

# An Exploration of Realism in Death Narratives in Contemporary Chinese and Korean New Youth Films from a Global Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract.** With the advent of economic globalization leading to cultural globalization, countries are integrating and innovating their indigenous cultures while absorbing and borrowing from the film cultures of other nations. Chinese and Korean New Youth Films employ a multi-genre narrative mode combining "youth" with realism. This paper conducts a comparative study of Chinese new youth film *Better Days* and the Korean new youth film *Next Sohee*, exploring the influence of global cultural perspectives on Chinese and Korean New Youth Films from the perspective of death narratives, the realistic application of death narratives in Chinese and Korean New Youth Films, as well as the differentiated narrative strategies of Chinese and Korean New Youth Films. This study further extends to the real significance and value of death imagery in youth films.

**Keywords:** Death Narratives; Chinese and Korean New Youth Films; Global Cultural.

## 1. Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet has facilitated cultural dissemination and accelerated the process of cultural globalization. Film, as a significant component of culture, plays an irreplaceable role in cultural dissemination. Youth films, as a focal genre in the film market, have experienced explosive growth since the beginning of the new century. Originating from the United States, *Rebel Without a Cause* directed by Nicholas Ray was hailed by Hollywood as the first film addressing youth issues. Subsequently, countries like Japan and Korea began to pay attention to this genre. Drawing on the perspectives of scholars such as Dai Jinhua and Chen Mo, this paper categorizes youth films as centered around teenagers, showcasing their lives both within and beyond the school campus, reflecting the diverse experiences of adolescence and serving as a cinematic portrayal of their growth [1].

The wave of Chinese youth films arrived relatively late, with attention to the individualized development of youth beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the 1990s, Chinese youth films embarked on commercial exploration[2]. By the 21st century, the wave of globalization swept through China, facilitating the intermingling of cultures from different countries and regions, thus presenting a diversified landscape for Chinese youth films. Films such as *So Young*, *My Old Classmate*, *Fleet of Time*, *Tiny Times*, *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, and *Yesterday Once More* emerged, depicting narratives of nostalgic youth.

Korea was influenced by the wave of globalization earlier than China. Starting from the 1990s, Korean directors who had studied in the United States and collaborated with Hollywood directors began to return, injecting new vitality into the Korean film industry. The Korean government also actively promoted the development of the domestic film industry, during which youth films flourished. The term "New Korean Films" refers to a group of directors born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or after the 1970s, who became active in the film industry after 2005[3]. These directors, influenced by Korea's talent development policies in film, received systematic education from professional institutions with a relatively high degree of freedom. In terms of creation, they sought to combine artistic individuality with mainstream narrative, focusing on social issues, the fate of ordinary people, and the ups and downs of life. Korean New Youth Films combine the realism narrative of New Films with "youth", creating realistic youth films. They represent the localization practice of Hollywood



genre films, innovating through genre fusion and counter-typification, integrating national cultural characteristics while achieving cultural multi-genre fusion. Representative works include *Silenced*, *Hope*, *Next Sohee*, among others. These films, adapted from real events, use "death" among teenagers to reflect the life consciousness and views on death of young people in real life, while also calling for attention to the physical and psychological health of young people from all sectors of society, demonstrating the educational function of film and its social value. Therefore, Korean New Youth Films are the result of cultural globalization.

China, influenced by the wave of globalization, experienced its impact in the 21st century [4]. The proportion of youth films gradually increased and tended towards maturity. However, during the first decade of the 21st century, most domestically produced youth films exhibited a nostalgic narrative style, with "campus romance" serving as a hallmark symbol of youth films. It wasn't until 2016, under the influence of Korea's "New Youth Films", that Chinese film directors abandoned the nostalgic narrative mode and romantic themes, integrating youth with realism, and delving deep into social realities and campus issues. For example, films like *What's In The Darkness*, *Cry Me a Sad River*, and *Better Days* explored social realities and campus problems from the perspectives of individuals, families, schools, and society, presenting the deaths of teenagers in films and focusing on the psychological growth of young people and their reflections on life. Although the development of Chinese youth films drew inspiration from Korean film themes, narrative modes underwent localization transformations, giving rise to mainland China's New Youth Films. Therefore, the author believes that mainland China's New Youth Films truly began in 2016. This paper employs the methodology of film authorship, using "death" as a point of entry to comparatively analyze the similarities and differences in creative techniques in Chinese and Korean New Youth Films.

## **2. The Realistic Application of Death Narratives in Chinese and Korean New Youth Films**

This paper uses the Chinese film *Better Days* (2019) and the Korean film *Next Sohee* (2023) as examples to compare and analyze the similarities and differences in the narrative of "death" in Chinese and Korean youth films.

