kind of propaganda once again showed up.

For the movie industry, 2019 is a critical growth stage for the Chinese film market. During the year, the total box office revenue of the film market in Mainland China reached 64.28 billion yuan, a record high. At the same time, Chinese films have also gained more and more attention and recognition in the international market, such as the successful release of films such as "The Wandering Earth" overseas.

After the movie theater reopened on July 20, 2020, the movie's total box office broke 113 million in the first week and reached 1.736 billion in the sixth week. On the first day after the "QiXi Festival" (The Seventh Night of July, known as Chinese Valentine's Day), the national single-day box office exceeded 525 million. Although the Chinese film market is gradually recovering in 2020, the long-term impact of the epidemic continues. The film industry needs to adapt to new consumption and marketing models and explore more innovative and flexible production methods to adapt to future challenges and opportunities.

To discuss whether theater movies will involve political propaganda and how it will be carried out, the movies of 2020-2022 are classified according to the subject matter of film shooting, and the movies are divided into comedy, action, animation, plot, war, science fiction, and others, discussing different types of films. Among them, the themes of war movies are mostly linked to the spirit of Chinese socialism in Chinese history, which gained great attention and the box office reached nearly \$461 million. Thus, this article will start with the main theme movies of war themes, taking the movie "Eight Hundred" as an example.

This movie, released in August 2019, starts with a little-known historical incident and tells the historical event of the Battle of Songhu. From the selection of film materials, although the "Eight Hundred Heroes" is a superficial touch in the history of the Songhu Battle, even from a military point of view, it does not have a

great record. Whereas from a political point of view, this material selection is undoubtedly of special significance. Since 1938, to arouse the patriotism and national spirit of the people, the national government has set eight hundred fighters as a symbol of heroic nationalism for media propaganda in extraordinary times, including heroic deeds in the form of movies, books, and newspapers [10]. Analyzing from the audio-visual language of "Eight Hundred", with Suzhou Creek as the boundary, the north bank is the four-line warehouse for desperate battles, and the south bank is the concession of paradise on earth. There is a strong contrast between the desolate war and the superficial peace of singing and dancing. The depiction and performance of the characters on both sides of the strait ultimately focus on reflection on the current situation of the family and the country. The description of each of the Eight Hundred Heroes connected the thoughts of the two sides of the strait to complete the construction of a national community, reflecting the profound nationalist spirit [11]. Similar to "Eight Hundred", "Changjin Lake" was also released in 2021. These works are protagonist melody films that promote China's mainstream thinking and the spirit of the times. They are filmed on major historical events and integrate the ideological and political elements of family unity and national unity into the film's audio-visual language and the characters' moving pictures.

2.2.Semiotics-based Analysis of Chinese Animation and Drama Film Propaganda

In recent years, the production of domestic animation films has become more and more sophisticated. Taking "New God List: Yang Jian" released in 2022 as an example, although it does not use propaganda as the main purpose of making the film, there exists potential political propaganda from the specific symbol construction. The film mainly makes a second story creation and modification of the character Yang Jianyi in ancient mythology to make it more suitable for today's aesthetics. Regarding the movie's content, "Yang Jian" only retains a small part of traditional Chinese mythology. From the beginning, when Yang Jian suppressed his younger sister Yang Chan under the mountain, and the end, when Chen Xiang splits the mountain to save his mother, the story is made up of many fragments. Moreover, the most crucial publicity of this movie comes from his characterization. From the movie's beginning, Yang Jian's image is handsome and unrestrained, a "handsome guy" image that combines contemporary aesthetics. However, at the same time, he is also a loser, a down-and-out fairy but still leisurely and happy [12]. Simultaneously, the film showcases myriad cultural symbols with distinctive Chinese characteristics that resonate with the audience. These include Wan Luo's en-charming flying dance in Yuefu, Shen Gongbao astride a white tiger, the evocative depiction of the Penglai fairyland, and the portrayal of Yuding as a seemingly righteous individual concealing underlying selfishness. These unique symbols, such as

the "immortals," the "flying dance," the utilization of calligraphy brushes and ink, and the depiction of the ethereal "Penglai fairyland," are instantly recognizable to the viewers. By recognizing these traditional Chinese cultural symbols, audiences can anticipate the film's direction and adjust their mindset accordingly, aligning themselves with the movie's values—namely, preserving Chinese traditional culture and achieving a subtle influence. This hidden political propaganda symbol is vividly displayed in animated movies. Furthermore, this cultural symbol can be seen in some drama movies.

