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Disability Representation in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: A Qualitative Narrative Study of Six Impactful Realist Films Made between 2015 and 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of disability in six influential domestic social realist films released in China between 2015 and 2024. These films, all within the social realist genre, achieved notable box office success, high audience ratings, and/or nominations for prestigious national awards. Through narrative analysis of the films' stories and plots, complemented by a discourse-focused examination, the study identifies three models of disability narratives: the individual model, the social model, and a hybrid model that integrates multiple perspectives on disability. Each film constructs its narrative around one of these models, shaping the portrayal of disability. The films also differ in their use of cinematic language and camera techniques, yet all effectively enhance the impact of their respective disability narratives. The findings suggest that contemporary domestic cinema encourages audiences to perceive disability as a complex, evolving, and multifaceted phenomenon, rather than merely as individual limitations—a perspective that continues to dominate state discourse on disability in China. Moreover, the selected films depict individuals with diverse impairments, including hearing, intellectual, physical, and mental disabilities, exploring their unique disabling experiences across various social contexts, such as care institutions, employment, and family life. Consequently, the study concludes that film functions as a positive sociocultural force in promoting equality and inclusion in China. Contemporary Chinese cinema contributes to a deeper public understanding of both the nature of disability and the complex barriers that individuals with different types of

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disabilities encounter in the process of social participation in China.

Keywords: Films; Disability; China; Narrative Analysis; Representation; Equality; Social Inclusion; Culture; Perception

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the international disability rights movement has catalysed the development of disability studies, particularly in the Global North. A central focus of this scholarship involves interrogating representations of disability in mass media[1]. As a critical site of cultural production, media not only disseminate information but also actively construct societal norms, attitudes, and behaviours. This often reinforces stereotypes that shape public perceptions[2]. Dawn states that society does not represent disability in a neutral manner; rather, it consciously or unconsciously shapes public understandings of disability through mainstream media, films, television programmes, literature, and advertising[3]. Briant et al.[4] further emphasise that media portrayals fundamentally influence societal understandings of disability, directly impacting disabled individuals' quality of life. For example, the persistent use of stereotypical portrayals of disability and disabled people risk perpetuating prejudicial attitudes, thereby undermining inclusive social interactions[5–7].

Disability studies scholarship fundamentally reconceptualises disability as extending beyond individual impairments[8], instead framing it as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon[9]. This paradigm requires media narratives that diversify perspectives, rather than limiting them to medical narratives, thereby enabling audiences to broaden and continuously evolve their conceptions of disability. However, despite some positive changes, achieving diversity of disability representations in media remains a persistent challenge. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) observes that media representations continue to disproportionately overlook or reductively stereotype disabled groups, systematically obstructing progress toward inclusion and equality[10]. Many studies have highlighted that modern media still often demonise disabled people or simplify the disablement they face in terms of social inclusion by attributing it solely to physical or mental impairments[11]. Thus, it is worth considering how disability and disabled people are narrated and represented in modern media.

Within this landscape, cinema's powerful capacity to shape perceptions through audiovisual storytelling, emotional resonance, and mass accessibility positions it as a critical site of analysis[12–15]. While the representations of disability in Western cinema have been extensively scrutinised, Chinese cinema remains conspicuously understudied—a critical oversight given China's status as the world's second-largest film market, attracting 1.01 billion cinema-goers in 2024[16]. This scholarly gap persists despite the growing sociocultural impact of recent Chinese social realist films featuring disability narratives, as some have achieved box office success, high ratings, and/or the nomination of prestigious national film awards. Consequently, this study interrogates how Chinese cinema narrates disability within China's unique social context, particularly whether such representations enable audiences to recognise complex disabling experiences. Addressing this research gap, this study has analysed six Chinese social realist films (2015–2024) featuring disability as a central theme or subtext. These films were released in Chinese cinemas and have had significant social impacts, as evidenced by their strong box office performance, high audience ratings, and/or nominations for prestigious local awards. Through narrative analysis, it examines how disability is constructed within these texts. The research advances understanding of contemporary Chinese cinematic representations while critically re-evaluating film's sociocultural role in shaping disability perceptions. Ultimately, it contributes to promoting inclusive narratives in both Chinese and global contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What Is Disability?

This section explores the representation of disability in cinema and media, beginning with an overview of how disability is defined. Disability generally refers to conditions that hinder individuals' ability to perform activities or access resources equitably within society[17,18]. Various mod-

els have been developed that seek to explain the origins of disability. The individual model (or medical model), historically dominant in Western and global contexts [19], attributes disability to personal impairments or illnesses, focusing on medical interventions aimed at 'curing' or 'correcting' individuals [20]. However, disability studies scholars critique this model, arguing that social, political, economic, and cultural factors exacerbate disabling experiences [8]. Alternative frameworks, such as the cultural, minority, and relational models, emerged, with the social model being the most influential [18]. The social model asserts that disability arises from societal barriers that exclude disabled people from full participation [21–23].

2.2. The Representations of Disability in Western Cinema

Since the 1990s, mass media—such as newspapers, novels, advertisements, and, most notably, films—have become a key focus for Western disability studies scholars. A central concern has been identifying the model of disability that films typically adopt in constructing disability narratives. In this regard, Martin F. Norden's study on the historical representation of physical disability in cinema continues to be foundational [24]. Analysing numerous Hollywood films from the 1920s to the 1970s, Norden found that the industry predominantly constructed physical disability through the medical model, portraying disabled individuals as objects of pity or as 'tragic' figures, while neglecting the role of social structures in their marginalisation. Similarly, Darke's doctoral thesis applied the social model to analyse six indicative Western films on disability released between 1970 and 1990 [25]. He concluded that while these films appeared to present diverse disability narratives, they fundamentally adhered to the individual model by equating disability with individual deficits and perpetuating 'tragic' narratives. For example, he found that even some of the selected films, which ostensibly promoted the agency of disabled individuals, subtly upheld the ideology of 'normalisation' through narrative framings. These narratives, conveyed through audiovisual language, character development, and plot structures, reflected and reinforced a medicalised interpretation of disability. Darke further argued that such portrayals neglected to address the societal barriers disabled individuals faced in real life, thus limiting audience understanding. Shakespeare's study also highlighted the frequent misrepresentation of disability in cinema [26]. He noted that mainstream films often objectify and simplify disability—whether physical, mental, psychological, or cognitive—rooting such narratives in the individual model. While 21st-century films have increasingly explored the socially constructed nature of disability, scholars like Smit and Enns [27], Ellis et al. [28], and Ellis et al. [29] argue that the individual model still dominates mainstream cinema and other media, such as newspapers [30]. They contend that this approach perpetuates stereotypes and limits public understanding of disability to sympathy and medicalised views [31]. These scholars urge filmmakers to critically reconsider the broader social implications of disability.

In summary, these studies demonstrate that since the 1920s, when Western cinema was more widely disseminated, the individual model has persisted as the dominant model in its disability narratives, despite challenges from alternative frameworks, such as the social model [32–34]. These Western scholars' works highlight the need for a critical examination of whether disability representation in Chinese cinema is similarly dominated by a singular model.

2.3. State Perspective on Disability in Contemporary China

In recent years, influenced by contemporary Western disability theory, the evolving understanding of disability in Chinese society has attracted significant attention from domestic scholars. Niu, through a comprehensive analysis of ancient Chinese social thought spanning from the Pre-Qin to the Qing Dynasty, identified two main characteristics of traditional Chinese views on disability [35]. The first is a fatalistic perspective, which attributes disability to an individual's past wrongdoings or their parents' moral failings, framing it as divine punishment. The second is the 'useless-invalid' viewpoint, which regards disabled individuals as incapable of contributing to society, often labelling them as burdens and marginalising them. Both views reflect an underlying perception: disability is an individual defect. These traditional perspectives continue to exert a profound influence on contemporary Chinese attitudes towards disability.

