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Cultural Identity and Realistic Reflection: Commonalities and Differences in Chinese and Korean Disaster Movies

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Abstract: ***Disaster movies, as a classic film genre, aim to present the essence of disasters and the brilliance of humanity through stunning audio-visual effects and a tragic aesthetic core. The commonality between Chinese and Korean disaster movies lies in their focus on "little people" within disasters, emphasizing "soft expression" of emotions and adopting parallel narratives and causal loops in their storytelling strategies. However, due to differences in the film industry systems and ideologies of the two countries, Chinese and Korean disaster movies diverge in thematic expression. Chinese disaster films often feature a strong national main theme and sentiments of patriotism and family, whereas Korean disaster films focus more on exposing human nature and reflecting on society. This paper will explore the commonalities and differences between Chinese and Korean disaster movies in terms of character development, narrative perspective, emotional presentation, and social values.***

Keywords: Chinese and Korean Disaster Movies; Commonalities; Differences.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of digital film technology and the exploration of new themes, disaster movies have evolved into a mature and classic genre, gradually transcending their category to become a significant theme in the film market. A disaster film depicts stories about a multitude of people suffering from a natural or artificial calamity and struggling to get away from it. Due to the differing film industry systems and ideologies, disaster movies from different countries exhibit unique creative styles and value concepts. Disaster movies from China and Korea, deeply rooted in Eastern culture, share common emotions and thoughts. However, their narrative focus and real-world values reflect the differences in their social systems and industrial structures.

2. FOCUSING ON THE COMMON PEOPLE, REFLECTING EASTERN THOUGHT AND THE BRILLIANCE OF HUMANITY

East Asian people usually find themselves in their relationship with others, put the goals of their groups before their personal goals, get motives for their social behaviors from social norms, duties and responsibilities, and try to maintain a harmonious relationship with groups (e.g. family, colleagues, friends) even if it is disadvantageous. Thus, unlike Western disaster movies that feature superheroes saving humanity, disaster movies from China and Korea typically cast protagonists as ordinary individuals from the lower social strata. This approach not only highlights the insignificance of humans in the face of uncontrollable forces and their psychological states during disasters but also presents these characters in a more realistic and three-dimensional manner, closely mirroring reality. By depicting the growth, transformation, and elevation of humanity in common people facing disasters, these films enhance the audience's empathy and deepen their understanding and contemplation of disasters.

As independent entities, humans inherently embody complexity, and individuals from various backgrounds and with different personalities exhibit diverse responses when faced with disaster and fear. This variation not only offers a more holistic and authentic revelation of the complexity of human nature but also highlights the profound value of life. Through their distinct reactions to adversity, individuals reveal the multifaceted aspects of humanity—ranging from fear, resilience, and self-sacrifice to the capacity for hope and redemption. This nuanced portrayal enriches our understanding of human behavior and underscores the significance of each person's experience in the face of calamity, reminding us of the resilience and complexity that define the human condition. By seeing how they cope with a fatal crisis in the extreme situation that they have fallen in, we can understand their culture and value system more clearly. Minor characters not only propel the narrative forward but more

importantly, through their display of courage and sacrifice, convey the benevolence and kindness of human nature as recognized under the Confucian culture of East Asia.One of major cultural differences that distinguish East Asian people from those in other regions is the collectivist tendency influenced by Confucian thought.

Minor characters not only drive the plot forward but, more importantly, convey the benevolence and kindness of human nature under the Confucian culture prevalent in East Asia through their bravery and sacrifices. Furthermore, these characters often shed their facades in the face of disaster, revealing hidden aspects of their daily lives unknown to most, thereby adding a layer of authenticity and persuasiveness compared to more prominent figures. For example, in the Korean movie "Train to Busan," the three main characters are ordinary people with their unique strengths and weaknesses, showcasing their humanity and the complex decisions they face during a crisis. Despite not resolving the crisis perfectly, they choose to sacrifice themselves to protect other passengers, illustrating the benevolence and kindness of human nature during disasters and creating heroes of a collective nature distinct from individualism. Similarly, in the Chinese disaster movie "Aftershock," the protagonist is an ordinary woman faced with an impossible choice, reflecting the societal pressures of the time and the complex inner turmoil of a mother, thereby highlighting the imperfections and selfish aspects of motherhood. These protagonists are not all-powerful; they are often vulnerable and conflicted, making the characters in disaster movies more nuanced and relatable, thereby enhancing their authenticity and credibility.

