

# ***A Study on the Cultural Differences Between Chinese and American Realistic Films: A Case Study of Dying to Survive and Dallas Buyers Club***

Shiyi Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cambridge International School (KCIS), Kunshan City, Jiangsu Province, 215332, China

a. 12788@kcisg.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** *Dying to Survive* and *Dallas Buyers Club* are two films centered around realistic themes, exploring the challenges faced by patients. Despite their shared focus on healthcare conditions, the films differ in their portrayal, thematic perspectives, and cultural implications due to varying production origins and cultural contexts. In terms of presentation, *Dying to Survive* employs humor and exaggeration against the backdrop of the drug trade, using satire and comedy to highlight China's healthcare system flaws and societal issues. Conversely, *Dallas Buyers Club* prioritizes realism, grounded in actual events and characters, shedding light on problems within the American healthcare setup. From a thematic standpoint, *Dying to Survive* probes China's medical system intricacies, legality of drug trade, and patients' struggles. It tells a tale of ordinary individuals battling to survive and help others, critiquing and urging reform in China's medical landscape. On the other hand, *Dallas Buyers Club* delves into the US healthcare system, focusing on a protagonist who sells drugs illicitly for survival. The narrative confronts the mainstream medical establishment, evoking questions and introspection on America's healthcare system. Culturally, *Dying to Survive* mirrors Chinese values, showcasing altruism and disdain for exorbitant drug costs. Meanwhile, *Dallas Buyers Club* mirrors American ideals of individual rights and freedoms, depicting one person's quest for survival and liberty, embodying core American values.

**Keywords:** cultural differences, realistic films, *Dying to Survive*, *Dallas Buyers Club*

## **1. Introduction**

The film *Dying to Survive* has a production budget of approximately 120 million yuan, with a final box office of 3.76 billion yuan, making it the third highest grossing film in mainland China's film history. The awards were for Best Actor and Best Adapted Screenplay at the 55th Golden Horse Awards. The film has received high recognition from audiences and professional reviews, with ratings exceeding 9 points on websites such as Douban and Cat's Eye.

According to data provided by Box Office Mojo, the film '*Dallas Buyers Club*' grossed \$55,189,694 worldwide in 2013. Among them, the box office in North America is an addition, according to IMDb (Internet Movie Database) rating data, the movie scored 8.0 out of 10 in

audience ratings and 8.4 out of 10 in professional ratings. This indicates that the film has gained a good reputation and evaluation in the industry.

The film tells the story of Cheng Yong, an ordinary man who runs a god oil shop and is searching for a cure. He met with Indian drugmaker Toll and officials from China's Food and Drug Administration. Cheng Yong he did not have any ambition, also do not want to be a savior, just want to make some money, keep the custody of the child, open their own god oil shop, in the process of looking for therapeutic drugs, he found a new drug in the United States can effectively treat his condition. However, the drug is not yet available in China and is too expensive for Cheng to afford. So he set out to find a way for others to buy the medicine, and with the help of Thor, an Indian pharmacist, he was able to buy the medicine. To help more patients, Cheng Yong and Lei Shen began working together to set up the "I Love My Family" pharmacy to help more patients buy the drug. However, their actions caught the attention of the China Food and Drug Administration, whose officials began investigating the actions of the I Love My Family pharmacy.

Following an investigation by FDA officials, Cheng Yong and Lei Shen were arrested and face serious criminal charges. Amid public appeals and protests, Cheng was eventually released, while Thor was deported back to India. In the process, Cheng Yong and Thor formed a deep friendship, and through their actions demonstrated their value for life and desire for humanity. At the end of the film, Cheng Yong dies of illness, but his spirit and actions inspire more people to pay attention to and cherish life.

The Dallas Buyers' Club told the story of Ron Woodruff, an electrician who learned that he was infected with HIV, and Ennis, who also suffered from HIV, and Eve, a transgender person, in the process of searching for treatment drugs.

This film is set in 1985. Ron is an electrician who was accidentally diagnosed with HIV and was told that only 30 days of life are left. Under the treatment of the therapeutic drug AZT, Ron's condition did not improve, but instead exacerbated his symptoms. After learning that there is a drug that is not approved by the FDA in Mexico that can treat HIV, Ron began to look for this drug, but he encountered legal and social obstacles.

