

Body, Emotion, and Soul: The Evolution of Alzheimer's Disease Representation in Chinese Films and Television Programmes

Jing Wu^{1,*}, Jimo Zhang²

¹College of Communication, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266061, China

²College of Foreign Languages, Shandong Vocational and Technical University of International Studies, Rizhao 276826, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

As China's population continues to age, the number of cases of Alzheimer's disease (AD) is rising to become the highest in the world. Film and television works reflect Chinese society's understanding of, and imagination surrounding, the disease, objectively building a bridge of understanding between the audience and this serious illness. This study analyses 41 Chinese films and television programmes about Alzheimer's disease from 1993 to 2024. It finds that, over three decades and alongside the evolution of Chinese national culture and social concepts, the depiction of Alzheimer's disease in Chinese films and television programmes has evolved through three distinct phases. Starting with an early focus on the disabled body, progressing to a mid-stage portrayal of patients' emotions, and culminating in the current emphasis on patients' inner journeys, this evolution reflects the inheritance and adherence to traditional Chinese societal ethics and morality. It also demonstrates the decline and transformation of the traditional family ethical order in the face of the disease, reflecting the in-depth thinking and diverse expression of film and television creators on the subject. This paper argues that China, having entered a deeply ageing society, requires a greater variety of Alzheimer's disease-themed films to enhance public understanding of the disease.

Keywords

Alzheimer's disease; Film and television representation; Stereotype; Disease metaphor; Stigma; Chinese traditional culture.

1. Introduction

According to data released by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs, the population aged 60 and over reached 310 million by the end of 2024, accounting for 22% of China's total population. Meanwhile, the population aged 65 and over reached 220 million, accounting for 15.6%. The deepening population ageing in China has led to a significant increase in the incidence, prevalence and mortality rates of age-related diseases, placing a significant burden on society[1]. Alzheimer's disease (AD) has seen a continuous rise in cases and an increasingly evident socio-economic burden, becoming a major health and social issue in China [2]. AD is a neurodegenerative disorder characterised by progressive cognitive impairment and behavioural deterioration occurring in old age and pre-senility. Clinically, it manifests as memory impairment, aphasia, visuospatial decline, and impaired abstract thinking and calculation ability, as well as changes in personality and behaviour [3]. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), there are currently 55.2 million people worldwide living with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. This figure is expected to reach

78 million by 2030 and 139 million by 2050[4] This equates to one new patient being diagnosed every three seconds globally. In China, a populous country, there are approximately 9.83 million patients with Alzheimer's disease (AD), the highest number in the world[5], accounting for 0.67% of China's total population. By 2050, this figure is projected to rise to 21 million[6]. In 2015, the annual treatment cost for AD patients in China was 167.74 billion US dollars. This figure is expected to rise year on year, reaching an estimated 188.718 billion US dollars by 2050 [7].

This severe situation has drawn Chinese society's attention to the issue of Alzheimer's disease (AD), and how to deal with AD is also a theme reflected in Chinese film and television works. In his article *Culture, Communication and the "Ideological Effect"*, British cultural theorist Stuart Hall proposed that modern communication has a primary cultural function: the selection and construction of social knowledge and imagery. The public uses this constructed knowledge and imagery to understand the world, experience real life, and confirm their own existence[8].

Shadow of Dream, released in 1993, was the first Chinese film to address the topic of Alzheimer's disease. By the end of 2024, a total of 41 films and TV programmes of this genre had been released in China. The core characters in these works are people with Alzheimer's disease, and they mainly depict the progression of the disease in terms of physical and mental aspects. These works convey the creators' ultimate contemplation of life in old age, reveal the innovation and continuity of Chinese national culture, carry subtle changes in social concepts and leave unforgettable visual memories for audiences of all generations. They also deepen the public's understanding of the disease and add depth and richness to film and television works.