The "flaws" of individuals are often a focal point in Chinese and Korean disaster movies. When human lives are threatened, societal frameworks are disrupted, and individuals are no longer protected or constrained, showcasing ordinary people's instinctual reactions reveals the most authentic aspects of human nature. This not only strengthens the audience's immersion but also deepens their contemplation of human nature, highlighting the films' interrogation and critique of humanity. The transformation of characters from selfish to selfless and the themes of sacrificing oneself for others are central to the value expressed in Chinese and Korean disaster movies.

3. EMPHASIZING "SOFT EXPRESSION," EFFECTIVELY UTILIZING EMOTIONAL NARRATION

While disaster serves as the theme and backdrop for disaster movies, the true essence these films seek to convey to the audience is the beauty of humanity and a sense of shared emotion. In their narrative approaches, disaster movies from both China and Korea place greater emphasis on the use of "soft expression," aiming to balance thematic content with audio-visual forms. This intertwining of emotional expression with the portrayal of disaster avoids the overshadowing of the main theme by excessive sentimentality, enhancing the artistic impact and humanistic value of disaster movies and facilitating an emotional resonance with the audience.

In the Korean disaster movie "The Flu," the character of the firefighter Kang Ji-goo leaves a deep impression on the audience through his acts of kindness. He saves individuals like In-hae Kim, who falls into a construction well, residents and a stray dog trapped in a supermarket amid panic, and a little girl, Mi-reu, infected during the epidemic, forgoing his chance to escape by helicopter. These acts of rescue not only depict the severity of the disaster but also showcase the responsibility of a firefighter, alongside compassion for family, loved ones, and innocent people, embodying the goodness of human nature. Similarly, in the Chinese disaster movie "The Bravest," firefighters forsake personal gain to rescue the masses amidst disaster, charging into fierce flames without hesitation or fear of sacrifice. The film, with its 1:1 scale real-life sets, not only presents a comprehensive view of an actual fire scene to the audience but also integrates valuable relationships between fathers and sons, spouses, and comrades into various details of the movie. It employs the subtle "soft expression" to vividly bring to life the spirit of dedication and collective unity unique to the Chinese nation on the screen.

Disaster movies from both China and Korea typically utilize stories of ordinary individuals to convey the inherent goodness and beauty of human nature, building an empathetic space within their films through the "soft" handling of emotional narratives. This approach not only encourages audience emotional resonance but also elevates the film's thematic essence. Effectively using emotional narration to showcase benevolence and goodness in human nature invokes people's conscience in times of disaster, highlighting the precious spirit of selfless dedication, which is a key value in Chinese and Korean disaster movies.

4. DUAL-NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND THE CHAIN NARRATIVE EMPHASIZING CAUSAL LOOPS

The use of narrative techniques determines the emotive power and the completeness with which a film's value is presented. In disaster movies from both China and Korea, a dual-narrative approach is typically employed, incorporating the Eastern philosophy of causal loops. "Disaster" in these films serves not only as the backdrop for the events or stories but also as a driving force for plot development. Chinese and Korean disaster films often unfold with a linear structure that emphasizes causal loops, thereby enhancing the logical coherence and narrative richness of the film. It's evident that in these films, the narrative perspective starts with the human element, focusing on the emotional arcs of characters while also visually presenting the disaster, using it as a secondary protagonist to advance the story. This narrative strategy encapsulates the intertextuality and interpretation of "natural and man-made disasters" and "karmic retribution" found in Eastern philosophy.