In Mexico, Ron met Ennis and Eve, who also suffered from HIV. Ron began to bring this drug back to the United States without FDA approval and set up the "Dallas Buyer Club" in Dallas to help HIV patients through illegal trafficking of this drug. During this process, Ron, Ennis, Eve, and others established a deep friendship to fight against disease and social injustice together.

Although Ron and his companions face legal and moral condemnation, they firmly believe that their actions are protecting life and dignity. At the end of the movie, Ron unfortunately passed away in the struggle between law and society, but his actions and beliefs inspire more people to pay attention to and care for life.

Many details may be discovered by examining this poster from the standpoint of the fundamental components of graphic design. On the entire screen, the positioning of the play's key characters creates an inverted triangle composition. Everyone is aware that the triangle denotes stability and solidity, but the inverted triangle denotes instability, tension, and collapse; the stable shape is an unstable state when combined with the plot theme, meaning that there are contradictions and conflicts within this peaceful and stable social structure that could at any time develop into another state of collapse. This serves as a metaphor for the underclass, which is unassuming and silent but is enveloped in a brutal darkness. It speaks up for the voiceless, roars at the darkness, and exposes the scars left by whitewashing.

Although there are many scholars studying this field, few have studied the cultural differences between Chinese and American realist themed films - as studying this type of subject matter is very interesting first of all. To understand and delve deeper into American movies and Chinese movies,

the meanings conveyed by the same subject matter are different, and the information received by the audience is also different.

## 2. Literature Review

With the increasing popularity of movies, many scholars have also conducted research on movies from different countries. Zheng Yang wrote that compared to the American film “Dallas Buyer’s Club” with similar themes, *Dying to Survive* may have a slightly youthful rhythm control, but the creators consciously avoided the former’s praise of personal heroism, liberalism, as well as core issues such as prosecution power institutions and social systems [1]. Such foreign films often gain artistic depth because of sharp social and political criticism, and become a masterpiece that awakens the conscience of the world, and even a masterpiece handed down to the world. But such films are too sharp criticism, in our country often survive difficult, do not be open to the world; And critical reality itself is a kind of knowledge molecular purport, the audience is relatively narrow [2]. It is the difference between *Dying to Survive* and *Dallas Buyers Club*, even though both are socially critical films, *Dying to Survive* is very subtle. Fixed themes are characteristic of genre films. The theme of social hero films is generally to promote social justice and public welfare. While the social hero is just a new genre we’re trying to discover and nurture, it actually has cultural roots. What the Chinese martial arts films carry forward is the chivalrous spirit of the swordsmen who see the injustice on the road, draw their swords to help, fight for the good, and sacrifice themselves for others. beauty

Chinese superhero movies celebrate the salvation heroism of sacrifice in the face of threats, the pursuit of justice, and the protection and salvation of communities, people, and the planet. In the United States, it highlights the resistance of individual heroism to the social system and interest groups. In China, constructive realism tends to mitigate social criticism by avoiding direct confrontation with the government and system. It prioritizes a more subtle approach that seeks to inspire and provoke thought at a rational level, rather than aiming for immediate shock or confrontation [3].

While there has been little research on the Dallas House Club, there has been a lot of research on *Dying to Survive*. Gong Ziqiang said that the standing character image, especially the hero image, is a necessary fulcrum for the critical establishment of the film, but the critical achievement of the film also depends on the completion of the overall quality of the film. The quality of the film itself is an important support for whether the film review is effective and powerful. What makes simple and rude criticism weak and even offensive is the poor quality of the film. The reason why The film is a thought-provoking critique of reality lies in Cheng Yong’s image and the “sum of social relations” it embodies [4]. Woodroof, the protagonist of *Dallas Buyers Club*, is a typical “anti-hero”. At the beginning of the film, the director directly focuses on the “inverse” in Woodroof’s “anti-hero” characteristics, that is, how Woodroof “dies.” First of all, his personal life was indiscreet. Secondly, he not only gambled, but also set up gambling schemes to steal other gamblers’ money and was willing to fight for this. Alcohol, drugs, women filled his life, he uncontrollably debauched the body, squandered life. Woodroof’s image is far from the “traditional hero” and “tall and full” figure image, he has neither high moral quality nor extraordinary talent, he is a “cheating and playing with women’s feelings” living in the bottom of society. But what is shocking is that “cheating men who play with women’s feelings” has reversed itself into a “hero” who has been recorded in the history of human fight against AIDS, a social activist for equal rights and interests of AIDS groups. Such a rise is bound to be more shocking than the “traditional hero” routine, and it is also closer to real life, and it is easier for the audience to empathize [5]. So, these also reflect that in American movies, people pay more attention to not how great and “heroic” people are, but the constant change and

change of people's hearts, which is the most important thing, while in China, people pay more attention to individual heroes and results, and do not care about the process.