Qu examined shifts in government discourse on disability across different social periods, particularly after the founding of the People's Republic of China. During the planned and collective economy periods (1949–1979), bod-

ies were seen as collective assets, with disabled bodies perceived as 'less contributive' [36]. However, since the reform and opening-up period (post-1979), the body has been seen as an individual tool for competition and production. Consequently, disabled people are now viewed as a social group with the potential to contribute productively, though their bodies are still regarded as frail and in need of personal effort to strengthen. Qu's work shows that while contemporary state discourse addresses equality and inclusion for disabled people, its understanding of disability continues to be influenced by individualised and medicalised frameworks. This is reflected in the definition of disabled persons provided by the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons (LPRCPDP) [37]. As defined by LPRCPDP, disabled persons are individuals with impairments, abnormalities, or losses in psychological, physiological, or anatomical structures that result in a complete or partial inability to engage in certain activities in a typical manner. Nonetheless, more and more local scholars and practitioners are becoming increasingly aware of the significance of adopting social model thinking to understand the real challenges faced by disabled people in China in achieving social inclusion [38]. This means that the challenges disabled people face in China can be equally complex, and the public should not limit itself to the knowledge shaped by the individual model.

However, the representation of disability in Chinese films, particularly those featuring disability as a central or subtextual theme, remains underexplored. If these films rely on traditional Chinese perceptions or contemporary state discourses, they risk limiting audiences' understanding of the complex and diverse realities of disability in modern society. This concern is far from unwarranted. As Dauncey points out, although the rise of the concept of social inclusion has significantly increased the visibility of disabled people on the Chinese screens, their representation is often strategically crafted to align with state narratives centred on harmony, productivity, and moral exemplarity [39]. Within such a context, disability may perhaps not be portrayed in ways that critically or complexly engage with the lived experiences of disabled individuals. Instead, such representations may tend to frame disability as an individual challenge to be overcome, or as a means through which institutions can display their benevolence. This kind of framing may contribute to what could be described as a state-oriented aesthetic of visibility in public media—one that appears to prioritise the projection of a 'good looking' image over a more substantive engagement with the social barriers faced by disabled people.

2.4. The Representation of Disability in Contemporary China's Media

Significant progress has been made in research on the representation of disability in Chinese media, particularly in news reporting. For example, Xiong and Wang conducted a content analysis of news articles related to disability from 23 major Chinese online media outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic [40]. They found that these outlets often framed the challenges faced by disabled people through the individual model, attributing difficulties to their physical vulnerability or improper behaviour, rather than considering other potential societal barriers. Similarly, Wang analysed disability representations in three prominent Chinese newspapers—People's Daily, China Youth Daily, and Beijing Times [41]. Wang found that disability-related coverage was confined to specific periods, such as the International Day of Disabled Persons and National Assistive Devices Day. These reports often portrayed disability according to the individual model, highlighting stories of disabled individuals 'reborn' after rehabilitation. Such narratives treated disability as an individual flaw, emphasising personal responsibility. Scholars widely agree that media coverage of disability in China is not only limited but also lacks diverse perspectives. These studies demonstrate that the individual model dominates mainstream disability-related media coverage, aligning with contemporary state discourse.

However, research on how disability-themed films portray disability issues remains limited. Some studies focus on older films, which may differ markedly from recent productions in their portrayal of disability. For instance, You examined 14 disability-themed films released between 1954 and 1965 [42]. He identified two dominant narrative models of the representation of disabled people: the first model depicts disabled commoners exploited by the old society before 1949. This narrative style seems more aligned with the social model's perspective. The second model portrays heroic figures disabled while serving the socialist New China established after 1949, which reflects the individual model's narrative style. However, since the reform and opening-up

period in 1978, societal changes may have altered the challenges faced by disabled people, making older films less representative of contemporary realities. While scholars like Lou [43] and Lin [44] have analysed disability narratives in contemporary documentary films, their societal impact is limited due to the limited popularity of documentaries in Chinese cinemas. Therefore, studies should prioritise socially realist commercial films that prominently feature disability or incorporate disability-related plots. Films—often starring popular actors and receiving wide releases—attract broader audiences and exert greater societal influence. However, research in this area remains limited, which leaves a significant gap in understanding how disability narratives are constructed in contemporary Chinese cinema.

3. Materials and Methods

This study focuses on six Chinese social realist films released in cinemas between 2015 and 2024, all of which engage with themes of disability or include disability-related storylines. These films were examined using narrative analysis, a qualitative methodology that centres on understanding how meaning is constructed and conveyed through the collection, analysis, and interpretation of stories or experiences from individuals or groups [45,46]. The central research question guiding this study is: How is disability narrated and represented in Chinese cinema? Seymour Chatman's classical theoretical framework provides the foundation for conducting analytical narrative research. According to Chatman, every narrative consists of two fundamental components: 'story' and 'discourse' [47]. The 'story' refers to the content of the narrative, encompassing events and existents. Events refer to actions and occurrences, while existents encompass characters and settings. 'Discourse,' in contrast, focuses on the presentation of the narrative, including structural elements such as grammatical structures or cinematographic techniques, as well as the specific media forms through which the narrative is conveyed (e.g., written texts, films, ballet, music, or mime). Building on Chatman's framework, this research focuses on the 'story' level. It seeks to analyse the narrative content of the selected films, specifically exploring the stories and plots related to disability. The research examines how disability is narrated and portrayed within these stories and plots, aiming to understand the nature of disability as depicted in contemporary Chinese cinema and re-evaluating the sociocultural role of contemporary Chinese cinema in shaping disability perceptions. While this study primarily focuses on the narrative dimension—specifically the 'story' level, reflecting the researchers' background in social work rather than film studies—it also draws on selected elements of film discourse, including shot composition, framing, colour palette, or sound design, to enhance and substantiate the narrative analysis.

The first step of this research is the sampling of films. When sampling, we followed relevant inclusion and exclusion criteria (see **Table 1** below).