Chinese and Korean disaster movies narrate from the dual perspectives of "human" and "disaster." On one hand, experiencing and understanding disaster from a human viewpoint not only significantly stimulates the audience's visual senses but also more readily evokes empathy and resonance, fostering an internal emotional response. On the other hand, reflecting on humanity from the perspective of disaster showcases the powerlessness and helplessness of humans in the face of irresistible forces, thereby engendering in the audience a reverence for natural disasters and an appreciation for their current well-being. These complementary narrative perspectives not only deepen the audience's understanding of "disaster" but also enhance the disaster consciousness within the film. The dual-narrative approach combined with a chain narrative structure enriches the storytelling in Chinese and Korean disaster movies, increasing visual intrigue and narrative conflict between the two threads, thus prompting a profound exploration of the story and human nature, and endowing the film with deeper intellectual and humanistic values.

Furthermore, Chinese and Korean films emphasize Eastern philosophical principles in their storytelling, showcasing the concept of causal loops within a chain narrative. Korean movies often link the occurrence of disasters to human actions. For example, in the Korean film "The Host," a military base secretly disposes of toxic wastewater containing nuclear pollutants into the Han River, causing pollution and mutation of aquatic creatures into man-eating monsters, thereby not only criticizing humanity's extreme ecological destruction but also implicitly satirizing social bureaucracy and governmental incompetence. Chinese disaster films, often adapted from real events, subtly incorporate the idea that good deeds are rewarded and intertwine dual perspectives within the film. For instance, "Back to 1942" uses the historical event of the Henan famine, narrating the severity of the drought and famine by counting the days of survival, also embedding in the struggle against the disaster and the arduous journey for survival. The dual-narrative approach not only showcases the increasing severity of the natural disaster but also expresses the ordeal and resistance of the suffering population during the disaster, more realistically restoring that period of history, highlighting the resilience and greatness of the Chinese people who continue to survive through numerous hardships.

5. SOCIAL VALUE: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF CHINESE AND KOREAN DISASTER MOVIES

At the national level, China and Korea possess distinct social systems and ideologies. In the realm of the film industry, both countries have established different structural systems and regulatory policies. Socially, they maintain different cultural habits and local characteristics. These differences across various levels collectively influence the creation of Chinese and Korean disaster movies, leading to distinct characteristics between the two. Compared to Chinese disaster movies, Korean disaster films tend to absorb more from Hollywood experiences, showing a tendency towards Westernization and openness. In contrast, Chinese disaster movies place more emphasis on presenting the essence of Confucian moderation, highlighting patriotism and humanitarian concern.

5.1 Integrating Western Film Industry: The Localization of Hollywood Disaster Movie Models in Korea

Disaster movies, as a classic genre within Hollywood, boast a mature production system and stable economic returns. In the context of economic globalization, cultural diversification, and the liberalization of policy environments, the Korean film market has actively absorbed Hollywood models and experiences. On this foundation, it boldly integrates elements of emotion, comedy, history, and more with local culture and national preferences for localization. This approach not only mitigates the typified characteristics of Hollywood but also infuses localized elements. Specifically, the localization of the Hollywood model in Korean disaster movies is evident in the innovative use of narrative space and perspective.

Narrative space plays a crucial role in films, where the authenticity and intensity of visual effects directly impact the quality of disaster movies. While Korean disaster films draw on Hollywood's special effects techniques to create stunning visual impacts, they do not merely replicate the Hollywood model but cleverly use its framework to convey different meanings. One such innovation is the alteration and compression of narrative space into enclosed environments. Korean disaster movies excel at using spatial constraints to create a larger context, contrasting with Hollywood's tendency to design grand scenes. For instance, the collapse disaster in "Tunnell" is set within a newly opened tunnel, and "Train to Busan" confines its entire narrative space to a single train, bringing together diverse characters such as businessmen, students, the elderly, and pregnant women in a confined space, sparking "sparks" of interaction. The limited and narrow space intensifies the tension and realism of disaster films. Additionally, the singular and enclosed story space enhances the film's emotive power, creating a sense of inescapability and crisis. This provides a domain for magnifying human vulnerabilities, offering an immersive viewing experience to the audience.