For example, in the movie "Life Events" released in 2022, the traditional Chinese funeral culture is the entry point, including "Wuhan dialect", "dating agency", "paper dolls", and more, using a kind of urban culture of the citizen class to promote Chinese-style romance and China's unique way of looking at death. The connotation of promoting the image of inheriting traditional Chinese culture is to induce citizens to gain a sense of cultural identity with the country. Its essence is also a means to enhance the collective sense of honor and enhance collective cohesion.

Subtle propaganda techniques in films can effectively immerse the audience in the intended cinematic atmosphere, facilitating their acceptance of themes such as patriotism and familial bonds portrayed through the narrative and visual elements. Additionally, the depiction of the decline of traditional culture can serve as a means to convey the importance of preserving and safeguarding cultural heritage, allowing viewers to grasp and appreciate this concept on a deeper level within the context of the film. Compared with direct political propaganda in war or main-themed films, subtle political propaganda is less detectable and easier to be accepted by the audience. This symbolic propaganda is more systematically used and remembered by the audience when encountering real scene symbols. Thus, the spiritual cohesion brought by the symbols of this traditional culture has enabled the people of the whole country to have a strong collectivist spirit during the epidemic. To a certain extent, it has dispelled the oppressive feeling of the epidemic.

2.3. Analysis of Chinese Science Fiction & Action Films Based on Communication Psychology

Chinese sci-fi-themed movies have made great breakthroughs in modern times, and its specific performance is taking "The Wandering Earth" as an example, from special effects to plots. He has made great contributions to Chinese science fiction films. From the point of view of the movie's publicity methods, among the 2020-2022 sci-fi movies, "Lonely on the Moon", as a summer file in 2022, had already gained great popularity and attention before it started broadcasting. In the online publicity before the film's release, through Douyin and other self-media channels, the efforts of the actors to shoot were released, and the selling points were created with seriousness and sincerity. Taking the Douyin platform as an example, the top video of Lonely Moon's

official promotional account is "analyzing the 45-second performance footage of the male protagonist after he got in touch with the earth", starting from the righteousness of the country, interpreting the actor's performance layer by layer, and starting to see everyone, did not give up on him to the country, even if he is a small maintenance worker, in the end, it is personal emotions, the touch, and admiration for the heroine's company. This kind of propaganda reflected in publicity and distribution is often subtle. Based on Hovland's communication psychology analysis, narrative can create a connection between the character and the audience, and the angle from which people "recognize" the character will be affected by the propaganda of the mass media so that they can see the world from the character's perspective. In the promotional film "Lonely Walking on the Moon", through the analysis of the actor's performance content in the promotion, the audience can get the same role experience as the actor, that is, let the viewer integrate with the role, and subtly put this collectivism on the individual. Subtly putting this collectivism before individualism while attracting more audience to watch the movie, it also changed the audience's thinking very well, achieving the purpose of political propaganda. This awareness that the collective is greater than the individual undoubtedly plays an important role during the epidemic. Group cohesion is essential for facing these challenges when a major public health event occurs in the country. The public must understand the connotation of the government's policies, and at the same time, under this kind of patriotism, to achieve the goal of controlling the epidemic in the short term and reducing casualties. For example, one-fifth of the post-90s volunteers in Jiangsu supported the fight against the epidemic as material transportation or shelter volunteer [13]. With these volunteers' help, the epidemic's work has been carried out more smoothly. With the materials and medical staff in place, the number of casualties in the epidemic has decreased accordingly.

While in action-type movies, this purpose is mostly presented through the background or plot description. For example, the movies "Anti-Corruption" and "Anti-Corruption Storm 5" released in 2021, are based on the national anti-crime and evil government decree and the anti-corruption and clean government policy. When people watch an action movie, they often focus on the action part and use "explosion" and "hand-to-hand combat" to stimulate the audience to bring a unique viewing experience. The background cuts in and starts to promote. For example, in the serious case of anger, the male protagonist was suppressed from performing the task because he was upright and refused to give the leader a back door before performing the task, resulting in his partner's sacrifice. Using this as a fuse, it emphasizes the importance of a clean government.