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for film sampling.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
• Disability-themed films: Although there is no unified standard for what constitutes a disability-themed film, previous studies [25,48,49] typically include films that meet the following criteria: (a) the storyline or primary characters within the film involve at least one disabled character, (b) the film describes the living situation of disabled people in mainstream society or portrays the inner world or identity of disabled characters, and (c) the presence of disabled characters plays an indispensable role in advancing the main storyline. This research will adhere to relevant inclusion criteria when selecting film samples.	• Non-disability themed films: (a) Films that do not feature at least one disabled character as a main or significant character; (b) Films that do not portray the living situation or inner world of disabled people; (c) Films in which disabled characters do not contribute meaningfully to advancing the storyline.
• Period and Location: The films must have been released in cinemas within the past decade (2015–2024), and they must be domestically produced.	• Period and Location: Films released outside the time frame of 2015–2024 or films that are not domestically produced.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
• The selected films must demonstrate significant social impact in China. This impact is measured using several indicators, and a film should meet at least one of them: (1) achieving box office revenue of over 100 million Chinese Yuan (CNY) (approximately 14 million United States Dollars (USD) as of 21 January 2025); (2) attaining a rating of at least 8.0 on the Maoyan Ticket Rating platform, a professional film data service that provides nationwide access to audience ratings and real-time box office statistics (data retrieved from Maoyan: https://m.maoyan.com/asgard/app/shortvideo on 17 January 2025); or (3) receiving a nomination for one of the three most prestigious Chinese film awards—the Golden Rooster Awards, the Golden Horse Awards, or the Hong Kong Film Awards (award information retrieved from Google Search: https://www.google.com/ on 7 January 2025). The inclusion criteria were established because, although the researchers acknowledge that any film may influence public perceptions, it is particularly meaningful to focus on those with demonstrable social impact. Such films not only achieve broad visibility and audience recognition but also stimulate public debate on social issues. By analysing these influential works, one can gain a clearer understanding of how disability is represented and how narrative strategies shape societal attitudes towards it.	• Social Impact: Films have not had a significant social impact in China, including having not achieved a box office revenue exceeding 100,000,000 CNY (or approximately 14,000,000 USD), films whose Maoyan rating below 8.0, and/or films that have not been nominated for at least one of the three major Chinese film awards (Golden Rooster, Golden Horse, and/or Hong Kong Film Awards).
• Social realism: The films should avoid excessive dramatisation or exaggeration, striving instead for a realistic portrayal of the lives of disabled characters in China. They should not be fantastic films.	• Non-social realism: Films that are overly dramatic, exaggerated, or fantastical, as these do not align with the goal of providing a realistic depiction of the lives of disabled characters in China.

Ultimately, we identified six films that fit the inclusion criteria from the Maoyan website: *Mad World*[50], *A Cool Fish*[51], *Shock Wave 2*[52], *Nice View*[53], *In Broad Daylight*[54], and *Article 20*[55] (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Summary of six films chosen to conduct narrative analysis.

No.	Movie	Region	Release Date	Number of Disabled Characters	Type of Disability	Role of Disabled Characters	Duration (min)	China Box Office (Unit: CNY)	Maoyan Ticketing Rating	Awards
1	Mad World	Hong Kong, China	2016	1	Mental Disability	Main Character	104	9,402,000	8.4	Hong Kong Film Awards (Winner)
2	The Unknown	Mainland, China	2018	1	Physical Disability	Main Character	108	794,000,000	9	None
3	Shock Wave 2	Hong Kong, China	2020	1	Physical Disability	Main Character	121	1,314,000,000	9.2	Golden Rooster Awards (Winner), Hong Kong Film Awards (Nomination)
4	Nice View	Mainland, China	2022	2	Hearing Impairment, Physical Disability	Supporting Characters	106	1,379,000,000	9.5	Golden Rooster Awards (Winner)
5	In Broad Daylight	Hong Kong, China	2023	Multiple	Intellectual Disability, Physical Disability	Supporting Characters	106	12,204,000	8.4	Golden Horse Awards (Nomination), Hong Kong Film Awards (Winner),
6	Article 20	Mainland, China	2024	1	Deaf-mute person	Supporting Character	141	2,429,000,000	9.5	Golden Rooster Awards (Winner)

The second step of the research involved data collection and analysis, during which we employed a combined approach of group reflective practice and thematic analysis. Group reflective practice, a qualitative method, is particularly effective in a group context for developing and enriching dynamic perceptions of experiences within the group [56]. First, we employed group reflective practice. The three of us first verified whether the six selected films were available on widely used streaming platforms accessible to international audiences, such as Netflix or iQIYI. Once confirmed, we each watched the films individually, ensuring an open and unbiased perspective. The initial viewing enabled us to gain a general understanding of each film's story and plot.

Subsequently, we organised six reflective seminars. During each seminar, we re-watched one film together, after which we took turns reflecting on and sharing our experiences. The discussions focused on three main questions: (a) What type of disability is portrayed in the film? (b) What stories or plots underpin this portrayal? (c) In what ways are these stories (e.g., key plot elements) presented through film discourse? Based on our prior literature review, we had some preliminary assumptions about potential answers to these questions. For instance, we recognised that the selected films might tend to narrate disability from a specific model, such as the individual or social model. However, we deliberately avoided allowing these assumptions to constrain our thinking, using them instead as a tool to systematically guide the organisation, expression, and communication of our reflective experiences. We recognised that our actual interpretations might diverge from our initial assumptions and acknowledged that conflicting viewpoints could emerge during discussions (e.g., some members might argue that a particular film narrates disability from an individual model, while others may disagree). In such cases, we documented these differing opinions and continued the discussions, revisiting specific stories and plots until a consensus was reached. All seminars were audio-recorded, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed. We then employed thematic analysis to code portions relevant to the research question. By analysing the transcriptions, we grouped films with similar narrative characteristics and identified key themes. Additionally, we highlighted useful reflective content related to issues (b) and (c).

4. Results

In this section, drawing on insights generated through our group reflections, we attempt to interpret how the six films narrate and represent the nature of disability by identifying and refining relevant stories and plots, and examining how these narratives are conveyed through film discourse, in order to determine the types of disability models they reflect.

4.1. The Social Model Narratives

As discussed in the literature review section, the social model emphasises that disability does not originate from individuals' physical or psychological impairments but rather from social barriers imposed on disabled people at multiple levels of society [23,57]. Our analysis of the narrative content of these six selected films shows that three of them—Nice View, In Broad Daylight, and Article 20—narrate disability from a similar perspective— the social model. For clarity, all characters' Chinese names in the analysis of these films are written in English order, while in the Chinese context the family name comes before the given name. This convention is followed throughout the article.

4.1.1. *Nice View*

First, in *Nice View*, the social model perspective on disability is clearly evident. The film tells the story of 20-year-old Hao Jing, who started an electronics assembly business to raise money for his sister's surgery. Two disabled characters, Chunmei Wang and Wei Zhong, work as frontline employees at the factory.

Chunmei Wang is a single mother who became deaf due to a work-related injury. Her storyline implies how disabled people are structurally excluded and marginalised by labour market exclusion. First, the film tells that after Chunmei Wang lost her hearing, she was dismissed by her employer, is currently suing the company, and can now only find low-wage, temporary work. Second, even though Chunmei Wang engages in low-wage, temporary work, she still struggles with many inconsistencies in the social environment. For example, the film portrays her struggles as a hearing-impaired part-time waitress in a restaurant, including being reprimanded for not hearing the boss's instructions and unintentionally frightening customers by speaking too loudly. Of course, these unfortunate encounters can be inter-

preted as resulting from her bodily impairments rather than being excluded by the employment market. However, subsequent plotlines then tell how, despite initial doubts about her abilities, Hao Jing decides to hire her. In the process, it particularly portrays how Hao Jing raises his voice to guide Chunmei Wang in disassembling components, a task she quickly masters. By contrasting Chunmei Wang's earlier failure to access mainstream employment with her eventual success in Hao Jing's factory, the film clearly conveys a message to audiences: disabled people may often suffer from marginalisation and exclusion in the labour market, but the root cause of such employment struggles lies not in their bodily impairments, but in the lack of equal opportunities and inclusive practices within the mainstream labour market[58,59]. Besides, from the perspective of discourse, our analysis found that the director uses specific cinematic shot techniques to symbolically reinforce that Chunmei Wang's difficulties in the labour market stem from social exclusion rather than from her impairment. First, the film uses visual methods to highlight Chunmei Wang's marginalisation during her part-time job at the restaurant. She is frequently shown in close-up shots that emphasise her isolation and anxiety. The director also focuses on the reactions of others—such as customers looking confused or visibly uncomfortable when she speaks too loudly while taking orders. One striking scene includes a close-up of the boss's angry expression as he scolds Chunmei Wang with a fly swatter, after she fails to hear a customer calling due to being focused on cleaning the table. These visual choices strongly suggest that the root of her exclusion lies in a social environment that is unwelcoming and intolerant towards disabled people like Chuimei Wang, without the need for explicit explanation. In contrast, after Chunmei Wang begins working at Hao Jing's factory, the camera adopts more stable and inclusive compositions—such as two-shots showing Hao Jing guiding her through tasks in a friendly manner. These shots reflect her growing integration and capability. In addition, from the perspective of film language, the scenes in the factory are accompanied by light and hopeful background music, which had not been presented earlier. The colour palette of the scene also shifts from the cold tones used in the restaurant to a warm yellow hue, with sunlight streaming through the window. This visual and auditory shift subtly implies that when society is willing to shift its mindset, respect diversity, and embrace difference, disabled people can have promising futures and become fully included in mainstream spaces such as the labour market. Overall, these filmic techniques effectively convey a key message: the root problem does not lie in Chunmei Wang's impairment, but in society's failure to provide inclusive and understanding environments for disabled people.

