

A Comparative Study of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige “Main Melody” Films

Lihao Xi^{1,a,*}

¹Changchun Normal University, Changchun, Jilin Province, China

a. 2654742421@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: This paper delves into the contemporary landscape of Chinese "main melody" cinema, shedding light on its developmental trajectory and distinctive attributes. It particularly hones in on the creative contributions of two prominent directors in this genre: Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Through an exploration of their works, this paper aims to provide readers with a comprehensive grasp of their filmmaking styles and thematic innovations. Zhang Yimou, a celebrated filmmaker, is introduced with a focus on his melodramatic masterpiece, "Impasse." This paper goes on to scrutinize the thematic content of this film, offering readers an insight into its narrative depth and emotional resonance. In parallel, director Chen Kaige is introduced, with a detailed analysis of his "main melody" opus, "The Battle at Lake Changjin," revealing its narrative structure and character portrayals, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the film. Furthermore, this paper delves into the innovative elements, character development, and cinematographic techniques employed by Zhang Yimou in "Impasse," while also dissecting the narrative structure and characterizations found in Chen Kaige's "The Battle at Lake Changjin." In conclusion, the paper conducts a comparative analysis of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's distinct approaches to crafting "main melody" films, illuminating the unique characteristics that distinguish these two accomplished directors in the realm of Chinese cinema.

Keywords: Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, "main melody" film, Chinese cinema

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese propaganda films, also known as "main melody" films, have seen significant growth and have gained recognition in the market. The melodramatic movie is a relatively unique subject matter, different from other commercial movie categories. Different from other commercial movie categories, it is to use visual images to portray the great story of the Chinese people's great stories, conveying mainstream values, cohesion of the masses, and enhancement of national It is one of the most important ways to convey mainstream values, unite people's emotions, and strengthen national self-confidence.[1] Both Chinese and international academic circles have taken a keen interest in this genre. Since 1991, there has been a noticeable surge in the creation of "main melody" films, forming a distinct category within the Chinese commercial film landscape. Previous research on "main melody" films has primarily focused on their ideological significance, often overlooking their role as a film genre and the artistic aspects of these films.

To delve deeper into the diverse creative styles found in "main melody" films, this paper will

conduct a comparative analysis of two notable films: "Impasse" directed by Zhang Yimou and "The Battle at Lake Changjin" directed by Chen Kaige. These two directors, both part of China's fifth generation of filmmakers, hold significant positions in the Chinese film industry and have developed distinctive individual creative styles. Each director brings their own unique characteristics to the creation of Chinese theme films, making their work essential for understanding the current state of Chinese theme cinema.

By examining Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's "main melody" films, this paper will highlight the differences in their creative approaches, particularly in the realm of filmmaking. Through this analysis, it aims to shed light on the distinct strategies employed by these directors in crafting "main melody" films and contribute to a better understanding of their contributions to this genre.

2. Background

2.1. Zhang Yimou and "Impasse"

Zhang Yimou is one of the most prominent Chinese directors, screenwriters, and producers. He is widely recognized as one of the leading figures of the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers. He was born in 1950 and received his education at the Beijing Film Academy. In terms of the film aesthetics, Zhang Yimou is celebrated for his distinctive visual style and his exploration to Chinese history. His filmography spans various genres and covers a wide range topics which addressed the issues of the progress of Chinese history and individual trauma persisting in the social transformation. Some of his most notable works include "Red Sorghum," "To Live," "Raise The Red Lantern," "Hero," and "House of Flying Daggers." His contributions have significantly influenced the creation of "main melody" films.

One of Zhang Yimou's recent masterpieces in the realm of "main melody" films is "Impasse", which was released in mainland China on April 30, 2021. The film revolves around the story of four Communist Party agents, Zhang Xianchen, Zhang Lan, Wang Chuliang, and Wang Yu, who underwent training in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. They return to China with a covert mission code-named "Ultra." However, their operation is compromised due to betrayal within their own party, with their whereabouts discovered by Gao Bin, the head of the secret service section. Gao Bin sets a dangerous trap for the four agents. In an attempt to safeguard their lives, Zhou Yi, an undercover party comrade working within the enemy's ranks, does everything in her power to assist them. The narrative unfolds through their struggles, including heroic sacrifices, with Zhang Xianchen and Wang Chuliang ultimately giving their lives to accomplish the mission. In the end, they manage to rescue Wang Ziyang and successfully complete the "Ultra" secret operation.