2.4. Analysis of Movies with the Theme of the Epidemic

Based on the theory of popular culture, culture is divided into traditional culture, that is, elegant culture and

popular culture. Mass culture is different from elegant culture, a culture whose main audience is the grassroots people. However, due to factors such as politics and ideology, the country's requirements for culture have led to the commercialization and standardization of all art. From the perspective of the Chinese film industry, it is obvious that due to China's special ideology and national requirements, it is "dancing in shackles". The film industry has not only existed as an art but also appeared in the form of commercialization. Bringing economic benefits is the primary pursuit. At the same time, based on the above analysis, almost all film categories will meet the needs of political propaganda in a specific form. Is this political need necessary?

It is worth noting that many Chinese movies with epidemic or medical themes appeared during the epidemic period. Representatives include "Hug You Through the Cold Winter", "Chinese Doctor", "The Most Beautiful Retrograde," and more. Based on the above differences in the political propaganda methods of different types of films, the political propaganda of films during the epidemic period exists. At the same time, it can be seen from the word-of-mouth test conducted on the Internet platform that the response to these films is positive. During the epidemic, movies with the theme of medical treatment or epidemic review the various hardships of the epidemic in the past three years. From the creation of different characters, background descriptions, and audio-visual language, the audience can truly feel the hardships brought by the epidemic and, simultaneously, be firm—in the national beliefs of the audience. Influence the audience through the film industry to improve the government's credibility to overcome the difficulties of the epidemic better. During the epidemic period, it is the most vulnerable period for the Chinese people. Due to the large number of casualties, the state has issued a series of policies to adjust and respond accordingly. Movies make the process of policy implementation smoother by subtly influencing the audience. To sum up, the role of film as a means of political propaganda cannot be abandoned.

3. Suggestions for the Chinese Film Industry

Today, people have left the period of the epidemic and entered the normalization of the epidemic. During the normalization of the epidemic, whether the film should still be used as political propaganda or be turned into pure art. To sum up, all types of films have such means of publicity, and at the same time, when they appear invisibly, the audience is less aware of them, and they will bring positive effects to society. The political propaganda of contemporary films should appear as a hidden symbol in the form of art. While not ignoring the film's artistry, it achieves the purpose of national management and political propaganda.

4. Conclusion

This study found that different types of movie propaganda methods are different, and the appearance of political propaganda in movies will bring certain positive effects to people. This study first classifies Chinese films during the epidemic period by the content of film creation. Military war films are prone to main theme films, and the political propaganda of such films is the most obvious. Generally, a certain political tendency will appear from the beginning of film material selection, mainly based on Chinese historical stories and famous wars. Through the description of the content and the shaping of the characters' characteristics, the Chinese people's spirit is created, and at the same time, it reflects a strong patriotism. The rise of Chinese animation let the audience understand the Chinese characteristics under the traditional cultural symbols, using myths and stories as the carrier, mainly through shaping animated characters, including characters, characters, objects, scene settings, and other symbols to connect mainstream Chinese values. In feature films, this kind of value will also appear in cultural symbols, while in action films, a specific policy will be deepened through the narration of the story's background. Coordinate state governance. The propaganda of science fiction films is reflected in the means of propaganda. This study aims to analyze the diversity of the means of propaganda in the film category. However, a film can have various means of propaganda mentioned above, and at the same time, this kind of propaganda is essential and inevitable. Through the study of the propaganda function of movies during the epidemic period, this study found that in this special period of the epidemic, movies, as an art industry, brought comfort to the people through political propaganda and promoted the recovery of the economy and people's livelihood during the epidemic. It provides constructive advice for the follow-up special period of the film industry to choose what it means to carry out publicity services. However, since this research is based on limited articles, the analysis of the film is not perfect, and it only focuses on the aspect of political propaganda, which has certain limitations. Through the limited analysis of the film mentioned above categories, it is hoped that the findings of this article can bring some references to the film industry under the normalization of the epidemic, and hope that the film industry can break through the predicament of the epidemic and achieve greater progress.

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