2. Early Film and Television Representation: The Disabled Body (1993–2009)

In the 1990s, Chinese society, as well as film and television creators, had only recently become aware of Alzheimer's disease and had a very limited understanding of it. The portrayal of patients was rife with stereotyping and stigmatisation. During this period, patients appeared as objects under the gaze of healthy individuals, with their abnormal physical appearance and behaviour emphasised. Their uncontrollable appearance became a kind of spectacle and an important plot device. At the same time, patients were regarded as completely intellectually and physically disabled and unable to control their bodies normally. They were also isolated from normal family life, which resulted in very tense relationships between patients and their families. Examples include the character of Ah Ngor's grandfather in the Hong Kong film *Summer Snow* (1995); the character of Zhang's mother in the TV drama *Loquacious Zhang Damin's Happy Life* (2000); and the character of Xie's mother in the TV drama *Watch for the Happiness* (2005).

Early film and television portrayals of patients exaggerated their physical characteristics and facial expressions. They were portrayed as confused, unconscious, stiff in their movements, weak and unsociable. In the 1995 film *Summer Snow*, for instance, Ah Ngor's grandfather suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He rarely has moments of clarity, and when he is quiet he stares blankly at the floor with weak limbs and an almost complete loss of consciousness and ability to care for himself. After Xie's mother is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and sent to a nursing home in the 2005 TV drama *Watch for the Happiness*, she sits there in a daze, staring blankly ahead and unresponsive to greetings from her children and grandchildren. However, when her daughter-in-law offers her the green bean cake she loves, she suddenly bursts into laughter, crumbles the cake, smears it on her face and then wails. The film also depicts the humiliating scene of Xie's mother being chased by a pack of dogs.

During this period, patients were portrayed not only as 'demented', but also as 'troublemakers' on screen. Their eccentric movements and abnormal behaviour were exaggerated for dramatic effect, and their inappropriate actions caused a great deal of distress to their family members and carers. In the 1993 film *Shadow of Dream*, an elderly patient spends a large sum of money on counterfeit antiques, mistakes a strange woman for his young lover and smashes up the room, driving his daughter and son-in-law out of the house due to his confusion. In *Summer Snow*, Ah Ngor's grandfather, who has Alzheimer's disease, delays rescuing his spouse due to his impaired mind. The TV drama *Watch for the Happiness* depicts the destructive power of Alzheimer's disease patients extremely vividly, with Xie's mother causing intense conflicts among her children and even indirectly leading to her son's death. In the 2006 TV drama *Stories of the Elderly*, the patient's children refer to the disease as a mental illness and claim that they want to send their father to a mental hospital. These exaggerated representations in film and television have led to misunderstandings and discrimination against patients among audiences.

In fact, venerating and respecting the elderly has been a core value of ancient Chinese culture. The ideas that 'the elder, the wiser', 'the aged hold supreme honor', and 'treat others' elders as you would your own' have lasted for thousands of years in China. However, around the year 2000, Chinese society entered a period of cultural transition, during which the perception of the elderly changed from one of strength in old age to one of weakness at the end of life. Those with Alzheimer's disease appeared even less able to adapt to rapid changes in the outside world, which highlighted their declining state and led to their gradual marginalisation and systematic social exclusion. Film and television creators constructed a binary narrative: in conflict with the concepts of modern civilisation held by the younger generation, the stereotypical characteristics of elderly patients — being slow, stubborn and unreasonable — were amplified and exaggerated. White hair and wrinkles were heavily criticised. In the competition between the elderly and the young, the elderly gradually lost their strength and confidence, shifting from respected elders to weak and incompetent individuals despised by the younger generation and wider society.

3. Mid-Stage Film and Television Representation: Emotions Amidst Memory Loss (2010–2019)

Since 2010, the media portrayal of patients with Alzheimer's disease has become more emotional. The focus of film and television portrayals has shifted from physical symptoms to emotional aspects of the disease. Patients are no longer depicted as completely incapacitated and without memory, but rather as retaining elements of love, family ties, and friendship. This change is attributed to increased knowledge dissemination about Alzheimer's disease in Chinese society, improved caregiver understanding, and a more empathetic attitude towards patients. Film and television creators have also improved their understanding of Alzheimer's disease. Examples of typical patient portrayals from this period include Lao Na and Li Ying in the 2010 film *Addicted To Love*, Mr Sheng in the 2015 film *The Song of Cotton*, and Su Dachang in the 2019 TV drama *All Is Well*.