"*Dallas Buyers Club*" focuses on the issue of the American medical system while including more social issues such as the LGBT community, its breadth and depth are worthy of reflection by Chinese films. How to make domestic mainstream films carry both principles and high criticism of social issues requires long-term wisdom exploration. In fact, there is a lot of "levitation" tendency in the current Chinese reality-themed film and television creation, which is seriously divorced from the real situation, not to mention the realistic creation. It can be said that realism is not only a kind of creative attitude, creative method and creative means, but also a kind of world outlook, life outlook, values and historical outlook. To establish the value concept and value orientation of people-oriented and people first and pay attention to the national economy and people's livelihood, especially the suffering of people's livelihood, is the first essence of realistic films. The film also shows that Chinese audiences are calling for realistic creation [6]. The same is that these two films show the contradiction between "love" and "law" through the rewriting of real events, and rise to a more universal reality. The repeated conflicts and coordination between "love" and "law" in the film reveal the kindness of human nature and the warmth of law, which can easily arouse the emotional resonance of the audience.

### 3. Methodology

Including the characterization of the two films, the characterization of *Dying to Survive* is an important driving force for the plot development of the film, and it is also a form of subtle expression of the deep content contained in the film by the director. It makes the whole story structure fuller and reflects the reality. There are no total bad people in the movie, and there are no good people all the time. In the first half of the film, Cheng Yong is not the "perfect Mr." we imagined, poor, lazy and degenerate, beating his wife owes rent... This is definitely not a positive image of the thing, the ruthless Zhang Changlin, with the alarm threat Cheng Yong, seize his generic drug agency, and then the price of many patients into the abyss... But at the last moment of the film, humanity flashes a light in the dark sky, and the "little man" actually grits his teeth to protect Cheng Yong. Instead of confronting us with the brutality and ugliness of reality, the film tells us a "utopian" warm fairy tale. One after another character image created in the film, which promotes the development of the plot at the same time, but also enables the audience to further understand the character image created [7]. There is an important scene in the Dallas Home Club where RON refuses to join a boy who can't pay his dues, and it is clear that he is running this as a business, not as a charity. With the death of his friends, the constant pressure of the Food and Drug Administration and the tax bureau, and the desire for life of many AIDS people, he began to change, and slowly provided drugs to some patients who did not have money for treatment, and sued the food and Drug Administration for all AIDS people. It is the transformation of character and the combination of positive and lateral description that make the whole plot compact and lively. At the end of the film, RON puts aside his personal interests, sells his car, and travels around the world to solve the problem of the operation of the club and the interests of the AIDS community, when he truly transforms into a traditional hero [8].

### 4. Results

Qualitative research typically uses in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations and other methods to collect data, and then uses analytical methods to interpret and illustrate the data and identify patterns and themes in the research topic. Qualitative research method refers to a method or perspective of studying things from the internal prescriptivity of things according to the attributes of

social phenomena or things and their contradictory changes in motion. Qualitative research should be based on certain theory and experience, directly grasp the main aspects of the characteristics of things, and temporarily omit the differences in the quantity of homogeneity.

The subject matter is different. *Dying to Survive* is a drama about the struggle between cancer patients and drug manufacturers and sales companies, while *Dallas Buyers Club* is a film about AIDS patients and the impact of AIDS on American society in the 1980s.

The characters are different. Cheng Yong, the protagonist of *Dying to Survive*, is a good-hearted pharmacist, while RON Woodroof, the protagonist of *Dallas Buyers Club*, is a rugged, rebellious, slightly wild cowboy. And reflects social issues from different angles: *Dying to Survive* mainly reflects the problem of drug chaos in China's real society, while *Dallas Buyers Club* focuses on the awareness and attitude of AIDS in the United States in the 1980s, reflecting the political, economic, social and other aspects of the United States at that time. Different styles: *Dying to Survive* presents the story with a cool, calm, and objective perspective, while *Dallas Buyers Club* creates a tense, intense emotional atmosphere by portraying characters with strong emotions and passionate expressions [8].

