

Truth of Chinese Survivors Concealed and Rediscovered From *Titanic* to *The Six*

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Abstract

Conventional film *Titanic* fooled the Chinese audience with an untold story of Chinese survivors through following narrative features of transitivity, identification, transparency, single diegesis, closure, and pleasure. Based on its skillfully designed narration strategy, the noble image of Anglo-Saxon gentlemen was well constructed. However, documentary film *The Six* pieced together the fragmented records of various sources and revealed the truth of what happened to those Chinese survivors through six corresponding narrative features by Peter Wollen, namely intransitivity, estrangement, foregrounding, multiple diegesis, aperture, and unpleasure. The unfair treatment Chinese survivors received added misfortunes to their sufferings in a huge tragic disaster in a foreign land. The images and characters of Chinese survivors reconstructed in *The Six* clear up what has been twisted and optionally forgotten.

Key words: *Titanic*; *The Six*; Chinese Survivors; Rediscovered; Narrative

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally argued that written narratives in Western cultures have been constructed in such a way as to induce the readers or spectators into accepting the dominant ideologies of the age. Film, a major form of entertainment which can have a deep sensory appeal, is acclaimed to be designed to reproduce the class, gender and race relations suitable for capitalists' interests. More often than not, spectators colonized or having the experience of being colonized once can be easily convinced of the conceptions constructed in the films because in large part they lost their mainstream culture and unconsciously take in the messages imposed on them.

Jean-Luc Godard, French writer and director who forwards the term “counter-cinema”, shot films with intense intertextuality and frequent quotations from other books, films, or art forms in most of his works.(Nathan, 2019). Peter Wollen, Britain director and producer, further advanced the term “counter-cinema” and described them as anti-narrative films which are featured with narrative intransitivity, estrangement, foregrounding, multiple diegesis, aperture, and unpleasure in contrast to the six equivalent ones in conventional films, namely, narrative transitivity, identification, transparency, single diegesis, closure, and pleasure. (Mulvey, 1985)

2. SIX FEATURES MANIFESTED IN CONVENTIONAL FILM *TITANIC*

Titanic, officially rolled out in China in 1998, made a real sensation with its classic love story of Rose and Jack. The highlight scene of Rose being lifted onto a floating board by Jack and later rescued by a returning boat successfully won Chinese spectators' heart with Jack's spirit of sacrifice for true love. Meanwhile, the noble spirit of Anglo-Saxon passengers, especially the ones from the first class who stand out as they wait in order and their

willingness of accepting the women and children to board the rescue ships in the first place. Chinese spectators were totally taken away by the narrative transitivity of coherent plot in which one event leads to another and form a complete structure of cause-and-effect and help to build the heroic images of those in the huge disaster. Chinese spectators had no idea that classic scene actually was an inspiration of a Chinese survivor.

Most major characters in *Titanic* are constructed, made up, costumed and filmed in such a way as to encourage audience identification. Jack, the captain and other gentlemen were designed and filmed to represent a particular social group — Anglo-Saxon knights who remain calm, brave and determined under extreme circumstances. This kind of identity is thus successfully established in Chinese spectators who had been envious of Western cultures and lost their local national identity.

From the angle of transparency, characters in *Titanic* are constructed so as to seem believable and the narrative line is to conceal the artifice of the film-making and to promote the illusion that those white passengers are practising real chivalry confronted gigantic disasters. Overseas spectators in China were made believe that the seemingly ideal illusion of Western heroism is a typical moral model for them to borrow.

In terms of diegesis, most narratives in *Titanic* take place in a single world-Western world, or to be more specific, American world. Characters of other nationalities are chosen to be minors who account for only a few minutes in the whole film. For those Chinese who struggled to survive and their survival rate is as high as six out of eight, they were spared only a few seconds shot in a complete silenced manner. The whole story told here is constructed around influential Western passengers on board in a single world.

Meanwhile, *Titanic* as a conventional film, the mainstream narratives help to build a relatively closed and self-contained world in which a sense of unity is achieved with the portrayal of those major characters. Jack is the symbol of the thriving US who is fighting for its culture identity in Western world. His pursuit for noble girl Rose who is already betrothed to Carl achieved a closure as he sacrifice his life for Rose and which put the love story to an end. This kind of unity is called by some writers organic. The whole story contented the audience with a grand story with a proper tragic ending filled with sweet love transcend classes.