Despite being affected by Alzheimer's disease, the patients in these works still possess the capacity for emotional expression. In the 2010 film *Addicted To Love*, retired Lao Na meets his former lover, Li Ying, by chance and starts to rebuild his relationship with her. Li Ying, who also has Alzheimer's disease, is helped by Lao Na to improve her memory with "brain teasers". Despite being separated for many years, the two support and care for each other. At the end of the film, Lao Na gets lost on his way home at night, revealing that he has developed Alzheimer's disease too. The film's portrayal of the elderly couple's mutual support is moving and evokes deep sympathy from the audience for the lonely lives of elderly patients with the

condition. The 2015 film *The Song of Cotton* tells the story of Mr Sheng, who has Alzheimer's disease and harbours a lifelong regret about not having a formal wedding with his wife, Miao Hua. On his deathbed, he continues to mutter about his deceased wife: 'Miao Hua, I want to get married... get married.' Ultimately, Mr Sheng passes away peacefully, smiling as he looks at his wife's photograph. In the 2017 film *Soldier Grandpa*, patient Qi Changfu, though confined by the disease, searches for traces of his old comrades with his family's support. Additionally, TV dramas such as *Hey Daddy* (2015), *Single Ladies* (2016) and *If Paris Is Not Happy* (2018) focus on the emotional journeys of patients. During this period, as Chinese society's understanding of Alzheimer's disease deepened, early stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes underwent significant change. The portrayal of patients shifted from 'abnormality' to 'humanisation', with their emotionally charged words and actions depicted in a way that moves the audience. However, this portrayal also reflects the creators' idealisation of Alzheimer's disease, which is another form of disease metaphor. As Susan Sontag once said, 'For over a hundred years, people have used tuberculosis to give death meaning — it was considered an enlightening and elegant disease.' Similarly, Alzheimer's disease was romanticised at this time, imbued with the idea of memory loss but enduring emotions.

Moreover, patients began to be seen as individuals. Rather than being depicted as 'useless' or 'incapable', patients were presented as having abilities. For instance, in the 2015 TV drama *Hey Daddy*, the afflicted Liu Er Tie is shown helping neighbours to repair equipment. Similarly, in the 2018 TV drama *Beibu Gulf People*, university professor Jian Shuxian continues to teach after being diagnosed with the disease until she feels unable to perform her duties, at which point she resigns. These portrayals align more closely with reality and reflect an increased societal tolerance towards Alzheimer's disease. Patients transitioned from isolation to acceptance and participation in social interactions.

4. Contemporary Film and Television Representation: The Return to the Soul (2020–2024)

Before 2020, patients with Alzheimer's disease in Chinese films and TV programmes were mostly portrayed as actors within the realms of family life and emotions. They were confined to these domains. Few works engaged with nuanced humanistic care for the individual patient. However, since 2020, while traditional 'negative' and 'emotional' frameworks have persisted to some extent, there have been many progressive changes in the portrayal of patient characters. Representation of Alzheimer's disease in film and television has achieved new breakthroughs. The independent lives of elderly patients and reflections on their existence have gradually come to the fore. Creators have begun to delve into the rich inner worlds of patients, striving to portray their innermost hopes and aspirations. Patient characters have evolved from being one-dimensional to becoming more complex and multifaceted. This shift indicates China's increasing openness to new ideas, greater dissemination of scientific knowledge about Alzheimer's disease, a more comprehensive public understanding of the disease, and a more inclusive social and cultural atmosphere. Initially, Chinese society viewed Alzheimer's disease patients as intellectually and physically disabled, neglecting their inner needs. Caregivers often dismissed patients' demands as absurd manifestations of their illness. However, in this phase of media representation, patients' inner desires are depicted and, to some extent, respected by their families. In the 2021 film *Being Mortal*, patient Xia Jianguo repeatedly asks his family to 'go back to Xiaodongmen' and 'return to his hometown'. While changing clothes in the bathroom, he takes his daughter's hand and, in a daze, says, "Mum, I want to go home. I want to go back to Xiaodongmen." Sima Qian wrote in his 'Biography of Qu Yuan': 'When people are in dire straits, they return to their roots. Thus, when exhausted from toil and hardship, they never fail to call upon Heaven; when suffering from illness and pain,

they never fail to call upon their parents.' Xia Jianguo's repeated desire to return to his hometown reflects the elderly's attachment to their place of origin when they are ill.