### **2.1. Similarities in Narrative of Chinese and Korean New Youth Films under the Global Cultural Perspective**

*Better Days* is a realistic youth film directed by Derek Tsang, delving deep into the issue of campus bullying. Director Derek Tsang employs death as a catalyst for character transformation, constructing themes of love, hope, responsibility, and belief within the narrative arc of suffering, rebellion, redemption, and growth. The film unfolds with the suicide of Hu Xiaodie, who couldn't bear the weight of bullying and jumps from the school building. Witnessing Hu Xiaodie's suicide, Chen Nian voluntarily covers her body with his jacket while classmates record the scene on their phones. The overhead shot ends focusing on Chen Nian, implying his subordinate position in the bullying dynamic. Upon returning to the classroom, Chen Nian sees red ink on his desk, marking his transition from a regular student to a victim of bullying. Subsequently, Chen Nian accidentally pushes Wei Lai down the stairs, resulting in Wei Lai's death. Wei Lai's death catalyzes a second transformation in Chen Nian's identity, from a victim of bullying to a perpetrator of crime. Chen Nian shifts from an objective observer of classmates' suicides to a subjective agent causing someone's death. Through two instances of physical death, *Better Days* illustrates that as death draws nearer, Chen Nian's choices become not only narrative turning points but also opportunities for character development.

In the Korean film *Next Sohee*, Kim Sohee, a soon-to-graduate student from a vocational school, is placed in an internship at a large telecommunications company's customer service center as per the school's arrangement. Initially optimistic about the job, Sohee finds herself repeatedly coerced into deceiving clients, subjected to their verbal abuse and insults, confronted with arbitrary company rules, and witnessing the departure of her colleagues. Her first confrontation with her own values occurs after the suicide of her team leader. The rapid appointment of a new team leader, the indifference of

her colleagues, and attempts to entice employees to sign non-disclosure agreements with bonuses make her realize the company and society's disregard for life. Subsequently, when a client's son dies and the company insists, she pitch sales tactics to the grieving client, Sohee experiences guilt. This marks her second confrontation with her own values. Later, she faces wage deductions by the company, targeted harassment by the new team leader, leading to her taking unpaid leave. This suspension without pays drives Sohee to contemplate suicide, marking her third confrontation with her values. Unable to alter her circumstances, Sohee chooses to confront death directly, but her attempt is thwarted by a friend who intervenes. However, this incident plunges her into utter despair. The indifference of her family, criticism from her teachers, and the school's emphasis solely on employment rates gradually push her towards the path of death. Initially, Sohee, new to the workforce, endeavors to change others in the face of the company's unfair rules, but witnessing the callousness of human nature after her team leader's death makes her strive to change herself. However, when confronted with the request to pitch sales tactics to a grieving client, Sohee realizes she cannot compromise her moral principles. Through repeated confrontations with her values, she ultimately chooses to end her life. In *Next Sohee*, each instance of "death" signifies a subversion of the protagonist's original values, propelling the narrative forward in successive layers.

It is evident that in terms of narrative themes and subject matter, films from China and Korea exhibit certain similarities in their choice of themes. Both countries' films focus on universal emotions such as family, filial piety, friendship, and love, aiming to evoke emotional resonance among audiences through nuanced character portrayals and plot designs. Chinese youth film *Better Days* and Korean youth film *Next Sohee* combine "death" and "youth," comprehensively revealing the predicaments and problems faced by adolescents from individual, familial, school, and societal perspectives. By integrating the seemingly contradictory themes of youth and death, these films delve deeper into profound issues such as the meaning of life, the value of youth, and attitudes towards death. This narrative approach enriches the themes of the films and encourages profound reflection. It can be said that "death" serves as a powerful means for realistic films to depict reality. Additionally, it contributes to the shaping of vivid character images. In narratives that blend "youth + death," characters often face life-and-death decisions and growth dilemmas, which render them more complex and authentic. Audiences can gain deeper insights into the characters' inner worlds, fostering stronger emotional connections with them. Furthermore, realistic youth films from both China and Korea are often adapted from existing social issues. The college entrance examination, fractured families, campus bullying, juvenile delinquency depicted in *Better Days* are all prevalent issues in contemporary society. Similarly, the focus on employment-centric education systems, workplace exploitation, and human indifference in *Next Sohee* reflects common issues in both countries. The cross-genre narrative of "youth + death" allows audiences to perceive different facets of youth, while also advocating for attention to the mental and physical well-being of adolescents and promoting a correct understanding of life and death among the youth growing up in the present day.

