

# ***Future Development Direction of Chinese Musical Film-By Comparing with the American Musical Film***

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**Abstract:** With the emergence of musical films in mainland China in recent years, the narrative logic, story, song and dance of musical films cannot attract audiences. This paper is to discuss the future development trend of Chinese musical film. This research compares the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese musical film *The Day We Lit Up The Sky* and the American classic musical film *Chicago* via case studies and literature review. Aiming at the aesthetic analysis of these two musical films, this paper discusses the content, theme, song and dance, awards, box office, audience analysis and so on. The research results show that the development of Chinese film industry is later than the United States and Europe, so there is still a lot of room for progress. This paper only analyzes two musical films with different area styles. Chinese musical films should break out of the conventional plot and use a lot of star cameos to attract audiences. The use of truly high standards of music, high quality dance, high level of art and unique film content to produce Chinese song and dance film, but also need to integrate its unique Chinese characteristics, culture and thought. The development trend of Chinese musical films in the future is to walk out of a road belonging to Chinese characteristics and find a positioning and direction that belongs to China, so as to make them different from Hollywood musical films and Bollywood.

**Keywords:** Musical films, aesthetic analysis, Narrative, Audience, Broadway

## **1. Introduction**

Musical film is a film consisting of a large number of singing and dancing forms. In the 1930s, western musicals were all the rage, most of which were adaptations of Broadway musicals or recordings of opera performances [1]. The actors sing to describe their inner emotions, the actions of their characters and the unfolding of the plot. Musical films are a good combination of performance, singing, dancing and music [1]. Chinese musical films have long existed, but their form is extremely simple. In recent years, in the field of musical and dance films in mainland China, there is a lack of performance strength and luxurious cast similar to Hollywood, and there is no beauty in Indian musical and dance films. On the whole, the musical films in mainland China are immature and lack of characteristics, with few in number and no scale. Musical films in mainland China are stagnant in recent years, without progress or improvement. The research topic of this paper is to compare musical films in the United States and mainland China and explore the future development trend of musical films in mainland China. With case studies and literature review as research methods, this research

compares music films in the United States and mainland China. It selects Chicago and The Day We Lit Up The Sky as comparative cases to explore the future development trends of music films in mainland China. The author hopes to find out the reasons for the stagnation of Chinese musical film development through this research, and to transform the successful film elements in American music films into the development of the unique form of Chinese mainland music film as assistance.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. American Musical Film

The musical film, as its name implies, is a film in which the songs and dances of its characters are integrated into the narrative content of the film. Musical film is a natural outgrowth of stage musicals and enriches its content by implementing Settings and Settings that are not available in theaters [1]. Musical film contains a large number of drama and Musical elements and styles, belonging to one of the mainstream movie types in the United States [2]. In the United States, Hollywood musical films have brought audiences countless surprises and high quality films. Hollywood musical films have won the recognition of audiences by virtue of their narrative content, high level and professionalism of music and dance, and achieved great success in the international market [3]. This section will analyze the content and aesthetics of Chicago, a classic American movie musical in the 21st century.

#### 2.1.1. Chicago

Chicago is a musical adaptation of a Broadway play of the same name. Its unique narrative content, superb artistic quality, professional singing and dancing performances and strong acting style led to the film winning six Academy Awards in 2003, including best Picture [4]. The movie grossed \$170.7 million. This film will be the United States Chicago universal by hook or by crook, the pursuit of fame and wealth of the world deduce incisively and vividly. The Chicago film version is different from the Chicago Broadway musical in dance style [3]. Bob Fosse's unique jazz dance style makes the narrative content of the film better reflected.

##### 2.1.1.1. Narrative content

Most of the songs and dances in Chicago films have a strong narrative, and their content is large. In the song and dance scenes, most of them are Roxie's mental illusion interspersed with the events in the real world, which pushes the story to a climax while displaying the song and dance content. The way the Chicago film was shot from Roxie's imagination has left millions of viewers wondering how the Chicago stage version will play out [5]. This is a superb technique of expression, and the film's director takes it beyond the stage space [6].

In the film, the addition of Vaudeville acts adds a lot of comical situations and elements [5]. The director described Roxie's illusion by combined the narrative content and song and dance plots, forming Roxie's imaginary imagination. At the same time, a perspective switch is used, and the narrative protagonist switches from Roxie to Morton.

The makeup of the characters also supports the grooming of the characters, with Morton's character's more flamboyant makeup revealing her corruption and lust for money and power [1].