Another disabled character, Wei Zhong, appears after the factory achieves stable operations. Wei Zhong is a retired veteran who lost a leg in the war. He seeks employment at the factory to enrich his lives. Initially, Hao Jing doubts their abilities and values, particularly sceptical of Wei Zhong's ability since he is a wheelchair user who lost his right leg. Our analysis shows that the film employs specific elements of shot composition and film language to underscore Hao Jing's scepticism towards older disabled individuals. First, the sequence opens with a frontal medium shot of five elderly job seekers—Wei Zhong in a wheelchair at the front, with four others standing behind. The camera then pulls back to reveal the backs of Hao Jing and the deputy director, positioned symmetrically on either side of the frame, observing the group from a distance. This over-the-shoulder composition invites viewers to adopt Hao Jing's perspective, reinforcing the emotional and ideological distance between the young entrepreneurs and the elderly applicants. Following this visual arrangement, Hao Jing then, visibly sceptical, asks, 'Can they really do this?' His partner replies, 'Those four definitely can't disassemble phones—they just want temp jobs.' Hao Jing presses, 'What about Uncle Zhong?' The dialogue arrangement, paired with increasingly doubtful expressions, effectively exposes his internalised bias—that older disabled people are less capable than their non-disabled peers. Through this visual and narrative construction, the film subtly exposes the social prejudice that portrays elderly disabled people as inherently unfit for productive labour. However, after repeated persuasion by the deputy director, Hao Jing reluctantly accepts their arrival and assigns them simple tasks. Wei Zhong soon proves his worth by excelling at component disassembly, attributed to his past experience as a watch repair technician. In this scene, a close-up captures his hands deftly removing micro-components, followed by a slow pan up to his calm expression as he says, 'I've been a watch repairer for half my life—who else can take things apart more precisely than me?' This shot sequence shifts focus from his physical impairment to his competence.

By showing skill before speech, the film ensures that his confidence appears grounded rather than boastful, reinforcing the challenge to ableist assumptions. This portrayal helps reposition older disabled individuals as capable contributors, contrasting with common media depictions of disabled people as either irrational or self-aggrandising [60]. All in all, at both narrative and discourse levels, the film represents the agency and capability of disabled elderly people, while revealing how entrenched societal views of their 'uselessness' may obstruct their full inclusion [61].

Overall, this film highlights the socially constructed barriers that disabled individuals face when seeking employment in the unique Chinese context, such as inherent prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes, as well as the resulting lack of equal opportunities and an inclusive environment [57,59]. It should be noted that the film does not depict the physical and psychological suffering that disabled individuals endure after acquiring an impairment in its plot construction. Therefore, we argue that this film narrates and represents the essence of disability through the lens of the social model.

4.1.2. *Broad Daylight*

Broad Daylight is a film based on true events in Hong Kong, China. The film follows an investigative team from a news agency that secretly infiltrates a private care home called 'Rainbow Bridge' after receiving reports of abuse. Their mission is to uncover the inhumane treatment of disabled residents within the facility.

First and foremost, the film aims to show audiences how care homes treat disabled individuals. At the beginning of the film, viewers are introduced to a profound social context in Hong Kong: care homes are often the only option for many disabled people to meet their basic safety needs, while the idea of living independently has become a widely accepted norm in contemporary society [17]. However, the film reveals the various forms of abuse endured by disabled residents in their daily lives. Several particularly shocking incidents of abuse include:

- Elderly residents in wheelchairs have their hands tied and are forced to bathe on the roof.
- The nursing home director deceives and sexually assaults a mildly intellectually disabled girl named Xiaoling.
- A caregiver physically abuses a mildly intellectually disabled boy named Mingzai over an extended period, ultimately driving him to commit suicide by jumping off a building.

This contrasting narrative technique underscores the film's core purpose—to expose and condemn the fact that care homes in Hong Kong, particularly private ones, can become places where disabled individuals face restricted lives and oppression, rather than highlighting the perceived incompetence of disabled people in coping with external barriers, such as institutionalised abuse. Such a purpose demonstrates that the film narrates and represents disability issues from a social model perspective. From a discourse perspective, the film uses a realist visual style to expose these harsh truths behind institutional care. For example, many scenes are filmed with handheld cameras, dim lighting, and long takes, especially when showing the daily routines and abuses within the care home. This cinéma vérité technique fosters a documentary-like authenticity, deliberately blurring the boundary between fiction and reality to enhance the credibility and urgency of the abuse being portrayed. In particular, in scenes depicting Xiaoling and Mingzai, the camera often adopts a voyeuristic point of view—framing them through half-open doors, surveillance screens, or narrow hallways—to evoke a sense of entrapment and constant monitoring. These compositions visually reinforce the lack of privacy and dignity experienced by disabled residents in institutional settings. Moreover, when narrating the unsettling scene in which elderly residents are forced to bathe on the rooftop, the film refrains from any theatrical embellishment. Instead, the moment is captured through footage secretly filmed by the female journalist from a neighbouring building. The director deliberately slows down the visuals, intercutting close-up shots of each resident—naked, strapped into their wheelchairs, and sprayed with water by care staff. The pacing is measured and unflinching, allowing the audience to fully absorb the humiliation and despair etched into every frame. Notably, the scene is devoid of dialogue; a cold, disquieting soundtrack underscores the imagery, intensifying its emotional impact. This absence of speech eliminates narrative distraction and heightens the sensory discomfort, compelling viewers to confront the violence in a raw, embodied manner. The strategy serves not merely to document abuse but to position the viewer in a space of ethical unease, prompting a deeper reflection on the structural violence that makes such scenes possible.

