

A Critical Analysis of Disability Narrative in Big World

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Abstract. This paper explores how disability is represented in Chinese cinema today through a case study of the film *Big World*, which tells the story of Liu Chunhe, a young man living with cerebral palsy. The representation of disabled people in Chinese films has in the past tended to adopt a binary model of pity or inspiration but *Big World* shows a marked change in this trend in its treatment of the subjectivity, agency and inner world of the protagonist. It also demonstrates the other issues associated with disability in its filmic narratives, such as family dynamics, social stigma and welfare systems. That said it is shown that the representation remains limited by being perceived from non-disabled perspectives, as in support characters such as Ya Ya, whose motivation is lacking in depth. While this enhances visibility and invokes empathy, the risk with this method of representation is that it continues to alienate. Individual disability is represented in its inspirational or tragic form. Meaningful progress in the representation of disability may only come as the result of including the disabled voice in the creative process at every level, including scripting and performance. It is only through the medium of collaborative story telling that Chinese filmmakers may move beyond symbolic representation into authentic and equitable representation that truly reflects the diverse experiences of disabled people.

Keywords: Disability, Chinese film, *Big World*

1. Introduction

Mass media not only reflects reality but also plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and social identities [1] and the movie, as a widely influential mass medium, plays a crucial role in delivering the representations of the marginalized social groups through storytelling. In China, the disabled population is large in scale, yet they have long been in a marginal position in public discourse and remain largely invisible within mainstream media representations. They are often reduced to two stereotypes: the “pathetic figure” who evokes pity, or the “superhero” who serves as an object of public inspiration. Although these two narrative patterns have opposite emotional orientations, they share the same essence- “othering” the disabled, ignoring their most genuine experiences and needs as individuals with complex emotions and subjectivity in daily life.

This article aims to explore how Chinese cinema portrays disability and to analyze how such representations both reflect and shape societal concepts of disability and welfare. Taking the film *Big World* as the core case, this article will analyze how it challenges the stereotypes by telling the story of the young man Liu Chunhe with cerebral palsy. The film focuses on the family

relationships, social interactions, and inner struggles of Liu Chunhe. It examines how the film portrays Liu not as “a subject to be spoken about,” but as “a real speaker” who articulates his own experiences and desires. Through its profound realist style, this movie reflects the complex reality faced by Chinese people with disabilities such as the limitations of family-based support and barriers to social integration, to the “symbolic” operation of welfare systems. This study argues that *Big World* marks an important turning point in the narrative of Chinese disability films, shifting from the “spectacular” display of disability to an equal examination of the inner world and civil rights of people with disabilities.

2. Literature review: disability issues in Chinese society, media and cinema

In terms of the influence of media, Hall argued that media representation does not merely reflect reality as a mirror; rather, it actively participates in the construction process of meaning and identity [1,2]. As a core medium of mass culture, films profoundly influence the public's perception and attitude towards social groups through narrative, character portrayal, images, and language. In China, due to the large population base, the disabled community is also of considerable size, but their visibility in the public domain and social interactions has long been limited. Therefore, exploring how Chinese films shape the identities of the disabled and analyzing how this representation reflects and influences the concepts of disability and welfare systems in the real society has become an important issue. This review aims to summarize relevant literature, elaborate on China's society's perception of disability, the history and current representations of media (especially films), and the importance of films in shaping public understanding, providing a theoretical basis for subsequent text analysis.

2.1. Disability in Chinese society: stigma, policies and limited visibility

In Chinese society, the understanding of disability has undergone a long process of evolution, with its background intertwined with traditional cultural concepts modern social policies, and persistent stigmatization issues. Culturally, disabled people have been unacceptably regarded as “abnormal”. Traditional Chinese concepts often associate disability with fate, karma, or family curses, and people with disabilities are often regarded as “abnormal” or “others”. Kohrman pointed out in her research on the construction of the modern Chinese disability system that “in China, disability is often endowed with moral and fate metaphors, and people with disabilities are regarded as objects that need sympathy or encouragement, rather than individuals with equal rights.” [3] This taxonomy has led to profound social exclusion and discrimination. The changes in historical terminology clearly reflect the evolution and residue of this concept: from the strongly derogatory term “disabled” (meaning “useless, disabled person”), to the neutral term “disability”, and then to the more socially patterned term “disability”, the evolution of the term “fully reflects the historical progress of our socialist civilization”. However, the old concepts are still deeply rooted, and many families still hide their disabled family members at home due to fear of social discrimination and misunderstanding, which further reduces the social visibility of this group.