##### 2.1.1.2. The expression -songs

In the arrangement and creation of songs, metaphors are often used to reflect the pursuit of power and the irony of personal interests and money. In Morton's song, When You're Good to Mama, Mama Morton compares female prisoners to chickens, and she is the hen that takes care of them. This

metaphor sees the two parties as supporting each other, and it also represents Mama Morton's satire of the pursuit of power for personal gain and money. The rendition of the song demonstrates the aesthetic issues and visual elements behind the special relationship between music and film narrative [1].

Film music has a specific formal relationship with the coexisting elements in the film, which plays a certain role and influence in shaping our view of narrative [1]. Chicago made full use of the actors' singing and dancing abilities and gave many innovative visual ideas [5].

As prison guard Mama Morton performs the song "When You're Good to Mama," the scene switches from Roxie's perspective. Morton, arguably the most authoritative figure in the women's prison, begins acting in Roxie's imagination, her flamboyant makeup revealing Morton's corruption and lust for money and power.

### 2.1.2. Cell Block Tango

A particularly famous movie clip is Cell Block Tango. Through the six women's narrating their own experiences and the experience of killing their husbands as the main storyline, in the narrative process skillfully integrated into the song and dance performance. "Pop, six, squish, uh-uh, Cicero, Lipschitz," from Cell Block Tango. Jazz music is a unique art with its aesthetic theory which is different from other entertainment music and popular culture [7]. Over and over again, the vocals and tunes perfectly demonstrate the dark style of jazz music.

Incorporating the tango style into the dance, can fully demonstrate the female prisoners cruel and bloody murder techniques and love and hatred in the song and dance show. At the same time, the expressive of climbing, struggling and roaring are added to show the hatred and resentment of the performers through body movements.

The shooting technique of this segment is very consistent, and the color treatment is attractive. The main color is black and bright red, which highlights the immediate feeling of crime film [6]. The rhythm of the music and the movement of the dance show, the dark atmosphere of the prison and bloody murder depicted vividly. The female prisoners are fierce and powerful, and their hasty acting style reveals their sexy charm and ruthless cruelty.

The film, which has received widespread attention and good reviews, is an incisive portrayal of Chicago's cut-throat quest for fame in the 1920s. The film uses a depiction that satirizes the fickle mentality represented by Chicago in the 1920s [5]. In fact, deep themes are not what musicals do best [8]. Chicago, on the other hand, adds thought-provoking themes and colorful characters to its narrative.

In the film, Chicago's absurd hype is on display. Lawyer manipulates the media, defies witnesses and draws sympathy by portraying the two female killers as tragic heroes [9]. The ugliness and absurdity of human nature unfold through different stories. The Hungarian prisoner, who did not speak any English, was hanged despite insisting she was innocent. It is ironic that in a country where English is the main language, a person who does not speak English will face a lot of injustice.

Chicago is unique in musical films, exposing the ugliness of human nature and the corruption of society from criminal cases, which still has implications for contemporary society [9].

## 2.2. China Musical Film

Chinese film industry started in the early 20th century, the first film made by Chinese people was called Dingjun Mountain. The release of Dingjun Mountain marks the birth of Chinese film. In 2021, the total box office of Chinese films reached 47.258 billion yuan, of which domestic films made 39.927 billion yuan, accounting for 84.49 percent of the total box office. The number of city cinema

audiences was 1.167 billion [10]. It can be seen that Chinese films have huge potential and market, with growing momentum and great vitality.

Although The Chinese film market is large, the development of Chinese musical film is not mature. In particular, musical films in mainland China lack characteristics, are few in number and small in scale. In recent years, the development of musical films in mainland China has stagnated without innovation and progress, which is worth discussing. This part will conduct aesthetic analysis and audience analysis on the new musical film *The Day We Lit Up The Sky* in Mainland China.

### 2.2.1. The Day We Lit Up the Sky

*The Day We Lit Up the Sky* was almost overwhelmingly negative among Chinese reviews. Before the movie was released, it was a youth musical film that boasted of being super happy. The film is marketed as a film with a fiery, wild attitude, and the result is a film full of stiff plots, awkward singing and dancing, and stereotypical characters. Almost all of the plot and details are awkward and outrageous [11]. A number of Chinese audiences have demanded a public apology from the film's producers and crew, saying the film should not be billed as a musical. Less than 20 percent of the movie included singing and dancing, which was far from what the audience expected, leaving the audience disappointed [11]. The movie grossed \$20 million, well below expectations [12].