Furthermore, although the plot focuses on the phenomenon of abuse within the private residential care home 'Rainbow Bridge,' it does not depict these incidents as isolated cases but embeds them within systemic flaws in broader social structures. Institutionalised abuse of disabled people is a critical focus within the social model, and many studies have highlighted its prevalence and the frequent neglect of it by society and the structural factors that lead to it[62]. The film reflects this awareness. For instance, it includes subplots such as the care home director expressing concern over the insufficient number of caregivers, only for the operating consortium to reject requests for additional staff while planning to increase the number of beds. This excessive workload forces some caregivers to resort to inhumane practices or vent their frustrations on residents. While the operating consortium's actions appear to be the primary cause of abuse, they also underscore the lack of government oversight in private care homes. Furthermore, the film illustrates how the investigative team learns that even if they expose the incidents, the government would likely downplay them due to the severe shortage of public care home resources and its reliance on private organisations to address this issue. The local government fears that exposing such incidents could lead to the closure of private care homes, leaving many disabled and elderly individuals without shelter. This plotline enables the audience to understand how the inadequacy of public resources perpetuates institutional abuse in private care homes. Additionally, the film depicts the investigative team's attempt to seek legal assistance for Xiao Ling, a victim of sexual assault, only to encounter the judicial system's failure to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes against disabled individuals. In one scene, a lawyer from the Department of Justice explains that, although charges would be filed, cases are often dropped to avoid further harm to victims when evidence is insufficient for a conviction. Ultimately, this is how Xiao Ling's case is handled. These interwoven plotlines reveal the systemic roots of institutionalised abuse within Chinese society. Through these narrative elements, the director offers viewers a deeper understanding of disability within the framework of the social model. Reflecting this narrative focus, the film largely maintains a restrained tone. For example, the scene in which the female journalist seeks legal assistance from a government lawyer on behalf of Xiaoling is shot in a plain, nondescript office. The camera keeps a moderate distance, and the characters remain mostly static. At the same time, there is no dramatic music or expressive editing—only a quiet and matter-of-fact delivery of institutional reasoning: insufficient evidence, victim protection, and legal technicalities. This minimalist approach avoids emotional manipulation and instead encourages the audience to reflect on how, in cases involving disabled victims, systemic neglect and 'rule-based reasoning' contribute to the persistence of injustice.

In general, the film portrays the nature of disability through the lens of the social model. It highlights institutionalised abuse as a disabling barrier that must be addressed to improve the lives and social participation of disabled residents in Hong Kong, China, while also exposing how systemic flaws in broader social structures perpetuate and sustain such abuses[63].

4.1.3. *Article 20*

Article 20 narrates prosecutor Hanming Weng's handling of a contentious case in China. Qiang Wang and his mute wife, Xiuping Hao, suffered six months of brutal treatment from local loan shark Liu Wenjing over unpaid high-interest loans. During one such incident, Wang fatally stabbed Liu, prompting Weng to investigate whether to charge him with excessive self-defence or intentional homicide.

The story of Xiuping Hao is structured around two interwoven yet distinct narrative threads. In both cases, traces of the social model of disability are evident in how disability is narrated. The first shows her being beaten and raped by Liu in a room while her husband was locked outside, rendering her resistance futile. After that, Liu forced Wang to sign a divorce agreement to take possession of Hao. This scene underscores sexual abuse as an external threat to disabled women's right to life in China. In fact, this plot mirrors the real-life experiences of many disabled women. Research has shown that, globally, women with disabilities face 2–3 times higher risks of gender-based violence (such as sexual violence) than non-disabled women[64,65]. Nonetheless, the film's intent remains ambiguous here. It could either emphasise disabled women's physical vulnerability when facing external threats or condemn how a disabling society undermines disabled women's lives and rights. As the plot progresses, we argue that the film seems to lean more towards the latter. First, the climax of the movie shows Hanming Weng passionately

arguing at an expert panel for Wang Qiang's acquittal, rejecting the charges of excessive self-defense or intentional homicide. He argues that this approach is necessary to protect the right to life of marginalised groups like Xiuping Hao, who have long been sexually abused, thereby highlighting the consequences for crimes against vulnerable people. The film makes no mention of Xiuping Hao's personal responsibility in experiencing sexual violence. Secondly, it does not include scenes suggesting that her inability to call for help audibly enabled the perpetrator to succeed, or that she desires to cure her muteness through medical or rehabilitative means in order to achieve a more secure life, among other things. This plotting suggests that the director seeks to use the film to illustrate how a disabling society—riddled with oppressive social elements such as violence, sexual abuse, threats, deception, and the defects of judicial institutions—can undermine the equal right to life for disabled women in China.

Another part of the film shows Xiuping Hao fleeing with her daughter after Wang's detention. She decides to run away because Liu's father—the village chief—has been besieging her home and threatening to take her daughter unless she falsely claims that her relationship with Liu was consensual. During her escape, Hao seeks evidence to exonerate Wang but is found by Liu's father. To protect her family, she jumps from a high building. In real life, many disabled individuals exhibit irrational emotions or behaviors, which can hinder their social integration. This requires assistance from helping professionals[17]. Nonetheless, Goodley and Rapley pointed out that many helping professionals tend to interpret these irrational elements through the lens of the individual model of thinking, viewing them as results of individual impairments or failures in personal adjustment[66]. Clearly, such a plot attempts to show audiences that the root cause of irrational behaviors (such as suicide attempts) in disabled people lies in the oppressive society they face.

From a discourse perspective, the film frequently uses medium or full close-up shots to capture Xiuping Hao's physical state and facial expressions during or after episodes of social oppression. This technique allows the audience to clearly witness the physical and psychological harm she suffers as a result of such oppression. For example, after the sexual assault, the director uses a nearly 20-second long take to show Xiuping Hao—dishevelled and injured—slowly walking out of the room. The camera lingers on her despairing facial expression and captures the moment she uses sign language to express to her husband that she no longer wants to live. Similarly, just before she attempts suicide, the film again uses a medium close-up to depict her signing to prosecutor Hanming Weng, conveying her deep disappointment and despair toward the legal system. These high-definition close-ups enable viewers to more profoundly sense the harm inflicted on disabled individuals by social oppression, as well as their despair at the lack of protection and inclusion in society. In other words, these cinematic strategies foreground the harm inflicted by social oppression and reveal that her suffering stems not from her impairment, but from intersecting forms of structural violence—including sexual assault, institutional neglect, and the absence of accessible support—which ultimately strip her of agency and lead to tragedy.

Overall, this film also narrates and represents the nature of disability from a social model perspective. It focuses on how a disabling society, with oppression and a lack of an effective security system, prevents disabled individuals from accessing mainstream life.

4.2. The Individual Model Narratives

A Cool Fish

Our analysis suggests that *A Cool Fish* adopts a strong individual model to develop its disability narratives. The film portrays absurd yet humorous events in a small mountain town, involving robbers Eyeglasses and Big Head, security guard captain Xianyong Ma, and paraplegic wheelchair user Jiaqi Ma, who are drawn together by a missing antique gun and a botched robbery. Jiaqi Ma's storyline unfolds almost entirely within her home, where the robbers hide after a phone store robbery. The narrative depicts her interactions with the robbers and how these inspire positive reflections on her future life. We argue that the film typically employs an individual model to depict disability for several reasons.

First, it frames disability as a personal tragedy, attributing Jiaqi Ma's difficulties to her paralysis from a car accident. In fact, the film's opening sequence adopts a humorous and light-hearted tone to portray the first encounter and subsequent interactions between Jiaqi Ma and the two robbers. At this early stage, however, disability is only lightly touched

upon. Narratively, there is no incident that explicitly frames her high-level paraplegia in terms of the individual model—there are no scenes illustrating how her condition restricts daily life. Apart from her use of a wheelchair, little marks her as disabled in ways that drive the plot. Nonetheless, at the level of discourse, the individual model is subtly embedded through occasional remarks about her body during exchanges with the two robbers. For instance, when Big Head sees her in a wheelchair, he calls her a symbol of 'bad luck.' Similarly, when Eyeglasses observes her sitting still, he remarks, 'You are sitting so still,' prompting Jiaqi Ma to retort with self-mockery, 'I am a cripple!' Eyeglasses responds with a sigh: 'That's what I call bad luck.' Jiaqi Ma also mentions that she seldom leaves the house due to her paralysis. These lines subtly encourage the audience to associate her misfortune with her impairment, rather than with broader structural or social causes. Visually, in scenes where she is not interacting with the robbers, the camera often adopts medium or long shots to frame her sitting alone in her wheelchair or in the corner of a room. This spatial arrangement reinforces the sense that she is trapped or socially isolated. Through the interplay of confined framing and casual dialogue, the film constructs a reality in which the disabled individual appears limited by her own body—embedding the individual model of disability discursively and visually, even though it remains understated in this scene.