In the 2023 film *The Cord of Life*, the titular character, a musician named Alus, accompanies his mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, on a journey to the grasslands in search of her childhood home, the "Yin-Yang Tree". Alus accompanies her on this journey of discovery. Along the way, she mistakes Alus for her deceased father, clinging to his arm and saying, 'Dad, Dad, you're finally back.' Eventually, she passes away peacefully beside the campfire, and Alus discovers the 'Yin-Yang Tree' that she had spoken of. This tree symbolises the elderly Alzheimer's patient's obsession with her childhood, her nostalgia for the beginning of life and her longing for her hometown. In the 2024 film *Before Memory Fades*, elderly Guo Zhijun, who is constantly thinking about his hometown, returns there with his long-separated spouse. As his Alzheimer's disease progresses, he is carefully cared for by his spouse and others. In the film, the hometown becomes an important narrative setting and a place of emotional attachment for Guo Zhijun. Smith noted in his book *Chinese Characteristics*: 'Chinese people are generally reluctant to leave their hometowns to seek happiness elsewhere unless absolutely necessary. Their ideal life is like a tree, rooted in the soil of their hometown, drawing nourishment, blossoming, bearing fruit, and returning to the roots.' This ethnic psychology intertwines with the unique psychological state and emotional needs of elderly Alzheimer's patients, resulting in a thought-provoking portrayal of them in the media.

Furthermore, the depiction of the relationships between patients and their loved ones in films and on television has changed significantly over time. In early works, patients had no voice, and the media overemphasised their dependence on family members. During the middle period, emotional narratives became central, highlighting the selfless, one-sided sacrifices made by family members for patients. However, true mutual understanding was lacking. In recent years, however, the portrayal of these relationships has become more nuanced. Both parties have gained a deeper understanding of each other's life values, ethical beliefs and family emotions, achieving a sense of reconciliation and mutual understanding. In the film *The Cord of Life*, Alus takes his mother back to her hometown to find the 'Yin-Yang Tree' as she remembers it. To prevent her from getting lost, he ties himself and her together with a hemp rope. At a campfire party en route, Alus seems to dance with his mother, appearing to be in a daze. She expresses her happiness to Alus, encouraging him: 'It's okay. Time will always move forward. Just like the grassland irises won't stay green forever.' Suddenly, she sees her deceased relatives in the distance and starts walking towards them, but the rope holding her to Alus stops her. With tears in his eyes, Alus cuts the rope, allowing his mother to walk away smiling. In reality, his mother had already passed away peacefully by the campfire. By cutting the rope, Alus signifies that he no longer wishes to hold on to his mother in this world. He transcends his love for her, truly respecting and understanding her. In the film *Mom*, Jiang Yuzhi, the 85-year-old mother, is portrayed as emotional, stubborn and somewhat playfully adorable. Her 65-year-old daughter, Feng Jizhen, is an intelligent, perceptive, meticulous and introverted university professor. Upon learning that her mother has Alzheimer's disease, Jizhen wants to make arrangements for her in advance. After finding out, the mother's maternal instincts are reawakened and she resolutely takes on the responsibility of caring for her daughter. Their relationship evolves from tension and estrangement to reconciliation and tolerance. The film includes many touching details of the mother's care for her daughter. Despite her old age, she patiently and meticulously takes care of her ailing daughter, cooking and cleaning. She chases after her daughter in the middle of the night, concerned for her well-being. She collaborates with doctors to tell well-intentioned lies to improve her daughter's condition. To uphold her daughter's dignity, she even gets into physical altercations with younger, stronger men. It is the mother's care for her daughter that gradually dissolves the immense, lingering pain of 'the father's death' that has stood like a

barrier between them. Love melts the iceberg in the daughter's heart, healing her emotional wounds and completing her self-redemption.