Furthermore, due to the similarity in geographical and cultural environments between China and Korea, youth films exhibit a high degree of consistency in their thematic choices and ethical perspectives. Family values hold significant importance in both cultures, with the family being regarded as the center of life and spiritual support, and harmonious and respectful relationships among family members being a shared goal. In *Better Days*, Chen Nian's passive acceptance of her mother's debts and her reluctance to burden her mother with her own troubles reflect this ideology. Similarly, in the Korean film *Next Sohee*, *Sohee*, despite facing workplace exploitation and parental neglect, doesn't exhibit strong resistance but opts for suicide. Whether it's the fractured family in *Better Days* or the seemingly intact one in *Next Sohee*, the maintenance of harmonious family relationships is a common theme in both films. This essence stems from the influence of Confucian culture in both China and Korea, where respecting elders and observing etiquette are guiding principles for adolescents in any circumstance. This mutual cultural influence demonstrates the convergence of narrative themes between the two countries, eliciting emotional resonance and reducing obstacles in the dissemination of both nations' films, fostering a heightened sense of mutual recognition of each

other's film culture. However, differences in narrative strategies still exist due to varying directorial styles and audience demands in both countries.

## **2.2. Differentiation of Narrative Strategies from the Perspective of Global Culture**

The differing social, cultural, and educational backgrounds of film directors in China and Korea lead to distinct charms in their creative processes. In this regard, the author will explore the differentiated narrative strategies of Chinese and Korean new-wave youth films from a global cultural perspective, focusing on character portrayal, audiovisual styles, and paths of growth.

### **2.2.1. Character Development and Role Differentiation**

Chinese youth films pay more attention to the social attributes and collectivism of characters in their portrayal, utilizing relationships between characters to drive narrative progression. *Better Days* employs the absence of certain characters to propel its narrative. Characters like Chen Nian, Liu Beishan, and Wei Lei are all influenced to varying degrees by the absence of familial roles. Chen Nian's introverted and rebellious nature stems from her father's absence and her mother's irresponsibility. Unlike Hu Xiaodie, Chen Nian silently resists acts of malicious mischief, drawing attention from the teacher. Their differing personalities lead to distinct behaviors. Hu Xiaodie's timid nature drives her to suicide, while Chen Nian's guilt over Hu Xiaodie's death and her inability to confront bullying alone establish a connection with Liu Beishan, a street thug accustomed to using force for self-protection. Chen Nian's act of reporting bullying fills a protective void in Liu Beishan's life, leading him to offer protection to Chen Nian when she faces bullying. Subsequently, they embark on a journey of mutual redemption. Their protective relationship leads Liu Beishan to confess to causing Wei Lei's death. Wei Lei, a victim of parental neglect and abuse, finds solace in bullying peers, driven by a distorted psyche shaped by her family environment. Despite not being from a single-parent household, Wei Lei's father's neglect and her mother's focus on academic achievement result in emotional detachment. Provoked by Wei Lei, Chen Nian, driven by a sense of rebellion, unintentionally causes Wei Lei's death. Overall, *Better Days* primarily relies on social relationships to shape character identities, thereby reinforcing the rationality of character behavior motivations.

Korean youth films place greater emphasis on the emotional changes and individual personalities of characters, utilizing interactions between characters to drive internal transformations. In *Next Sohee*, Kim Soo-hyun enjoys a harmonious relationship with her parents, friendly relationships with classmates, excels academically, and has time to pursue her interests outside of school. In such a seemingly perfect social structure, the protection of family and companionship of friends shape Sohee's character into one that is courageous, just, and kind. She stands up for her friend when they face unjust criticism, believing that justice can always triumph over evil. However, when she enters the workforce and experiences insults and abuse from clients, unreasonable assessment systems at her company, and witnessing her friend being bullied by seniors, Sohee feels disillusioned. The suicide of her team leader, the indifference of her colleagues, and the exploitation by her new team leader lead her from disillusionment to rebellion. Eventually, a physical confrontation with her new team leader, coupled with being deceived by a colleague and being suspended from work without pay, pushes Sohee from rebellion to compromise and ultimately towards suicide. Following the failed suicide attempt, parental neglect, and pressure from school, accelerate Sohee's demise. Through the film's narrative, it becomes evident that Sohee's psychological transformation is the result of successive events. The constant onslaught of people and events in school, at home, and in society challenges her existing values, ultimately leading to her death.

In conclusion, Chinese youth films pay more attention to the concept of group in character shaping, and the lack of group roles will inevitably bring about differences in character; On the other hand, Korean youth films pay more attention to the changes of individual emotions brought about by the interaction between characters.