"Impasse" reflects Zhang Yimou's continued exploration of "main melody" films, emphasizing themes of sacrifice, loyalty, and espionage, while showcasing his signature visual storytelling and commitment to portraying complex human emotions and relationships on screen.

2.2. Chen Kaige and "The Battle at Lake Changjin"

Chen Kaige is a renowned Chinese director and producer born on August 12, 1952, in Xicheng District, Beijing, China. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy and has made significant contributions to the Chinese film industry. His work "Farewell My Concubine", the Chinese epic that proved the traumatized experience during the national-wide political movements, is of one of the most reputed Chinese film in the world. It shared the top prize at this year's Cannes International Film Festival with "Piano" which showcased its international impact. Although the film was an adaptation of the novel written by Li Bihua, an author who famous for her popular literature, "Farewell My Concubine" has been framed with a critical focus on the historical violence and addressed the individuals' trauma encounters during the violence.

Through his film works, Chen shows his interest to portray the authentic scene of Chinese history. One of Chen Kaige's notable works in the realm of Chinese theme movies is "The Battle of Lake Changjin," which was released on September 30, 2021. The film is set during the Battle of Lake Changjin in the context of the Korean War, portraying the experiences of soldiers Wu Qianli and Wu Wanli as they serve in the 9th Army Corps of the Chinese People's Volunteers, battling against the U.S. Polar Bear Division.

2.3. Chinese "Main Melody" Film

The term "main melody" film has a long history. In 1987, during a national conference of feature film directors organized by the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television, He Jingzhi, then Vice Minister of the Central Propaganda Department, introduced the creative policy of "highlighting the 'main melody' and emphasizing diversity." "Main melody" films, also known as Chinese propaganda films, are Chinese movies directly or indirectly promoted by the government, representing the mainstream ideology of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Since their introduction in the 1980s, over more than thirty years, "main melody" films have undergone remarkable changes from concept to ideology propaganda. The creation and study of "main melody" film hold a crucial historical position in the journey of contemporary Chinese cinema's industrialization. "Main melody" films don't fit neatly into the traditional film classification system but constitute a unique cinematic landscape nurtured in a socialist environment with distinct Chinese characteristics. Due to their potential market size and distinctive artistic representations, "main melody" films have become an indispensable aspect of the study of contemporary Chinese cinema aesthetics [1].

The development of "main melody" films has not been without challenges. While "main melody" films received policy support from the Party and the government, they faced difficulties both at the box office and in terms of audience reception. Internally, traditional Chinese theme movie productions primarily aimed at propagating socialist ideology and promoting positive values. Such films as "Red Detachment of Women" and "The Taking of Tiger Mountain" often disregarded the aesthetics principles of filmmaking, resulting in didactic and unengaging content with an overt ideological propaganda function. For example, "The Founding of a Republic" served as a media for socialist ideology. Externally, the 1980s marked the beginning of the reform and opening-up period, during which various Western cultures and ideas began influencing China. Traditional socialist ideology, under the influence of Western capitalist culture, led to a shrinking audience for patriotic educational films. In contrast, Hollywood movies, with their comprehensive industrial systems, vibrant visuals, special effects, and mature plot patterns, became more popular among the younger generation. In the 21st century Hollywood entered the Chinese commercial market, and the mainland box office was heavily dominated by overseas. The Chinese government and medium-sized and large film companies have discovered the importance of tapping into localized film resources and have begun to think of ways to operate in the commercial film mode. In 2003, the Mainland and Hong Kong signed the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), which accelerated the relationship between the Mainland and Hong Kong in the film industry. The emergence of CEPA accelerated the cooperative relationship between the mainland and Hong Kong in the film industry, and the Chinese mainland began to learn from Hong Kong's film industry. Mainland China has also begun to learn from Hong Kong's private film industry in terms of capital operation, industrial strategies, and promotion and distribution modes. scene scheduling, visual expression, sound design and narrative strategy have also changed year by year. and narrative strategies. At the same time, Hong Kong-led melodramatic films have also manifested the change of national ideology after the handover of Hong Kong. For example, Tsui Hark's "Wise Tiger Mountain", with a star-studded cast from both the mainland and Hong Kong, is adapted from the model play "Lin Hai Xue Yuan", which