Korean disaster movies contain profound reflections on human responses to disasters, showcasing strong social relevance and contemporaneity. This demands a comprehensive analysis of Korean disaster films within the context of their societal development, enabling a correct and in-depth understanding of the films' satirical and critical narrative stance. Thus, it provides reference and contemplation for those who might face similar disasters in the present or future.

The narrative perspective primarily manifests through the viewpoints of specific characters within a film, closely intertwined with character development.From an emergency management perspective, disaster films are arguably less about the specific hazard they depict and more about the way in which the characters respond to the effects of the crisis.

American culture venerates individual heroism, a trait also characteristic of Hollywood disaster movies. Korean disaster films, however, navigate the Hollywood model with selective adaptation and innovation: they "adopt" the presence of heroes; "discard" the notion of "super" heroes with special abilities saving everyone; and "innovate" by placing the heroic perspective on ordinary individuals, often parents, turning these average humans into heroes through their roles as fathers or mothers. For example, in "The Flu," the female doctor In-hae Kim risks her life to protect her daughter, and in "Train to Busan," Seok-woo sheds his selfishness and sacrifices himself to save others. Korean disaster movies successfully blend the Hollywood formula with local culture and public preferences, daring to link the exploration of human nature with societal critique, thus achieving a localized innovation in narrative perspective and creating a distinctively Korean genre of disaster movies.

5.2. Upholding Confucian Moderation: The Restrained Core of Chinese Disaster Movies

Disaster movies inherently contain intense conflicts between humans, disasters, and nature, with "sorrow" and "injury" often being focal points of artistic expression. Despite China and Korea sharing similar cultural roots and aesthetic preferences as East Asian nations, there are distinct differences in their disaster films. Chinese disaster movies are deeply influenced by Confucian thought and the principle of moderation, favoring harmony and unity between heaven and humanity. On one hand, this moderation symbolizes the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty, embodying Confucianism's highest philosophical aspirations with its emphasis on balance and appropriateness. On the other hand, Confucianism advocates for harmony among individuals, society, and the state, promoting benevolent governance and moral statecraft. In Chinese disaster films, this is manifested in efforts to mitigate pain and death, depict government rescue operations and public mutual aid, and employ "happy ending" narrative structures.

In depicting disaster scenes, Chinese disaster films often adopt approaches that soften the portrayal of suffering to align with societal and cultural expectations, deliberately minimizing the depiction of pain, gore, or death. Scenes that are graphic or bloody, though essential to the disaster film genre, are typically moderated in frequency and intensity. For instance, "Aftershock" tones down the depiction of the post-earthquake carnage, while "Back to 1942" avoids overly tragic or large-scale death scenes, opting instead to subtly convey the severity of the disaster and famine through desolate, cracked landscapes and characters' parched lips. Unlike Korean and Western disaster films that graphically showcase tragic disasters, this measured avoidance of pain benefits from avoiding sensationalism, allowing for a more composed focus on the story and its emotional values.

Additionally, focusing on rescue efforts and setting satisfying conclusions are other prominent features of Chinese disaster films. Unlike Korean disaster films, which may feature tragic endings and social critique, Chinese disaster

movies often conclude with national peace and safety, emphasizing rapid government response and care for the populace after disasters. They highlight the collective warmth and spirit of dedication between the nation and its people, showcasing patriotic sentiments. Scholars note that "rescue" is a fundamental theme in Chinese disaster films, regardless of the nature of the calamity. For example, in "The Mega Storm," Mayor Xu leads the charge against the typhoon, ensuring the safe evacuation of all citizens. "Chinese Doctors" showcases healthcare workers stepping up, with the entire nation uniting to overcome adversity, conveying the spirit of dedication and collectivism valued in Chinese society. While disaster films may portray characters' crises and fears, they primarily focus on the rescue efforts themselves. Even though "happy endings" are common in commercial cinema, such conclusions in Chinese disaster films enable audiences to empathize with the heroes, fostering anticipation for a just and peaceful resolution after disasters. This approach also softens the tragic nature of disaster films, aligning with the psychological needs of Chinese audiences and facilitating broader acceptance and engagement.