The first vivid depiction of Jiaqi Ma's disabling condition through the lens of the individual model appears in a mid-film scene: she experiences sudden urinary incontinence and, upon being seen by the two robbers, loses emotional control. The scene follows a coherent storyline, illustrating how physical impairment restricts one's ability to live independently—an interpretation typical of the individual model of disability. At the discursive level, the director reinforces this reading through subtle visual and verbal cues. The scene begins with a medium close-up showing urine dripping from the seat of Ma's wheelchair, followed by a slow upward pan as the robbers help her change an adult nappy. The camera lingers on her facial expressions, capturing a shift from initial calm to rising panic and finally to emotional collapse. This framing encourages the viewer to interpret her breakdown as a direct result of losing bodily control. However, from a social model perspective, her distress can be understood as stemming not from the impairment itself, but from socially constructed norms that define what counts as 'normal' behaviour. It is this internalised shame, rather than the incontinence, that triggers her collapse [67]. The film also constructs a clear emotional progression through dialogue: Ma's words shift from restrained lines such as 'Don't touch me' and 'Stay away' to more intense outbursts like 'Get out!' and 'Damn you!'. Her tone rises from low and pleading to loud and anguished. These cinematic strategies help the audience vividly experience her despair over the loss of bodily autonomy.

Another scene that depicts Jiaqi Ma's disabled condition through the lens of the individual model occurs directly after the incontinence incident—she confides in the two robbers that she hopes they will help end her life. This decision is gradually understood, and even encouraged, by them. Narratively, when viewed alongside earlier scenes, her wish to die is not portrayed as impulsive despair but as a relatively rational response to prolonged physical suffering. This arrangement reinforces an individualised understanding of disability by presenting her suicide as the ultimate consequence of prolonged physical suffering. Notably, the film makes no attempt to explore structural factors behind her despair—such as the lack of community support, care services, or accessible environments. Their absence further reinforces the impression that her desire to die stems solely from her bodily condition, as if it were a purely personal choice. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the director, through careful orchestration of atmosphere and camera work, conveys the 'rational' dimension behind Jiaqi Ma's suicidal intention. Following the emotional chaos triggered by the incontinence incident, the film shifts to approximately three seconds of silence, marking a sudden emotional turn. This silence offers the audience a moment to breathe and serves as a narrative pivot—from breakdown to reflection. During this transition, the camera adopts a steady medium shot: Jiaqi Ma sits frontally at the centre of the frame, with the two men standing a few metres behind her, all three remaining silent. This visual composition highlights the emotional distance and relational tension between them, subtly positioning Jiaqi Ma as the narrative focus. She then breaks the silence in a calm, restrained tone, asking the men to help end her life. In response, Big Head—previously rough and vulgar—approaches slowly, kneels, and quietly says, 'I will help you.' This sequence of near-ritualistic gestures and

softened speech constructs a solemn, contemplative atmosphere, presenting death as a deliberate and rational choice. Taken together, through its use of verbal and visual language described above, the entire scene highlights Jiaqi Ma's decision to end her life as reasoned and coherent—a response to the suffering caused by her high-level paralysis—thereby reinforcing the narrative logic of the individual model of disability.

Second, from the level of storytelling, the film ultimately presents Jiaqi Ma's perceived journey from self-loathing to acceptance of her body. This aligns with the individual model, as this model also states how psychological-emotional struggles, stemming from rejection of physical changes, can destroy motivation to reintegrate into society[17]. In the latter part of the film, Big Head deceives Jiaqi Ma by asking her to close her eyes and listen to music, promising to turn on the gas and leave. However, after sleeping for some time, she senses something is wrong, opens her eyes, and finds a handwritten note from Big Head that reads, 'I'll stay with you for the rest of your days.' Moved by the message, she begins to cry and smile. This scene marks a pivotal perceived turning point in Jiaqi Ma's will to live—from a firm determination to end her life to a reconsideration of survival. While Big Head's words clearly contribute to Jiaqi Ma's cognitive shift, it is important to note that the film depicts her alone in the room at this crucial moment. This narrative choice implies that positive transformation ultimately relies on the disabled individual's own internal effort. Such an arrangement aligns with the logic of the individual model of disability, which frames the problem as residing within the person and needing to be fixed—here, specifically through psychological adjustment. From a discursive perspective, the film uses a gradual zoom—from a distant to a close-up shot—to capture Jiaqi Ma's mixed expression of laughter and tears. Simultaneously, fireworks suddenly appear outside the window, casting a warm glow into the room and breaking the film's previously muted colour palette. At the same time, cheerful and hopeful vocal music is introduced. This combination of cinematic techniques highlights the stability and permanence of Jiaqi Ma's cognitive shift, reinforcing a narrative of personal triumph over internalised negative self-perception. Such a representation is consistent with the stylistic features of the individual model of disability.

Overall, we conclude that the film's disability narratives focus on individual emotions, psychology, and physical conditions, reflecting the individual model, with little attention to socially constructed barriers like structural issues.

4.3. Narratives Blending Different Disability Modes

Our analysis reveals that the two films—Mad World and Shock Wave 2—narrate and represent disability by integrating two or more disability models.

4.3.1. *Mad World*

First, the film *Mad World* depicts Shidong Huang (nickname: A Dong), a man with bipolar disorder, and his struggles to reintegrate into family and society post-hospitalisation. The film presents disability from the medical model perspective, exemplified by the opening scene where Tung's father, Tai-Hoi Wong, collects him from the hospital and carefully listens to the nurse's instructions on medication and follow-up appointments. Additionally, it references A Dong's chaotic pre-hospitalisation life, such as scenes where his ex-fiancée suggests moving his mother to a care home, leading to A Dong's behavioural and emotional outbursts; impulsive investments resulting in massive debts; and his angry confrontations with his bedridden mother over her rejection of taking rehabilitation exercises. These scenes underscore how bipolar disorder significantly hinders Tung's social participation.

However, as the storyline progresses to A Dong's attempts to reintegrate, the film adopts alternative theoretical models to narrate disability. For instance, Tung faces deep-seated discrimination and prejudice in job searches. Despite being qualified and able to manage his bipolar disorder daily, no employer hires him. Similarly, once his condition is known to his landlord and neighbours, they insist on immediate eviction. These scenes emphasise how structural exclusion and discrimination bar individuals with mental disabilities from the mainstream labour market, aligning with the social model. Furthermore, the film portrays A Dong's disability from the relational model perspective, emphasising how disability is shaped and experienced through social and interpersonal interactions[68]. For example, A Dong's father inadequately supervises his medication, resulting in A Dong to discarding pills in secret. Another scene shows Tung attending a church service with his ex-fiancée, where she

publicly discloses his past erratic behaviour without consent, triggering depressive symptoms. In contrast, Tung finds solace in the kind concern of a neighbouring child during depressive states. These plots illustrate how Tung's disabling experiences are shaped and alleviated through interactions with family and friends, aligning with the relational model.