Laura (1985, p.306) holds that “the pleasures of mainstream entertainment films seduce the spectator into a state of passive receptivity so that ideologically reactionary/conservative ‘messages’ are allowed free passage. It means that mainstream entertainment films like *Titanic* intentionally lead their audience to a state in which they receive whatever values and ideologies under the story told in a sensational manner. This total and

uncritical acceptance of Western culture blinded most Chinese spectators and paralyzed their curiosity into doing further research about the later stories of those six Chinese survivors after the *Titanic* sinking tragedy. They tended to celebrate the joy and success of this recreational work with great pleasure and hundreds of academic articles followed up in various journals commenting, retelling the story from aesthetic angles.

Resultantly, few serious spectators left to read and study the history behind the real *Titanic* event and all the stories of Chinese survivors.

3. SIX FEATURES MANIFESTED IN DOCUMENTARY FILM *THE SIX*

Arthur Jones, the director of *The Six*, is a seasoned one who shot a great number of programs for *National Geographic*, *BBC*, and *Discovery Channel*. After several years of learning experience in China, he came to Steven Schwankert, a researcher on marine life and correspondent who shows a glimmer of interest in Chinese culture after several years of traveling and learning experience in China. After they learned the fact that practically personal information of every single survivor on board the *Carpathia* was well documented in one way or another, while six Chinese survivors’ stories almost vaporized in history. Fragmented pieces of report about them in then newspapers were overwhelmingly negative. Arthur and Steven are determined to excavate the truth buried in the history. Obviously, this feature-length documentary takes ideologically oppositional positions on the motif it dealt with compared with the *Titanic*. It deconstructed the ideologies the governments aimed to establish — white Anglo-Saxon gentlemen with chivalry versus ugly Chinese who broke principles and gave up dignity in face of desperate circumstances. Footage are chosen, edited, and presented in a way to serve specific functions.

3.1 Intransitivity in Narration

In Peter Wollen’s (1987) generalizations of the differences between conventional film and counter-cinema, he claims that events in the latter do not follow each other in a logical structure; there is likely to be digression and incoherence. The documentary *The Six* begins with an alien passenger list of survivors from the rescue ship *Carpathia*. Ali Lam, Fang Lang, Len Lam, Cheong Foo, Chang Chip, Ling Hee, Lee Bing, and Lee Ling. Researchers had little documented knowledge of those Chinese passengers. The following-up narration is like groping in the dark cave. Whenever there is a beam of light leading to the outside, explorers follow the guiding light. And different groups of explorers hold on to different light guide in order to find a possible ending.

Researcher Grace Zhang and Emily Yang searched in major blogs and discussion groups about the people who

left valuable information about Chinese survivors and tracked down to Tom Fang, the son of survivor Fang Lang and the research team went all the way to his home to obtain more information first-hand from him.

Meanwhile, another narrative line came to an interview with Titanic game designers Tom and Matt who created Game Titanic Honor Glory which provides a CGI model of the interior of the ship. Based on the model ship in game, the research team figured out the possible escaping route of Chinese survivors which highly contradicts with the negative comments on them for in most Western reports, they were portrayed as selfish opportunists who disguised as women. They were believed to hide themselves in collapsible boats and took women and children's seats. In order to rectify the abuse on them, the team interviewed Chinese scholar and social historian Cheng Wei who wrote the book *Chinese Survivors on Titanic—Power of Racial Imagination* and was informed of more details of the press comments on them and the causing reason of the release the Chinese Exclusion Act. With the purpose of testifying that it is almost impossible to hide four passengers in a collapsible boat without being noticed by people sitting next to them, the research team invite teachers and students at West Academy of Beijing to build a collapsible boat with the same size of the boat Chinese passenger got on. It visually and experimentally overthrows the ill abuse on Chinese passengers and proves they were wrong. It was physically impossible to stay in that position for four hours. Steven Schwankert reaffirmed that Chinese passengers were not cowards, they just took their chance to escape when their were seats available.