5. Discussion

Over the past three decades, the representation of Alzheimer's disease in Chinese film and television has gone through three distinct stages as Chinese national culture and social concepts have evolved. Initially, the focus was on the disabled body; then it shifted to portraying patients' emotions; and now, the emphasis is on patients' inner journeys. These three types of representation are interwoven and fluctuate, reflecting the inheritance and adherence to traditional Chinese ethical and moral values. They also reveal how the traditional family ethical order declines and transforms when confronted with the disease, demonstrating the in-depth thinking and diverse expression of film and television creators regarding Alzheimer's disease.

In reality, creating successful film and television works themed around Alzheimer's disease in China is extremely challenging. Yang Lizhou, a director who produced a documentary about people with Alzheimer's disease, said that his friends thought he was crazy when they learned what his film was about. They remarked, "Documentaries are box office poison, the elderly are box office poison, and diseases are box office poison — you have three poisons". Alzheimer's disease encompasses both "ageing" and "disability", making it almost impossible to avoid portraying the vulnerable situations experienced by those affected. This is the fate of such subject matter. Looking back over the last three decades, the portrayal of Alzheimer's disease in film and television has evolved from the physical to the emotional and spiritual, with increasingly rich and three-dimensional character portrayals. However, there are still many shortcomings. Firstly, there is a lack of focus on patients with Alzheimer's disease who live alone. Almost all patients depicted in stories are embedded in stable family or social relationships. Secondly, some films and TV shows play down the cruel aspects of the later stages of Alzheimer's disease, treating them as magical or romantic plot devices. Such portrayals do not help the public to understand the seriousness of the disease. Thirdly, some works use Alzheimer's disease as a catalyst to resolve family relationship issues in their narratives, which is also detrimental to the accurate depiction of serious diseases in films. Rather than seeking open-ended positive emotional outlets, it is more important to raise awareness of the situation of caregivers in Alzheimer's disease families.

These omissions may be due to the irreversible nature of Alzheimer's disease, which does not permit a narrative of "overcoming" or "getting better", as is common with curable diseases. This is also why the theme of 'love' is so important in films about Alzheimer's disease. The emergence or reconciliation of love can provide a resolution to these stories' incomplete endings. The most common narrative logic in Alzheimer's disease films is therefore that only love bound by ties that do not disappear can withstand the irreversible abyss of forgetting caused by the disease. To construct positive stories about ageing, the reality of the disease is diminished.

In most films, Alzheimer's disease serves as a plot mechanism, a metaphorical symbol and an emotional device. The depiction of family relationships and the underlying social emotions undoubtedly elevates these films beyond the level of individual suffering. Most creators of films about Alzheimer's disease recognise the complexity of the condition and attempt to challenge the public's stereotypical view of patients as passive sufferers. The growing number of films and television programmes about Alzheimer's disease is also a response to an ageing society. Excellent films and television programmes about Alzheimer's disease should avoid pity, criticism, excessive pathos, abruptness or exaggeration in their plots. They must accurately portray patients' experiences within a limited timeframe, while also being

attractive and marketable. Achieving these goals is no easy task. As the most widely accessible mass medium, film and television play an indispensable role in shaping public values, knowledge and understanding of contemporary society. China, a country that has entered a period of deep ageing, needs more films about Alzheimer's disease with diverse narratives to enhance public understanding of the complex future that lies ahead.

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Authors

Jing Wu (born 1978) is a female associate professor from Qingdao in the province of Shandong. She holds a Master's degree, and her research areas include media, elderly care and mental health in aging China.

Jimo Zhang (born 1964) is a male professor from Qingdao, Shandong. He has a Master's degree and an ABD, and his research areas include cross-cultural management, linguistics, literature, translation, and interpreting.

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