Government policies play another important role in defining who is disabled and what their life should be like. On the one hand, China has established a systematic legal protection system for the disabled since the 1980s, such as the “Law on the Protection of the Disabled” and the welfare subsidy system for the disabled, aiming to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. But on the other hand, these policies might exclude those who really need help. For example, recent cases show that a person with single eye blindness was refused to be issued a disability certificate due to the

"Chinese Practical Disability Assessment Standards" stipulating that "single eye vision ≥ 0.3 is not considered disability", and was unable to enjoy employment support, falling into "the gap between policy and reality". This reflects the limitations of the welfare system for people with disabilities in responding to diverse needs. Moreover, in the field of welfare for disabled children, although institutional care is transforming towards community-based and family-based care, "the proportion of disabled children in welfare institutions has exceeded 70%, while the local adoption rate has continued to be low due to medical expenses, social stigmatization, and the lack of support systems", revealing the complex interaction between policies and social concepts.

2.2. The portrayal of disability in Chinese media throughout history

Historically, the portrayal of disability in Chinese media has undergone significant changes. Riep's research has succinctly summarized the three historical stages of how Chinese media (including films) depicted people with disabilities [4].

The first one is "peeping" stage. In the early days, the media often presented the physical differences of disabled people with a curious mindset, viewing them as abnormal "spectacles" that satisfied the public's curiosity and strengthened their "outsider" identity.

The second one is "staring" stage". As China started to implement supportive policies for people with disabilities to return to normal life, the representation gradually shifted to "elevated staring". Disabled people were portrayed as "inspirational role models" or "superheroes", who "overcame" their disabilities through tenacious willpower. Their stories were used to inspire non-disabled viewers. However, although this representation seemed positive, it unconsciously set the standard for "normal people" and transformed structural social barriers into personal problems to be overcome.

The third one is "reconstruction" stage: In recent years, attempts to dismantle divisions and move towards equality have emerged in the narrative. The media began to pay more attention to the rights, emotions, and daily lives of disabled people as ordinary people, aiming to "reconstruct" the social fairness and justice of the integration of disabled and able-bodied individuals.

This evolution trajectory indicates that media representation is gradually moving from a single, stereotypical pattern to a diversified one, but the process is still slow, and the old pattern, especially the "staring" pattern, still dominates mainstream film and television works to this day.

2.3. The significance of films in shaping identities and public perception

Movies play an irreplaceable role in shaping the public's understanding of disability, due to their powerful emotional appeal and impact, wide dissemination capabilities, and potential to shape social perceptions.

Firstly, through emotional storytelling, films can effectively stimulate the audience's empathy. A touching story is more capable of breaking down prejudices than cold data and dry preaching, allowing the audience to empathize with the situation of the disabled characters, and to personally experience the challenges, emotions and desires they face. As pointed out in the review of the film "Face to Face", it can "open up the emotional barriers and cognitive fog between people in modern society through 'invisible faces'", thereby promoting a deeper level of social understanding [2].

Secondly, films have the ability to set the agenda. By placing the issue of disabilities on the screen, films can bring it into the public discussion and increase its social visibility. A popular film can trigger heated discussions among the media and the public regarding specific types of disabilities, such as discussions on welfare policy gaps or the construction of a socially accessible

environment, thereby promoting the advancement of social consciousness and enhancing social cohesion.

Finally, films represent a crucial domain for cultural representation and identity construction. Hall posits that media is an important system for constructing meaning and identity [1]. The recurring images of disabled individuals in films – whether as victims of tragedy, inspiring heroes, or ordinary people in daily life – are constantly conveying information about "what disability means" and "what the value of disabled people is". These representations subtly influence the self-identity of disabled individuals and shape the attitudes and behaviors of non-disabled public towards disabled people. Therefore, critically analyzing the disability representations in films is not only necessary for cultural studies but also a crucial step in promoting a truly inclusive and equal society.