The third narration line goes to an experiment at extreme environments laboratory in the University of Portsmouth. It was designed to simulate the survivor Fang Lang who was discovered on a piece of board. Because the research were amazed at high survival rate of Chinese passengers on board especially after they learned that 49 Hungarian and 33 Bulgarians from the F deck where third class passengers board all died. In order to stimulate the experience of getting soaked up in icy cold water in pitch black for four hours, Steven Schwankert took the initiative to stay in 12 degree water for 40 minutes. It turns out that 15 to 20 minutes are the limit and proved to be the shortest period of time within human's bearing. Steven and his group were amazed at Fang Lang's wisdom and grit of floating on a board in pitch black for more than three hours before he was discovered by Carpathia. Here, Fang Lang and his fellowmen are considered to be heroes instead of cowards.

The fourth line goes to the whereabouts of other survivors. It seems each line restored a fragment of the truth in a jumpy and incoherent way, one line does not necessarily lead to another as a cause-and-effect manner. Spectators may get confused and have difficult figuring out 'what is going on' as jumps in time, location and

theme are not signaled as they usually are. Besides, no attempt is made to provide an illusion of passage of time by inserting different interviewees.

3.2 Estrangement of Characters in *The Six*

In terms of estrangement versus identification, the characters *The Six* are to focalize are estranged in the background for their stories are twisted and then made silent in the history and their identifications are not to be established by themselves. Resultantly, they are fragmented and their roles are highlighted a little bit each time when there is a major progress in the research. The stories floated to the surface through an over voice of either a researcher, a piece of faded document, or rare relative found, Fang Lang here is an example in case, his story was revealed by his son Tom Fang and other relatives interviewed in far China, Fang lang's hometown. The other survivors' life were pieced together either in a review or analyzed through a faded file at a far away museum. Their image of those negative stowaways were partially washed, however, the complete identification of those heroes in hard times are nowhere to be constructed again.

3.3 Foregrounding in *The Six*

When it comes to the foregrounding, *The Six* failed to construct illusions as usually performed in conventional film like *Titanic*, props and settings and other film making equipment have become part of the film. Presence of Game Titanic Honor Glory and its designers, experiments at West Academy of Beijing and the University of Portsmouth gives audience a sense of realism via which spectators may distance them from the film and promote in themselves contemplation and analysis instead of involvement and identification. Spectators in this sense can step back and view the scene from the perspective of the film staff and be aware of the point that those experiments serve as a powerful vacuum cleaner absorbing all the dust so as to reveal the real face of all the furniture. Those foregrounding in *The Six* with its adding of a great many interviews and experiments effectively help to wash away the century-long stain on Chinese survivors' face. Scenes are not made to lead the audience believe a story preconceived, rather, they are invited to experience along with the research staff to testify in a scientifically way that who are those Chinese survivors and what possibles happened in the whole process. It proved experimentally they are not stow-away hid in women's shawl to occupy a spot in life-saving boat.

3.4 Multi Diegesis in *The Six*

In terms of diegesis, *The Six* takes several parallel narratives in which events or stories told in one diegesis does not necessarily motivate event in another. Progress in the film is pushed forward with the information found on the eight Chinese on the name list. Narratives went here and there to locate their respective fateful endings. Before

little was found, it seems there is just one single diegesis, but as more is obtained, multiple narratives spread out to tell respective stories of theirs.

As the film spread with the interviews, very soon, they nailed down that among the eight, Len Lam, and Lee Ling died on Titanic at the the tragic night. The diegesis focus was shifted on to the research work around the rest six. Chang Chip was transferred to Annetta, a cargo ship and was discharged from the ship after he was diagnosed with pleurisy and later died in London of pneumonia in 1914. Cheong Foo was not able to be tracked down as there were too many similar names. An Lam' and Ling Lee's file was nowhere to be tracked after they boarded Annetta. After examining the local archives, the researchers found and reaffirmed that his disappearance was a result of an act named Chinese Leave London. The Chinese sailors were exploited to work on the England ships while the previous English sailors were recruited to fight in the war. They were also employed to work on the jobs with the lowest wage locals were unwilling to do while a series of strikes were going on. However, after the war, when the economy was in recession, British government hardened its hostility towards hundreds of unemployed Chinese sailors and they were secretively sent away to Hong Kong and China Town in London suddenly became a ghost town and even local women married to Chinese remained in the dark and believed they were abandoned by their Chinese husbands until the file was revealed for the public. Lee Bing was later found worked for a coffee shop in Toronto. Though various versions of the stories could not narrow down which one in the family is the one experienced the tragic night, the spectators learned his life was not easy after all. Chinese Immigration Act passed in 1923 restricted Chinese immigrants, especially labors in Canada with the threshold pay rising from 50 to 100, then to 500 dollars.