From the film's discursive dimension, our analysis reveals that when portraying scenes in which A Dong experiences episodes of mental distress—whether triggered by internal factors, interactions with social or interpersonal structures, or a sense of exclusion from mainstream life due to discrimination—the director consistently employs a range of strategies to enhance the narrative effect. Firstly, in terms of shot language, the film frequently makes use of handheld camerawork, abrupt shaking, and rapid zoom-outs followed by sudden forward thrusts to capture moments when A Dong loses emotional control or displays intense behaviour. These dynamic techniques heighten the viewer's perception of the sense of breakdown typically associated with episodes of mental illness. In addition, many of the film's key conflict scenes are set within enclosed and oppressive interiors. For instance, A Dong's argument with his ex-girlfriend takes place in a cramped, newly purchased flat; his confrontation with his mother during rehabilitation training occurs in a dimly lit, dilapidated home; and his failed job interview is situated in a narrow and confining office. These spatial arrangements considerably intensify the viewer's sense of claustrophobia and psychological pressure, thereby enabling a more visceral engagement with the personal, relational, and structural barriers faced by individuals with mental health conditions in their efforts to achieve social integration. In terms of the cinematic language, a muted, cold colour palette is employed throughout to create a sombre and oppressive atmosphere. This aesthetic choice further accentuates both the psychological collapse A Dong experiences during periods of illness and the tragic nature of his attempts at reintegration. In doing so, the film generates a dual narrative effect: on the one hand, it conveys the deeply personal suffering brought about by psychiatric disorders; on the other, it exposes the broader social marginalisation endured by individuals with mental illness within both interpersonal and institutional contexts.

However, when the film narrates scenes in which A Dong's condition is alleviated through positive social and interpersonal interactions—where his confidence is gradually rebuilt—the director adopts a contrasting set of strategies. For instance, in terms of shot language, handheld camerawork, abrupt shaking, and rapid zooms are replaced with static shots. In several scenes where A Dong, in a state of despair, finds psychological comfort through conversations with a neighbouring child, the camera remains still and employs long takes. This technique effectively conveys A Dong's inner sense of calm. In addition, the director frequently chooses open spaces for these scenes—for example, the rooftop where he interacts with the child, or the wide roadside where, at the film's conclusion, his father finally decides not to send A Dong to a rehabilitation centre and instead promises to face future challenges together with him. These open settings unmistakably enhance the sense that support from social and interpersonal relationships offers hope for people with mental disabilities like A Dong to overcome their condition and external barriers. At the same time, the director also shifts from a previously cold colour palette to warmer tones. The use of natural elements such as sunlight, blue skies, and white clouds further reinforces the hopeful narrative theme that positive social and interpersonal engagement can help individuals with mental disabilities transcend both personal and societal obstacles.

In summary, our analysis concludes that the film adopts multiple perspectives—including the medical, social, and relational models—to interpret the complex barriers faced by individuals with bipolar disorder in integrating into mainstream society.

4.3.2. *Shock Wave 2*

The film *Shock Wave 2* portrays disability from multiple perspectives. It tells the story of bomb disposal expert Chengfeng Pan (nicknamed Feng), who loses his left leg in a bomb disposal operation. Although he recovers, he cannot return to frontline work due to institutional restrictions within the police force, leading to resentment and a desire for revenge. The film begins with a scene of Feng's foot being shattered in the explosion, followed by scenes of his treatment, wearing a prosthetic leg, physical training, and rehabilitation. At this point, the film uses an individual model to portray disability, focusing on the functional and social limitations faced by individuals with physical disabilities and the potential for rehabilitation through personal effort[17]. It also adopts a relational model by depicting the emotional

and technical support Feng receives from colleagues, such as Zhuowen Dong and his girlfriend Ling Pang. This highlights the empowering role of family and peer support in the rehabilitation process.

However, the film soon shifts to conflict when Feng, after meeting physical fitness requirements, is assigned to a non-frontline role due to public safety concerns. Disagreeing, Feng protests publicly at a police award ceremony, leading to his dismissal. This prompts the audience to reflect on the ableist social mechanisms that marginalise disabled individuals like Feng, even after successful rehabilitation. At this stage, the film aligns more with the social model of disability, focusing on the socially constructed barriers to employment for disabled people. However, the individual model perspective appears occasionally, showing that Feng still faces functional limitations due to his physical impairment. For instance, the film includes a scene where Feng takes gabapentin for pain relief after leaving the police force, hinting that his challenges arise from both societal disabilities and personal functional limitations.

From a discourse perspective, our analysis finds that the film uses specific visual and narrative strategies to support different disability models. In scenes related to the individual model, the director often focuses on Feng's injured body, medications, or assistive devices. For example, after the failed bomb disposal, the camera moves from a high-angle shot of his body to a close-up of his broken leg, exposing bone and blood. Similarly, when Feng takes gabapentin at a restaurant, the film gives the pill bottle a dedicated close-up. These shots guide viewers to see his body as the source of difficulty, reinforcing an individualised understanding of disability[69]. The film spends little time showing Feng bedridden. Instead, it uses fast-paced montage sequences to show his rehab progress—walking with a prosthetic, strength training, and more. These scenes highlight his willpower, but also imply that recovery is a personal responsibility needed to rejoin society[9]. In contrast, scenes involving relational support use balanced, stable camera work. Feng often appears in the same frame with Zhuowen Dong or Ling Pang, side by side, suggesting partnership rather than dependence. Eye-level or slightly low camera angles create a sense of equality. These techniques reflect the relational model's idea that disability is shaped through social and emotional interactions[68]. When the story turns to structural exclusion, such as Feng being denied a frontline role despite meeting standards, the film switches to shaky handheld shots and high angles. These create a chaotic and oppressive tone, showing his marginalisation within the institution. This aligns with the social model, which sees disability as produced by social and institutional barriers[70].

5. Discussion

Through analysing the stories and plots of six impactful domestic social realist films released between 2015 and 2024, it is clear that the individual model—viewing disability as a personal tragedy—is not the only way to depict disability in contemporary Chinese cinema. Five of them present disability in Chinese society from social models or a hybrid model combining individual, social, and relational perspectives. The findings show that although modern state discourse in China still portrays disability as a medical impairment, an equal yet dependent body, or a less capable body needing compensation[36,37], contemporary Chinese cinema does not limit itself to this narrow view when developing its disability narratives. In addition, these six films also depict the struggles faced by individuals with different types of disabilities and highlight the potential difficulties encountered by disabled people in various social circumstances in China. For example, *Broad Daylight* focuses on the challenges faced by disabled individuals in institutionalised life, while *Shock Wave 2* and *Nice View* highlight the difficulties in obtaining equal employment opportunities for disabled people, and *The Road to Dawn* concentrates on the obstacles disabled individuals face during their rehabilitation and return to society. These representations offer viewers a deeper understanding of the challenges disabled people face regarding social participation and inclusion in China. In addition, this research also incorporated an analysis of film language and shot composition across the six selected films. These discourse-level elements—such as framing, spatial arrangement, and visual tone—consistently reinforce narrative patterns associated with different disability models. Techniques such as the recurrent use of close-ups to capture Xiuping Hao's bodily and facial expressions in *Article 20* demonstrate how visual strategies support underlying disability narratives—specifically, the idea that it is society, through social oppression, that disables disabled people[66]. In *A Cool Fish*, the film repeatedly

intersperses dialogue between Jiaqi Ma and the two robbers with negative comments about her paraplegic body. These remarks subtly prompt audience alignment with the notion that physical impairment is the root cause of disabled people's inability to live independently or participate fully in society[18]. By attending to how cinematic form interacts with story content, we gain deeper insight into how disability is constructed not only through narrative but also through the visual, affective, and auditory strategies embedded in film discourse. Based on these findings, we conclude that the domestic cinema industry has the potential to act as a positive socio-cultural force in promoting real equality and inclusion for China's disabled people. These films can help deepen public understanding of the complex barriers that hinder China's disabled individuals from fully accessing mainstream society. This conclusion seems to contrast with the views of many Western disability scholars, who see films as a medium that hinders disability equality and inclusion. They argue that films tend to depict disability as a personal issue while failing to present the complex societal factors that prevent disabled individuals from accessing mainstream society[27–29].