is a fantastical account of China's revolutionary and struggle for independence, highlighting the heroic Yang Zirong's 203 personal heroes' stories with the bandit captains, and at the same time showing a deep appreciation for the hard work behind the founding of the motherland. demonstrates a high degree of recognition and praise for the revolutionary comrades who worked hard behind the scenes to establish the motherland. The movie was highly recognized and praised by the audience during the 3D viewing. The audience's individual emotions during the 3D movie watching process are elevated to national sentiments. The audience's individual emotion during the 3D viewing process rises to the national sentiment, and their patriotic emotional needs and audio-visual pleasure are ultimately strongly satisfied [2]. Nevertheless, Chinese theme movies did not disappear; instead, they developed their own distinctive characteristics.

After the millennium, Chinese theme movies made significant breakthroughs to cater to changing market demands. Consider "The Founding of a Republic" in 2009, a film produced by China Film Group to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of New China. It achieved tremendous success at the box office, topping the 2009 Chinese movie box office list with 420 million yuan in revenue, leaving a 160 million yuan gap with the second-place film, "Red Cliff" (John Woo, 2009). With 13.05 million moviegoers, the film stands as a classic success story of Chinese theme movies, achieving both critical acclaim and box office success [3]. Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, the achievements of China's movie industry have undoubtedly been enormous. The achievements in the development of China's movie industry over the past 40 years of reform and opening up are undoubtedly enormous. Among them, the development of melodramatic films is an important aspect. The earliest reference to the so-called main theme movie came from a statement made by He Jingzhi, then vice minister of the Central Propaganda Department, at a national conference of feature film directors in 1987.

He Jingzhi, then vice minister of the Central Propaganda Department, made a speech at a national conference of feature film studio directors in 1987. He Jingzhi, then vice minister of the Central Propaganda Department, made a speech at the National Conference of Feature Film Studio Directors in 1987. Later, with the approval of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, the Film Bureau established the "Major Revolutionary Historical Themes" program. The Leading Group for Film and Television Creation on Major Revolutionary Historical Themes, with Ding Peak, then deputy director of the Film Bureau, as its director.

Ding Peak, then deputy director of the bureau, was the head of the group. Over the next few years, with the support of government funding In the next few years, with the support of government funds, "The Lofty Kunlun", "The Founding Ceremony", "The Battle of Armageddon", and "The Great Battle" were produced. The Founding Ceremony", "The Great Battle" (a trilogy), and a series of other films that had a great impact at the time. In the 1990s, a series of films with great influence at that time were produced, and a triad of melodrama and commercial films was gradually formed, In the 1990s, the development pattern of main theme films, commercial films and art films was gradually formed. [4].

In 2017, "Wolf Warrior 2," directed by Wu Jing, achieved staggering commercial success by collecting 5.683 billion yuan at the box office, further illustrating the influence and popularity of Chinese theme movies in China. In summary "main melody" films, have undergone a transformative journey over the years. They adapted to changing audience preferences and market dynamics while conveying essential ideological messages. Despite initial challenges, they have emerged as a significant and successful genre within contemporary Chinese cinema, achieving both critical acclaim and box office success.

3. Analysis of "Impasse": Micro History, Personal Story, and an Alternative Historical Narrative

"Impasse" is one of Zhang Yimou's masterpieces among "main melody" films. In terms of the movie's style, it falls under the spy genre, featuring espionage as its central theme, and it featured narratives about secret agents, wars, love, and violent torture. Unlike Zhang Yimou's earlier works such as "Red Sorghum" and "Raise the Red Lantern," which pays specific attention on the representation of history and goes with vivid colors, this film's visual style is dominated by cold tones, effectively setting the cold emotional tone throughout. The use of snow and night scenes enhances the cold and cruel visual tone, marking a departure from Zhang Yimou's previous reliance on colorful elements and showcasing his evolving style in exploring "main melody" films.