Unlike movie *Titanic* which is spread along one major diegesis line around which major hero and heroine are to be depicted, however, in *The Six*, research group together with the six survivors, along with the experts and family members interviewed somehow show up individually in different diegesis line but united as one to convey the motif. From the miserable endings learned from various diegesis for those Chinese labors boarding Titanic, it can be seen that Western powers like America, Canada, and England exploited the poor and the weak in the expansion of their capitalism. However, those foreign workers were treated in an inhuman means afterwards regardless of their contribution to the country for decades. Actually, The Brulingame Treaty passed in 1868 between China and the US allowed citizens of either country to travel freely and legally between the two. But America publicly tore it up and violated the pact. In addition, in order to better enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act, it built a detachment center on Angel island and many Chinese labors died

there in the prison called "sweet home" with their heartfelt hatred and sorrow caved on the cell's wall.

3.5 Aperture in *The Six*

Unlike the *Titanic* which focalized on a self-contained world, *The Six* on the other hand, disintegrates the "unity" by frequently "referring to other texts, files, interviews and indulges in those references for the sake of making a point" (Nathan, & Ian, 2019), a self-evident one which can be figured out by the spectator. Seemingly, extreme experiment under water and interview with the Titanic game designers are distant and irrelevant to the theme of the story. However, it is right this information which help to prove and testify that Chinese survivors boarding Titanic saved themselves in a brave even heroic way. They did not deserve to be treated like enemies. Maybe, there will never be a proper ending of their life stories accurately known to the public until the movie ends. In contrast to "organic" world constructed with a perfect closure in *Titanic*, the world explored and presented in *The Six* can never achieve that with some survivors' information never to be found again and some are only reasonable assumptions. The point is made with an aperture in narration.

Another, the editing in *The Six* ensures that the message does not escape the audience. Those six Chinese survivors are just as heroic as other male passengers who were saved. Confronted with brutal reality in which they hardly understood a word of the language being spoken, they made the most of their knowledge after years of experience on seas and grasped a ray of living and hung in there without taking others' seats, especially women and children's as being accused of. Their stories are well worth being documented and told to the world, as well as to their descendants. "Because of most of Chinese survivors chose to stay silent and research on Chinese is basically neglected, limited materials dug fail to restore what they experienced." (Tian, 2021)

Though, some whereabouts of those Chinese survivors are left open with a gap or hole nobody would fill, *The Six* did its utmost through a rich supply of data and end the movie by shooting floating some lamps onto the ocean on a traditional Chinese holiday—Tomb-sweeping festival to convey the meanings that the spirit of those Chinese survivors died in foreign land are to be guided back home and may rest in peace now.

3.6 Unpleasure in *The Six*

The Six has a social purpose and thus becomes a vehicle for propaganda and this to some degree undermines the audience's need for pleasure. With a seemingly casual beginning and fragmented pieces of interviews and discussions of the found files, it serves almost no function of pleasure at all. Instead, spectators may get bored with endless talking that even could not come to a specific ending of one particular Chinese survivor. Sometimes,

the introduction of historical background almost went too far to its original motif and spectators may get bored or dosed off by its aridity. Obviously, box office proved spectators in the US and some other Western countries care less about the fate of a couple of Chinese guys who died already. All in all, *The Six* failed to provide the spectators unforgettable experience supplied by *Titanic* for it loyally tracked down the drops in history and rewrote, rediscovered, recorded the part of history that was twisted and forgotten. The absence of pleasure is replaced with a sense of relief and solemnity. As result, it well fulfilled the directors wish of putting what is right in front of the public.

4. CONCLUSION

Naturally, *Titanic* and the producers are not to be criticized for not telling the stories of those six Chinese survivors for as a conventional film with advanced technology applied, it successfully hit the spectators with the touching love story and depiction of the classic events skillfully woven together. It has perfectly served the function of supplying pleasure for the audience, which is understandably its major priority. Documentary *The Six* released in China on Tomb-sweeping festival, a day descendants show respect to their ancestors by sweeping the tombs and provide offerings. It has been widely acclaimed by Chinese spectators when many begin to be interested in that part of

the history and are eager to have an official publication or media form from the West to revise the story that was not properly told. The truth once hidden and rediscovered is a kind and timely response to those six Chinese survivors and people they related.

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