3. Case study

The following analysis will focus on how the film *Big World*, through the story of Liu Chunhe, breaks away from the traditional representation of disability, and offers a critical reflection on social reality and the welfare system.

The film *Big World* uses a realistic documentary-like approach to profoundly depict the living conditions and inner world of the disabled young man Liu Chunhe. The film breaks away from the binary narrative framework of "tragic pity" and "inspirational spectacle", by creating a real and tangible world of life. It not only successfully portrays a disabled character with complex emotions and a sense of selfhood, but also serves as a clear mirror, reflecting many real issues faced by the disabled community in China regarding family relationships, social integration, and welfare systems.

3.1. From "the other as discourse" to "the discourse-producing subject": a revolutionary shift in narrative perspective

The most fundamental breakthrough of the film lies in its internal shift of the narrative perspective. The opening scene featuring the protagonist Liu Chunhe struggling to climb the stairs alone is immediately immersed the audience into his subjective body experience through meticulous depiction of his distorted posture and heavy breathing. This "experiential" visual language discards the position of the disabled person as an object "being viewed" in the spectacle, forcing the audience to shift from "observation" to "empathy". As cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall stated, representation is the key to constructing meaning and identity [1]. The film achieves this by means of this internal-focused narrative, making Liu Chunhe himself the constructor of his own meaning.

The most powerful proof of this subjectivity lies in the fact that the film grants him the power to speak. Whether it is the soul-searching questions posed by his mother - "Who made me this way?" "I have tried to accept myself, but you keep reminding me that I am a monster", or the powerful speech at the fake charity event, Liu Chunhe is no longer a silent, defined symbol, but an independent thinking individual who can express anger, pain, longing and self-identity. This completely overturns the stereotype of "infantilizing" disabled people (making them seem childlike), achieving the narrative shift advocated by Wang, that is, focusing on the spiritual world of disabled people as complete individuals [2].

3.2. Microscopic social landscape: the tension and fractures of the family support system

The Microscopic Social Landscape: Conflict and Fractures in the Home Support System. The movie richly portrays the micro-social landscape surrounding Liu Chunhe, especially his family and the warmth and limits of informal support systems. The grandmother in the story signifies the Chinese family as the main support system, as pointed out by Kohrman who observed that "Liu Chun He has cerebral palsy and not stupidity," which is a direct act against the social label of "stigma," put forth [3,5]. Noted to be like a "fire," a thick buffer was in the making for the grandson to resist outside forms of prejudice. The scars covering our past "scarf" and the guilt of our daughter revealed the trauma history of the supporters making the act of giving care a method of helping to make up for previous fallacies. At the end, the two encouraged each other to "learn to be honest" and "let go of the past", completing the "two-way redemption and growth", demonstrating the dynamic and complexity of the support relationship.

Another crucial component of the complexity of family system is Liu Chunhe's mother. However, the film does not portray a "perfect mother", but rather realistically depicts the "motherly exhaustion" and limited acceptance of the mother. She is responsible and devoted, but always regards Chunhe as a child who will never grow up. Even in subconscious mode, she disallows connection to be made to the newborn sister. This also signifies that here may be probably unconscious discrimination and deep estrangement in kin relationships. The pretty short sketch is very courageous since it suggests that the pain of the disabled is not caused strictly by external society, but maybe wrought in the closest integrity of family relationships, thus seeing the difficulty in the inner process of social prejudice internalization. At the same time, the complete absence of the father figure in this film is a sharp and biting indictment of reality and structure satire of reality. It indicates that in most families of the disabled that the degree of care increasingly rests upon women members (mothers, grandmothers) and that the collective failure of the men care givers indicates a more profound structure of social sex role division.