Concerning the movie's settings, "Impasse" indeed explores a singular historical event which could be less reported in the national history. The story is set against the backdrop of the event known as the "918 Incident" that occurred in Harbin. This incident revolved around the fall of the Northeastern region to a pseudo-Manchukuo colony. Through the portrayal of this period, the film aims to evoke the spirit of resistance to war, serving as a means of promoting the "main melody" film's indoctrination. The sacrifices made by the great revolutionary martyrs for their country are vividly portrayed in the film. It sheds light on the Northeast region under the rule of pseudo-Manchukuo.

In terms of character design, the movie primarily focuses on portraying minor characters to depict the national sentiment during the war. In the film, the highest status of the villain Gao Bin is only that of the pseudo-Manchu police department's secret service section chief. The protagonist group of four does not hold senior leadership positions within the organization. While these individuals may not influence the fate of the country directly, their dedication to the nation's strength and independence is unwavering. They demonstrate unhesitating commitment, even at the cost of their lives, in the fight for national independence and resistance against the Japanese invaders. This reflects director Zhang Yimou's perspective on the role of the masses in history and the fact that the masses of people shape history, with the victory against the Japanese being led by the masses. In recounting the story of the revolution, *Above the Cliff* abandons the traditional "perfect hero" characterization of mainstream films and skillfully presents the "perfect hero" characterization of the revolution. "perfect hero" characterization in mainstream films, and skillfully shows the emotional side of the characters. Zhang Xianchen, in the process of fleeing for his life, can't help but go after a child who is begging for food. a child in need of food, Wang Yu's silent pain in the middle of the night when she learns of her husband's death, Chu Liang's Wang Yu's silent pain in the night when she learns of her husband's death, and Chuliang's self-sacrifice in a moment of emergency. Throughout the movie, the "little self" and the "big self" are always in the forefront of the movie. The choice between the "little self" and "everyone" is a rare emotional narrative in spy movies. In the movie Communist underground workers carry out a mission called "Utra", which means "dawn" in Russian. "In the movie, Zhang Xianchen believes that after a long period of darkness, dawn will finally come. After a long period of darkness, the dawn will come. A major feature of *Above the Cliff* is the intersection of multiple threads. The two opposing sides, three combat forces, eleven people, Wang Yu's team, Zhang Xianchen's team, and the Special Branch are the three main parties. Wang Yu's team, Zhang Xianchen's team, and the Special Branch are the three main parties, and the struggles of all parties around the "Utra" operation are intertwined and interspersed. The three parties, mainly Wang Yu's team, Zhang Xianchen's team and the Special Branch, are intertwined and interspersed in the struggle around the "Utra" operation. The group movie has a unique rhythm and narrative form [5].

Regarding the film's narrative approach, it primarily revolves around two main storylines. One centers on the completion of "Operation Utra," aimed at rescuing the Harbin human experimentation survivor Wang Ziyang and obtaining evidence of Japanese human experimentation. The other

storyline focuses on the defection of one of the moles, Xie Zirong, leading to the organization encountering numerous traps set by the enemy. These intertwined storylines, along with elements like love, national distress, and more, constitute the entire narrative network of the film. Unlike typical spy or suspense films filled with numerous suspenseful plot twists, "Impasse" develops its story in a straightforward manner, gradually revealing each aspect to the audience. This represents an innovative approach by director Zhang Yimou in the realm of suspenseful melodramatic films.