5.3 National Themes and Social Criticism: Reflecting Reality in Chinese and Korean Disaster Movies

The most evident distinction in disaster movie production between China and Korea lies in the films' overall tone and their reflection of real-world values. Chinese disaster films tend to present disaster effects in a more restrained and subtle manner, excelling in promoting national themes and the spirit of unity and great national spirit. Conversely, Korean disaster films, while grounded in local culture, emphasize the incorporation of Western Hollywood techniques, using audio-visual spectacles to reflect reality and critically examine the complexities of human nature and societal injustices.

"Joy without indecency, sorrow without harm" not only represents a cultural and social principle inherent to national character but also serves as a longstanding guideline for literary and artistic creation. Chinese disaster films often depict the collective response and rescue efforts of the people and the state in the face of disasters, reflecting the collectivist spirit of solidarity and a people-oriented core philosophy. These films incorporate the national will into their thematic expression, aligning with mainstream social values and enhancing national cohesion and cultural export through the portrayal of national themes. For instance, in Chinese disaster films such as "Back to 1942," "Aftershock," "The Bravest," and "Chinese Doctors," audiences witness the severe consequences of drought, earthquakes, fires, and viruses. More importantly, they experience the commendable qualities of mutual assistance and self-sacrifice among the Chinese people, as well as the commitment of government bodies to prioritize the safety of the public above all else. Furthermore, the stories of ordinary figures such as firefighters, soldiers, and doctors against the backdrop of disaster serve as powerful channels for emotional engagement, evoking empathy and inspiring a sense of national identity and pride in viewers. It is evident that, compared to Korean disaster films, Chinese disaster films may exhibit less social realism and critique but possess a stronger sense of national sentiment, highlighting the distinctive main theme and social value unique to Chinese disaster cinema, thereby contributing to the development of a disaster film genre with distinct Chinese characteristics.

Korean disaster films, building upon a foundation of "Westernization," closely integrate local culture and the current national situation, daring to innovate within a relatively liberal policy environment. This approach has led to a unique path of localized creation for disaster film genres, marked by strong social critique and cultural introspection. Unlike Chinese disaster films, Korean disaster movies are generally grounded in social reality, often attributing disasters to the "consequences" of human actions. Additionally, Korean disaster films do not shy away from graphically depicting disaster scenes and are less likely to resolve issues at the national level. Instead, the government in these films often appears ineffective or even counterproductive in its rescue efforts. The films stimulate audience reflection and resonance by exploring the contradictions and integration between social systems and disaster events. For instance, movies like "The Host," "The Flu," "Tunnel," and "Train to Busan" commonly attribute disasters to human errors such as biological mutations, viral infections, and engineering accidents, candidly exposing societal injustices and governmental incompetence through well-rounded antagonists and conflict-driven plots. Korean disaster films engage in thorough contemplation of societal flaws, anticipating the worst possible outcomes, and deeply examining complex human nature, sparing no criticism of national government and social systems in order to sound a warning bell for the populace.

6. CONCLUSION

Disaster movies from China and Korea share common historical roots and display unique Eastern philosophies and cultural essences in character development and narrative techniques. Meanwhile, Korean disaster films actively incorporate Western film industry models, innovating in narrative space and perspective based on Hollywood

disaster film formats, endowing Korean disaster films with profound social criticism. Chinese disaster films steadfastly adhere to the doctrine of moderation and national history, focusing on the unity and fearlessness of the people during disasters, as well as state-led rescue and reconstruction efforts afterwards, showcasing the nation's humanitarian concern with a strong sense of patriotism and alignment with the era's dominant themes. With the continuous refinement of the Chinese film school system and advancements in production technology, under the cultural philosophy of "beauty in diversity and shared beauty" and the banner of a shared human destiny, Chinese disaster films are poised to go further in creating films with distinct Chinese characteristics, truly achieving the international dissemination of Chinese stories and culture.