3.3. Macro level society critique: the symbolic nature of the welfare system and the structural barriers to its integration

The social critique of the film goes beyond special individual kinds of discrimination and directs itself to the institutions, along with institutional mumbo jumbo, and the structural social barriers that perpetuate inequality. The film exposes the contradiction between "face-saving projects" and genuine welfare needs, revealing how institutions prioritize symbolic acts of benevolence over substantive social change. Through Liu Chunhe's tokenistic employment and the bus company's staged charity events, the narrative critiques the bureaucratic obsession with maintaining a positive public image rather than addressing the structural barriers that marginalize the disabled. The coffee shop hired Liu Chunhe due to preferential policies, and the bus group distributed rice, flour, and oil at the publicity event as a sign of "concern". These actions are vivid examples of the "symbolic" operation of the welfare system. These behaviors may seem to provide assistance, but in reality, they do not address the core issue. Through this, the film criticizes the bureaucratic way of treating the disabled merely as a publicity tool rather than as a rights holder.

In the film, Liu Chunhe's declaration in a complaint letter to the bus company, "It's all about the outcome," signifies a pivotal awakening of civic consciousness. This is one of the most powerful moments in the entire film. This is not only an individual act of protection of rights, but also symbolizes the awakening of civic consciousness among disabled people. It states that disabled people will no longer take injustice lying down but will strive for their rights, and changing the

status quo through persistent advocacy. This collocates with Yang Mengqi's plea for a warm "support chain" that places greater importance on human contact and lived experience than on cold, bureaucratic policies [6].

3.4. The "other" as a mirror and limited tolerance

When the incomparable humanistic desires of academia have to face a real and socially gripped intimate relationship (as that of being the girlfriend of a boy of cerebral palsy), she shrinks back. This in reality expresses a part of the group who, with very good meaning, cannot entirely get free from social prejudice: they can feel understanding and friendliness in a safe and distant way, but as soon as it comes to bearing the social results and responsibilities of an intimate association their inherited ideas predominate [7]. The value of *Big World* is not confined to telling a moving personal story. By the association of Liu Chunhe and his grandmother, mother, Ya Ya and the society, a true condition of the living conditions of the disabled in China in our day is depicted in the film. The film teaches us that true toleration and dignity do not depend upon the patronising "charities" or formal "benefits by policy" of action, but rather whether the society is capable of furnishing a life-environment where each *Big World* can be free from fear, be put on an equality and treated with respect, and have the opportunity of Shining.

At the end of the film Liu Chunhe and the grandmother scatter the ashes of the little kitten. The grandmother takes off a scarf, and together they rush forward to a new life which means a reconciliation with the past troubles and the facing of the hope of the future. This hope is not confined to the characters, but it is that of the Chinese film in their exposition of the subjects of disability. We have at last begun to have each kind of a film. It is not sentimental or melodramatic, but one of real and firm realism and humanitarian interests, from the low angles of things and the cracks, which hears the grand intonations of things in the *Big World's*, and sounds loudly enough to shock the world.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the film *Big World* successfully transcends the traditional representation patterns of disabled people in Chinese cinema with its firm humanitarian concern and delicate realistic approach. By means of portraying the rich and realistic character Liu Chunhe, the film strongly proclaims the subjective position of the handicapped: they are not passive victims of fate, but active human beings endowed with the passions, desires, hatreds and dreams of all human beings, in addition to the power of adaptation to these as much as their physical weakness will allow. At the same time the film displays a dialectical treatment of the family tender system, censors the formalism of the social action system, and presents the "limited toleration" illustrated by Ya Ya, thus making a multi-stage social picture and plainly indicating that the real deterrents come to a much larger degree from social structure and cultural bias than they do from the physical incapacity of individuals.

However, the achievements of the film also reveal the challenges and potential that need to be continuously addressed in future creative endeavors. Although it significantly enhanced the visibility of the disabled community and sparked empathy among viewers, disabled people themselves are still rarely involved in making those films or telling their own stories. This may result in certain narrative aspects, such as Ya Ya's motivation, remaining open to interpretation. Therefore, if Chinese cinema is to advance further in its exploration of disability: not only should they "talk about" disabled people on the screen, but also "involve" disabled people and "speak for" them. This means

that film creation should strive to include more direct perspectives of disabled people, from script development to performance stages, ensuring that their experiences and voices become the core of the narrative. Taken together, the value of *Big World* lies in its role as a guiding light, illuminating the starting point of the path towards a more inclusive and equitable narrative. It reminds us that the conscience of art lies in observing the ups and downs and the corners of the world, and that social progress begins with our willingness to see, listen to, and respect the complete personality and life dignity contained within every "little me".

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