The narrative is organized into chapters, and the story is divided into segments like "secret signals," "action," "cards," "maze," "dangerous chess," "life and death," and "forward." This approach ensures a clear and well-structured plot, with an emphasis on character portrayal. Additionally, character development in the film departs from the use of secondary characters to merely support the main characters. Instead, it adopts a group narrative in which the main eleven characters play essential and independent roles, making each character indispensable. One notable feature of "Impasse" is its multifaceted storytelling, with two major opposing parties, three combat forces, eleven key characters, including Wang Yu's group and Zhang Xianchen's group, and the Special Branch as the three main factions. The struggles of these factions revolve around the "Ultra" operation, with their stories intricately woven together, creating a unique rhythm and narrative form characteristic of ensemble film [6].

4. Analysis of "The Battle at Lake Changjin": Historical Authenticity, Panoramic Narrative, and Intertextuality

Chen Kaige's masterpiece in "main melody" films is "The Battle at Lake Changjin," characterized by magnificent scenes and a compelling war backdrop. The movie captivates audiences with its stunning war sequences brought to life through modern movie processing technology. It primarily focuses on the battle between the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and the U.S. Army in the Changjin Lake area of North Korea, set against the grand historical event of the anti-U.S. war in North Korea.

The film delves into significant historical events that shaped the battlefield on a macro level, including Chairman Mao's decision to enter the Korean battlefield and the leadership of Marshal Peng Dehuai. Amidst these grand events, the movie zeroes in on the 7th Tactical Interpolation Company, led by Wu Wanli and Wu Qianli, who bravely fought against the U.S. Army while escorting severed power lines. The film adopts a simple narrative style, focusing on patriotism, dedication, and fearlessness displayed by ordinary young heroes such as Wu Qianli, Yu Congrong, and Mei Sheng.

In terms of content, "The Battle at Lake Changjin" excels in both storytelling and historical authenticity. The movie's plot development draws from real historical events of the Korean War, displaying objectivity and authenticity. Simultaneously, it artistically processes characters and events, infusing the storyline with historical accuracy and engaging elements like ups and downs, heartwarming plots, and vivid characterizations. In Changjin Lake, the characterization of the individual is synchronized with his belonging to the collective and the nation. The individual's characterization is synchronized with his belonging to the collective and the nation, which is mainly concentrated in director Chen Kaige's filming, which aims to establish the character's image and personality. The movie is mainly focused on director Chen Kaige's filming, and the purpose is to establish the character's image and personality. The three lines of the narrative are synchronized. At the same time, the three-fold narrative structure also emphasizes the significance and nature of the battle at the national level. The three threads of the narrative also emphasize the significance and nature of the battle at the national level, and the intersection of high-level decision-making and individual growth threads shows the importance of the individual as a member of the nation. The intersection of high-level decision-making and individual growth threads expresses the responsibility of the individual as a member of the nation for the future and destiny of the nation [7].

The film employs a documentary-like panoramic narrative strategy, offering three distinct perspectives on the battle: from high-level command, to the activities of ordinary soldiers on the battlefield, and even from the viewpoint of the U.S. military. This approach expands the traditional war film narrative, interweaving the pre-war, wartime, and post-war battlefield experiences.

Unique to "The Battle at Lake Changjin" is its through-line narrative from the perspective of the American army, providing a comprehensive account of their journey from the initial bombing to their eventual defeat and retreat during the battle. The film pays meticulous attention to detail, including the portrayal of key American characters like the arrogant MacArthur and the blind commander of the 10th Group Army, offering a comprehensive view of the American army rarely seen in other war films.

From beginning to end, the movie "The Battle of Lake Jangjin" is based on the recreation of war real events and the central characters of the battlefield as the narrative base. On the one hand, the "United National Army" landing at Inchon, enemy planes bombing villages on the border between China and North Korea, the 9th Corps' urgent inter-regional mobilization to the front line, and soldiers secretly entering North Korea to bury their soldiers. the 9th Corps' urgent inter-regional mobilization to the front line, the soldiers' secret ambush in the snowy mountains of North Korea, the annihilation of the Polar Bear Regiment, the bombing of the Suomen Bridge, the close reconnaissance and carpet bombing by American planes, and the withdrawal of American troops from Hyungnam. The movie "The Battle at Lake Changjin" is about the historical facts that took place during the battle. It presents a panoramic view of these historical facts that took place during the battle at Lake Changjin [8].