### 2.2.2. The Content

The plot of the film lacks logic, lacks basic storytelling, and does not consider the context of the display. Songs and dances that are supposed to be integrated into the storyline are separated from the plot. The hero wants to persuade the heroine to take part in the dance contest. Then he dances in the rain, however, this song and dance has nothing to do with the hero's purpose to persuade the heroine. In addition, without the background of the story or the auxiliary plot, the sudden chorus is also very abrupt.

Moreover, in the episode where the hero and heroine are chatting, the hero grabs the suspended railing which is dozens of meters high and hangs in mid-air, and the heroine also grabs the suspended railing, then the two continue to chat calmly and freely. All of the story development is illogical and happens very suddenly.

The whole film is too predictable in its beginning and ending, without any intention at all [11]. The director and actors tried to embody the theme of hot-blooded youth, but it was extremely embarrassing to watch. *The Day We Lit Up The Sky* uses a large number of star cameos, disguised as a teen musical film without considering any story logic or realistic setting [11].

### 2.2.3. Issues

Chinese mainland musical films have long been considered box office poisons [13]. *The Day We Lit Up The Sky* is no exception. The cliched plot, the rigid transitions between song and dance, and the plot make this film a full-on music video collection. The common problem of most musical films is that the songs and dances are not closely related to the plot and the narrative content is not deep enough. But movie musicals should never be a FIG leaf for bad movies. Although there are breakthroughs and attempts in musical films in mainland China, it is still difficult to produce a blockbuster film [13]. Looking at the professional level and production mode of Hollywood musical films, we can only say that musical films in Mainland China still have a lot of room for improvement [14].

### 3. Discussion

The biggest problem of musical films in mainland China is that the traces of song and dance performances are too heavy, which are seriously separated from the narrative content. They are only stiff song and dance performances without participating in the narrative or expressing emotions.

In 2013, Jay Chou's *The Rooftop*, skillfully combined various elements of love, martial arts, singing and dancing to form a unique mode of musical film, and created The highest box office record of musical film in China. However, its high box office does not represent the achievements of Chinese musical films, and its popularity is largely influenced by the star effect [15].

What is worth thinking about for Chinese musical film people is how to properly combine song and dance with narrative content and promote the development of the plot while showing the leading characters. In *Chicago*, song and dance give audiences a feast of sight and sound, as well as the relationships between the characters, inner fluctuations and emotional changes. Mama Morton reveals her identity, status and desires in her songs and dances. Lawyer Billy Flynn's puppet dance shows how he's using his word game to manipulate reporters and the media. In the whole film, song and dance are closely combined with the plot, which makes the audience feel a great visual effect and also increases the dramatic tension of song and dance. Music can have a reliable influence on the audience's interpretation of the narrative content, and music can also influence the audience's view of the film narrative. A film's musical genre can serve as an emotional framework that prepares the audience for what they might experience in the narrative [16].

In the future, musical movies in mainland China need to think more about the function of singing and dancing as narrative and combine with localized expressions with Chinese characteristics [17]. No matter in Hollywood or Bollywood, the song and dance expressions and plot contents are all based on the characteristics of their own nation and localization [14]. China also has Peking Opera, Yue Opera, model opera and other distinctive forms of performance that combine narrative and music. However, these performances remain in the pure shooting of video, and there is no aesthetic significance of the film. The monster movie directed by the famous Chinese director Zhang Yimou has taken the road of combining local culture and global cross-cultural collision, constructing an alternative vision [18].

### 4. Conclusion

By comparing The advantages and disadvantages of The Classic American musical film *Chicago* and the Chinese musical film *The Day We Lit up The Sky* in 2021, this paper understands that The narrative logic, story, song and dance of Chinese musical films are difficult to attract audiences. The results prove that The development of China's film industry lags behind that of the United States and Europe, so there is a lot of room for improvement. The deficiency of this paper lies in the analysis of only two musical films, there are certain limitations. Chinese musical films should break the convention to seek innovation, rather than blindly imitate. Truly high artistic quality and unique narrative content are the key factors for success. The future development trend of Chinese musical film is to walk out of a road belonging to Chinese characteristics and find the orientation and direction belonging to China in the world. Future improvement articles should analyze and compare more musical and dance films, so as to better find appropriate ways and methods for Chinese musical and dance films. It integrates song and dance with narrative content, and integrates with localized expression of Chinese characteristics into a unique form of cultural performance, paving a way for the combination of local culture and global cross-cultural collision. In the future, it is worth thinking about how to combine musical films with Chinese social background and local characteristic elements to better adapt to China's film and television market. Therefore, There is still a lot of room for improvement in music quality, film aesthetics and narrative concept of Chinese musical films.

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