## 5. Discussion

The realistic social hero film's most notable characteristic is that the storyline is constrained by the realistic aesthetic, and since it is challenging to create a vast fiction, the character is the first in art [9]. The protagonist is a stereotypical, three-dimensional civilian hero who seeks social justice (a decent man), and the supporting cast and antagonists are created to back him. Although the plot can occasionally stand on its own, it usually needs to support the character. In *Dying to Survive*, Cheng Yong, played by Xu Zheng, is a character that represents a commoner hero; he is a greasy middle-aged selfish citizen with a very low starting point, a failed marriage, and domestic violence, but he is eventually changed by the world after being encouraged and oppressed by various outside forces; He stopped selling generic drugs due to timor, but after his friend's tragic near-death experience, he returned to it out of compassion. Over time, he developed chivalrous and charitable traits, much like the righteous thief and chivalrous man in crime and martial arts films, as well as the police battle of wits and courage; Finally, after the problems with the supply of goods in India, he even sent drugs to patients at a low price, upgraded from a drug vendor to a medicine man, and then transformed into a hero who saved many people with chronic leukemia. In the film *Dallas Buyers Club*, there is a reflection of the way of human existence [10]. After the protagonist realizes that he is terminally ill, the first problem he faces is whether he can continue to exist. Looking at the difference in his attitude towards life before and after becoming ill, it can be clearly seen that he has a desire for existence. He loves cowboys, participates in some competitive activities, often indulges in, visits prostitutes and even takes drugs, such a rotten life continues until he suddenly fainted one day and was diagnosed with AIDS, and was told that he only has 30 days to live. When he told the news to his friends, they began to discriminate against him because they thought he was gay, and gradually withdrew from him. RON lost his friends at this time, and fell seriously ill, the heart is very lost and desperate, and do know that the hospital to provide a small number of patients to use the AIDS treatment drug AZT has no right to use, the heart is sadder and angrier, can only wait for the advent of death. At this time, the existence of God's greatest care for him, unwilling to yield to fate, he began to re-examine himself, and determined to contend with fate.

## 6. Conclusion

"*Dallas Buyers Club*" focuses on the awareness and attitude of AIDS in the United States in the 1980s, reflecting the political, economic, social and other aspects of the United States at that time.

In the film, the protagonist RON Woodroof, in order to seek a cure for AIDS, began to smuggle illegal drugs, causing concern and suppression of the United States government and the medical community. The film shows that the understanding of AIDS in the United States at that time was relatively vague, the medical community lacked effective treatment means, the government failed to respond to the disease and other problems, calling on all sectors of society to strengthen the research and attention to AIDS, and improve the social cognition and response to the disease. *Dying to Survive* mainly reflects the problem of drug chaos in China's real society, while *Dallas Buyers Club* focuses on the awareness and attitude of AIDS in the United States in the 1980s, reflecting the political, economic, social and other aspects of the United States at that time.

## References

- [1] Chen, L. (2018) *The creative inspiration of Dying to Survive on current Chinese realistic films*. *Western Radio and Television*, (19):72-73.
- [2] Liu, F. (2018) *Dying to Survive: The Chinese Experience of Social hero films*. *Film Arts*, (05):63-66.
- [3] Chen, Y. (2018) *Dying to Survive: Can it usher in a new era of Chinese cinema?* *Film Review*, (14):16-21.
- [4] Gong, Z. Q. (2018) *How Films Criticize Reality -- On the Inspiration of Dying to Survive to Domestic Films*. *Art Review*, 2018.
- [5] Gui, L. (2018) *Commercial Imagination of Domestic reality-themed films: From Dear to Dying to Survive*. *China Literature and Art Review*, (10):30.
- [6] Huang, J.Y., Xue, J. (2019) *The Symbiosis of Realism and Film industry Aesthetics: Analysis of Dying to Survive*. *Changjiang Literature and Art Review*, (05).
- [7] Wen, M. Y., Xie, Y. *Image-based Construction of Self-aesthetics System: Interview with Wen Muye, director of Dying to Survive*. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*.
- [8] Huang, J. F. (2019) *The significance of film agenda Setting for public opinion guidance and value dissemination: A case study of Dying to Survive*. *Media Watch*.
- [9] Rao, S. G. (2018) *Realistic Background and Genre Strategy: A Review of Dying to Survive*. *Contemporary Film*, (08).
- [10] Liu, J. L. (2019) *Conflict and Balance between drug patent rights and life and right to health: A review of parallel import system of patented drugs from the perspective of I Am Not a Medicine God*. *Journal of Wuyi University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 21(03).