To further maximise the impact of domestic disability-themed films on promoting positive societal perception changes, several actions are necessary. First, it is crucial to support the production of more high-quality local films that explore and highlight the often underrepresented challenges encountered by disabled individuals in various social contexts in China. This will allow audiences to continually enrich and update their understanding of disability in the Chinese context. Second, systematic curation of disability-themed films is necessary to improve accessibility for audiences. During our sampling process, we identified significant gaps in the availability and accessibility of such films in China. We had to manually examine each domestically produced film released between 2015 and 2024 in the database, including reading through their synopses and character lists, to find suitable samples. This low accessibility means that, in real life, some audiences may be familiar with films like *A Cool Fish* but lack exposure to others, perpetuating a narrow and tragic view of disability. To address this, effective strategies for integrating and promoting disability-themed films are necessary. Potential solutions include creating a dedicated 'Disability Themes' category on mainstream platforms like Netflix and iQIYI, and using algorithmic tools on popular domestic social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin to recommend this genre of films to users. Third, it is important to find effective ways to encourage the Chinese government to continually reassess its disability policies and services by considering the value of these films. Our study's findings highlight potential shortcomings in the government's perception of disability, specifically that it may have been strongly influenced by an individualistic viewpoint. However, when it comes to perception adjustment or the formulation and adjustment of social policies concerning specific social groups, the Chinese government typically relies on its professional observations and judgments to make decisions, and while it also considers the input of opinion leaders and people's representatives at times, it does not, however, typically draw direct conclusions from relevant film and television works. Therefore, professionals who work closely with the disabled community and advocate for social justice and change, such as social workers[63,71], should consider actively involving disabled individuals in watching these films and leading in-depth discussions on the real struggles they face in Chinese society. On this basis, professionals need to gather these perspectives and create effective communication channels to ensure that the voices from these discussions are fully heard by the government. This may prompt the government to continue reviewing its existing perception of disability, policies, and services, ensuring better protection of the equal rights of social participation for disabled individuals, while also promoting the role and value of disability films in this process.

This research has its limitations. First, due to the researchers' background in social work, the analysis mainly focuses on how the stories and plots reflect different models of disability, with some attention to selected film and discourse techniques that support these narratives. While the study includes discourse-level analysis of language and shot composition, it does not aim to offer a full account from a film studies perspective. The discussion of film language remains selective and is shaped by a social work lens, focusing on how cinematic choices help convey disability-related themes, rather than offering technical or genre-specific analysis. Hence, future research—particularly by scholars with expertise in film or media studies—may build on this work by conducting more systematic analyses of cinematic form, in-

cluding editing, composition, sound, and genre conventions, to further uncover how disability is visually and narratively constructed. In addition, audience reception studies could explore how viewers with different backgrounds interpret these disability narratives, including how visual, auditory, and affective elements shape public attitudes. Such approaches could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how disability-themed films function as cultural texts and policy-relevant interventions. Secondly, due to space limitations, this research did not explore in depth the characterisation of disabled individuals in these films—an important area for future studies on media representations of disability. For instance, Briant et al.'s research [4] found that there had been a change in the way disabled people in the United Kingdom were reported by news coverage during the age of austerity (2010–2011). There was an increase in articles depicting disabled people as a 'folk devil,' justifying the need to reduce welfare provision costs in response to the global financial crisis. Thus, interested scholars could further explore whether the disabled characters in these six selected films are represented in a positive or negative light, and explore, at the discursive level, how cinematic techniques are employed to highlight these character traits. This would help people more comprehensively examine and understand the value of contemporary Chinese cinema in promoting disability inclusion, equality, and diversity. In fact, the characterisation in the six selected films is notably rich and multidimensional. For instance, *Nice View* presents Chunmei Ma and Chunmei Wang as kind-hearted and honest individuals who, despite being marginalised, prove to be far more capable than societal assumptions about them might suggest. A case in point is Xiuping Hao in *Article 20*, who—although subjected to repeated abuse and injustice, and therefore seemingly portrayed as a tragic figure—also demonstrates remarkable resilience as she persistently negotiates with an unjust social system.

6. Conclusions

This study explores the narrative content of six representative Chinese social realist films made since 2015, examining how disability is portrayed to address the research gap concerning the under-explored representation of disability in local disability-themed films in China. Our analysis identifies three distinct narrative models of disability across these films. The first is the social model narrative, used in *Nice View*, *In Broad Daylight*, and *Article 20*. The second is the medical model narrative, which frames disability as a personal issue, as seen in *A Cool Fish*. The third model combines two or more disability frameworks, typically blending the individual, relational, and social models, as exemplified in *Mad World* and *Shock Waves 2*. These findings suggest that, while the individual model of disability continues to dominate the state discourse in China [36], contemporary cinema presents a challenge to this view. Additionally, we observe that these six films portray the disablement experienced by individuals with various types of impairments, highlighting the difficulties they face in different social contexts within China. Furthermore, these films make use of distinctive cinematic and visual techniques that serve to reinforce disability narratives within their respective stories and plots. Overall, these findings suggest that films have the potential to serve as a positive socio-cultural force in promoting equality and inclusion for disabled people in China by prompting audiences to reconsider disability as a complex, diverse, and evolving phenomenon within the Chinese context. This conclusion contrasts with the perspective of many Western disability scholars, who often view cinema as a medium that may hinder progress towards disability equality and inclusion, as it tends to depict disability as a personal issue, neglecting the complex and diverse societal barriers that disabled people endure.

However, to further enhance the impact of domestic disability-themed films on shaping public perceptions, we recommend, first, supporting the production of high-quality local films that address the often-overlooked challenges faced by disabled people in diverse social contexts in China. Second, systematic curation is needed to improve the accessibility and visibility of such films among the general public. Third, more effective strategies are required to encourage governmental actors to use these films as reflective tools for reviewing disability-related policies and services. In terms of future research, scholars—particularly those with expertise in film studies and a strong interest in disability—may consider engaging more systematically with film theory, exploring how visual storytelling techniques (such as composition, editing, and shot design) shape audience interpretations of disability. Greater attention to discourse-level strategies may also help reveal how disabled characters are constructed

through cinematic form. Such work would enrich current scholarship by more closely linking aesthetic strategies with the sociocultural meanings of disability representation.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation, D.H.; methodology, D.H.; software, D.H.; validation, D.H., A.S.A. and A.A.H.S.; formal analysis, D.H., A.S.A. and A.A.H.S.; investigation, D.H., A.S.A. and A.A.H.S.; resources, D.H.; data curation, D.H.; writing—original draft preparation, D.H.; writing—review and editing, A.S.A. and A.A.H.S.; supervision, A.S.A.; project administration, D.H.; funding acquisition, A.S.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM) (Ethics Ref. No. JEP-2025-502).

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy, confidentiality concerns. However, data may be available from the corresponding author, Dade He, upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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