### 2.2.2. Differences in Audiovisual Styles

#### 1) Narrative structure

In 2017, after integrating realistic themes, Chinese youth films began to adopt non-linear narrative structure due to the influence of Korean realistic youth films and the director's creative style[5]. However, while most of the Korean youth films of the same period adopted a non-linear narrative structure, *Next Sohee* adopted a linear narrative structure.

*Better Days* employs a non-linear narrative structure, utilizing a combination of flashbacks and flash-forwards to create a sense of suspense and dramatic tension. The film begins with the ultimate fate of Chen Nian and Xiao Bei, breaking away from the traditional narrative structure of "cause-effect-climax-resolution" to arouse curiosity. It starts with Chen Nian noticing a young girl's abnormality in class, then takes the audience back to Chen Nian's school days, and finally returns to the present where Liu Beishan fulfills his promise to escort Chen Nian home, with the adult Chen Nian assuming a protector role for her students. The beginning, middle, and end echo each other, forming a perfect narrative circle. Furthermore, the film cleverly employs intercutting during Chen Nian's school days, intertwining the fates of different characters and enriching their characterizations. For instance, the scene of students opening their exam papers is followed by the discovery of a body by an excavator, hinting at divergent paths of fate for the characters. Seemingly unrelated scenes are connected, linking Wei Lei's death with Chen Nian taking the college entrance exam, creating suspense. The non-linear narrative establishes close connections between characters. The film revolves around Hu Xiaodie's death, radiating out to Chen Nian, Wei Lei, and Liu Beishan, forming a closed loop using flashback and intercutting, interweaving events tightly and maintaining a compact pace.

*Next Sohee* employs a linear narrative strategy. The director presents Soo-hyun's high school phase, her transition into the workplace, and her experiences thereafter in chronological order, showcasing her emotional and psychological changes. This approach renders character transformations more natural and resonates with the audience. Unlike *Better Days*, where the narrative is driven by the deaths of surrounding characters, reflecting societal issues, *Next Sohee* primarily reflects real-world problems through the protagonist's gradual descent towards death. It emphasizes the internal transformations of characters, hence utilizing a linear narrative to illustrate the emotional changes more clearly within characters.

#### 2) shot language

In *Better Days*, wide shots and close-ups are frequently used to magnify the characters' psychological states. After Hu Xiaodie's suicide, Chen Nian walks alone to the middle of the school building to cover her with a school uniform. The overhead shot with blurred background and the noisy ambient sounds suggest that Chen Nian has become the focal point of the school bullying at this moment. Subsequently, the scene shifts to a student's cellphone footage as the foreground, then zooms in on Chen Nian's face in close-up. Her determined gaze contrasts with the earlier close-up of Hu Xiaodie's eyes, enriching the character portrayal and setting the stage for her subsequent acts of resistance. Additionally, *Better Days* employs a third-person perspective to depict the relationships between characters. For instance, during Hu Xiaodie's suicide scene, the director uses a classmate's cellphone as the foreground to capture a close-up of Chen Nian, implying that bystanders could also become indirect participants in the school bullying.

The shot in *Next Sohee* shots towards a documentary style, often incorporating shaky and first-person perspective shots to enhance realism. For example, when Sohee first enters the company, shaky first-person shots are used to depict the work environment, setting a tone of oppression. The use of moving shot works throughout the film add a sense of authenticity, amplifying emotional expression and providing a more realistic portrayal of the characters' inner emotional changes. Additionally, the director skillfully employs long takes to capture shifts in character emotions. Extended shots are used to showcase Sohee's confidence during her initial learning phase and her subsequent change in

expression after being insulted by a customer, deepening emotional resonance between the audience and Sohee.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, within the global cultural perspective, the innovation and dissemination of Korean film culture have provided new insights for the development of Chinese Youth New Films. Chinese new-wave youth films have developed localized characteristics based on the foundation laid by Korean new-wave youth films. This paper conducts a comparative study of Chinese and Korean new-wave youth films, exemplified by *Better Days* and *Next Sohee*. In both films, "death" serves as a significant component driving narrative development, revealing the challenges of adolescent growth and social realities, thereby sounding an alarm for individual adolescent development and society's attention to youth issues. However, due to cultural differences between the two countries, there are distinctions in the treatment of "death" in their respective new-wave youth films. China utilizes the deaths of characters surrounding the protagonist to propel their growth, whereas Korea adeptly confronts the protagonist with death to expose the societal dark sides and considerations of human nature faced during the process of growing up.

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