By parallelizing the three narrative lines of the U.S. Army, top brass, and the company, Chen Kaige constructs a narrative structure distinct from other films. This approach effectively represents the perspectives of the nation, the collective, and the individual, making the vision of family and nation unity a reality [9].

"The Battle at Lake Changjin" also incorporates classic Chinese theme characterizations, such as the heroic martyr Yang Gensi and the valiant Ice Sculpture Company, enriching the plot with diverse stories and historical scenarios, creating a captivating inter-text of different narratives.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the films "Impasse" and "The Battle at Lake Changjin," we can discern distinctive personal styles in making melodramatic films between Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Zhang Yimou opts for an original story of underground struggle rather than placing the narrative within familiar historical events. This approach provides more room for personal creative expression, making his work relatively more innovative. On the other hand, Chen Kaige sets his story within the context of the Changjin Lake war, offering the audience a more familiar historical backdrop and a narrative style that leans towards a documentary perspective.

In terms of characterization, "Impasse" stands out for its collective narrative approach, where major and minor characters are not distinctly separated. Instead, all eleven characters play a joint role in advancing the storyline. In "The Battle at Lake Changjin," the characterization focuses on key figures like Wu Bai Li and Wu Qian Li, with supporting characters playing a secondary role in the development of these central characters [10]. The story is primarily led by these main characters.

Regarding to the settings, "Impasse" employs cold colors and mostly indoor scenes, emphasizing the conflict between positive and negative characters. In contrast, "The Battle at Lake Changjin" unfolds on the grand stage of the Korean War's front battlefield, with visuals predominantly highlighting the war scenes.

In summary, Zhang Yimou's primary style in shooting main media films, as exemplified by "Impasse," is characterized by a clear storyline, a distinct overall atmosphere, and prominent story points like climaxes and reversals. On the other hand, Chen Kaige places more emphasis on shaping

the story scenes, downplaying the plot, and focusing on the experiences of soldiers on the battlefield, where life and death are constant companions. His storytelling often evolves from changes in the battlefield environment, emphasizing the characters' development within that context.

References

- [1] Wang, Y., Qianxian, C. (2023). *Collective Memory Building through Medium Rituals in Melodramatic Movies: From the Heroic Image of Changjin Lake*. *Comedy World (First Half)*, 6, 81-83.
- [2] Li, Z.(2020). *Research on the Aesthetic Style of Contemporary "Main Melody" Films (2009-2018)* [Doctoral Dissertation, Jiangxi Normal University].
- [3] Zhu, B. (2020) *The Underlying Narrative of the New "Main Melody" Cinema--Take "Me and My Country" as an Example*. *World of Sound and Screens*, 8, 43-44.
- [4] Zhong, T. (2020). *Research on Aesthetic Style of Contemporary "Main Melody" Cinema (2009-2018)* [Doctoral Dissertation, Jiangxi Normal University].
- [5] Chen, R., Zhai, L. (2019). *A Study on the National Image in the "Main Melody" Cinema Over the Past 40 years of Reform and Opening up*. *Art Hundred*, 1, 125-129+148.
- [6] Lin, X. (2022). *The Group Narrative of 'Impasse' and the "Main Melody" Cinema's The Construction of National Identity*. *Ancient and Modern Culture and Creativity*, 27, 89-91.
- [7] Li, H. (2023). *Panoramic Narrative and Poetic Emotional Expression: Brief Introduction to the Narrative Strategies of The battle at Lake Changjin- The Narrative Strategy of Lake Changjin*. *Western Radio and Television*, 4, 108-110.
- [8] Li, H. (2023). *The Construction of National Image in War Theme Films from Lake Changjin*. *Art Education*, 8, 161-164.
- [9] Xu, H., Zhang, Q. (2022). *Historical Memory and National Identity: Coming-of-Age Narratives and Epic Beauty in Lake Nagatsu*. *Movie Review*, 8, 24-27.
- [10] Xu,Y.,Zhang, L. (2022). *The Battle at Lake Changjin: The Practice of Innovative Development of "Main Melody" Cinema Creation Method*, 43(17), 157-159.