Ethics on the Silver Screen: A Cultural Comparison of Chinese and Western AI Film and Television Text

Liu Jiang, Wang Guowei, Bai Wei

Beijing Forestry University, China

Abstract— In recent years, the imagination of artificial intelligence on the screen has become a mirror reflecting social and cultural values. Western film and television works generally focus on how self-aware AI challenges human individual status and free will, with stories often revolving around boundaries, conflict, and control. In contrast, Chinese narratives tend to explore how AI is incorporated into existing networks of family and social relationships, emphasizing responsibility and integration. This paper selects representative Chinese and Western film and television texts to compare them from three aspects: AI role behavioral choices, linguistic expression, and role positioning, combined with audio-visual language analysis. The study finds that AI in Western stories mostly appears as a "challenger" seeking autonomy, with value choices favoring the individual; whereas AI in Chinese stories often serves as a "new member" integrating into the collective, with value reflected more in fulfilling family or social responsibilities. These two different screen imaginations correspond to the cultural mindsets of "prevention and boundary" and "integration and responsibility" respectively, indicating that the discussion of AI ethics needs to fully consider diverse cultural contexts to form a more inclusive consensus globally.

Keywords— Artificial Intelligence, Cultural Comparison, Ethical Stance, Science Fiction Film

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become one of the most important themes in film and television works . On the screen, AI is not only a technological imagination but also a reflection of different societies' thoughts on human nature, identity, and future survival. Research indicates that AI images in movies largely shape public attitudes and emotions toward intelligent technology, bringing both hope and fear (Cave et al.). From "Skynet" representing survival threats in the early *The Terminator* (1984) to Samantha triggering emotional confusion in the recent *Her* (2013), the evolutionary trajectory of AI images is itself a history of interaction between technology and culture .

In Western academic and film traditions, the gender bias of AI and its challenge to anthropocentrism are focal points. Scholars have analyzed the evolution of Hollywood AI narratives from "rebellious servants" to "intimate partners." Critical views argue that many AI images are endowed with feminized traits that cater to stereotypes, perpetuating gender bias in technological imagination (Wajcman). Escudero Pérez (2020) analyzed from a gender perspective that even AI images set as "genderless" often carry feminized traits of submission and seduction. Zhao Xiuhong and Wu Wenqing believe that films like *Ex Machina* and *Her* "extend to social issues such as 'machismo' or gender discrimination." A more discussed viewpoint is the philosophical anxiety about machine intelligence; for instance, Nick Bostrom's (25) discussion on the risks of "superintelligence" losing control provides intellectual resources for the "AI threat theory" motif in many Western films. This worry is repeatedly enacted in Hollywood movies, from *Ex Machina* to *Transcendence*, where AI often appears with a posture of rebellion, manipulation, or transcending humans, making the reflection on human subjectivity deafening (Huang). Joseph Daniel points out that early Hollywood movies mostly emphasized AI hostility and loss of control, while later

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works highlight the emotional connection between humans and machines .

In comparison, Chinese film and television works focus more on AI's position in social and family relationships. Works represented by *Hello, An Yi* (2021) focus the lens more on the role of AI in family ethics and social trust structures, triggering widespread discussion in the local context. In the analysis of *Hello, An Yi*, the core conflict does not stem from the fear of technology losing control, but rather how AI is incorporated into a family ethical network deeply influenced by Confucian culture (Zhang Ziying & Liu Binbin). Regarding gender bias, Chinese scholars Dong Sijia and Wang Jun point out that some films convey a tendency to dissolve traditional binary gender concepts by constructing unique "gender-power" relationships. Overall, Western narratives generally worry about how an overly capable AI challenges human autonomous status, while Chinese stories are more concerned with how a fully functional AI fulfills its social and family responsibilities .

AI images in film and television are powerful cultural metaphors; "the ethical narrative logic of AI in sci-fi film and television reflects the different philosophical foundations of China and the West" (Lu) . It not only presents the technological imagination of different societies in the intelligent age but also profoundly reflects their different orientations regarding core values such as individual and collective, rights and responsibility, and instrumental rationality versus family emotion. This paper takes representative Chinese and Western film and television works as objects to systematically compare the behavioral choices, linguistic expressions, and role positioning of AI characters. Specifically, Western narratives tend to shape AI as a "challenger" seeking autonomy, emphasizing "prevention and boundaries"; while Chinese narratives focus more on AI as a "new member" integrating into the collective, highlighting "integration and responsibility".

Ethical Boundaries: Film and Literary Interpretation of AI

Before discussing ethical expressions in Chinese and Western AI film works, it is necessary to define "ethics" as used in this paper . It is not abstract philosophical speculation or legal provisions, but refers to value concepts that guide behavior, judge right and wrong, and are embedded in narrative rhetoric within specific cultural contexts. In film and television works, such ethical issues are usually presented through the characters' behavior, language, and position in the story, because authors guide the audience's value judgments through these choices (Booth 45) .

1.1 Core Concepts and Theoretical Framework

This study proposes the core concept of "Ethical Stance" to capture the ethical position exhibited by AI characters in films . The so-called "stance" emphasizes not an immutable "good" or "evil," but the dynamic performance of AI in specific situations.

AI's ethical stance is mainly reflected in three aspects: behavioral choices, linguistic expression, and role positioning .

Behavioral choices refer to AI's action decisions and value orientations at critical moments, such as choosing sacrifice, betrayal, or obedience. This is reflected in Vladimir Propp's classic study of character functions (21-65). This includes both the path selection of AI between "integration" and "confrontation" analyzed in Chapter 2, and the behavioral choice of humans between "testing" and "empathy" when facing AI discussed in Chapter 3 .

Linguistic expression involves the discourse mode of AI. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory reminds us that discourse always generates meaning in interaction (270-272). Therefore, linguistic details—whether AI calls humans "father" or "virus," and whether humans call AI "she" or "it"—collectively define the intimacy or distance of the relationship .

Role positioning concerns the social role assigned to AI by the narrative, and how audio-visual style reinforces this positioning. Cinematic elements like camera angles, composition, and lighting are not mere decorations but powerful means to guide our understanding of characters (Bordwell 57). AI shot from a low angle is more intimidating, while AI under warm light appears more approachable; these audio-visual choices directly affect whether it is perceived by the audience as a "challenger" seeking autonomy or a "new member" integrating into the collective—which is also the core issue running through the full text .

1.2 Research Methods and Text Selection

Currently, systematic cross-cultural comparisons of AI-themed works are still scarce, and discussions mostly remain at the level of plot summaries and dialogue, limiting our understanding of global AI imagination . The subtleties of cultural differences are often ignored under this method because the meaning of film largely arises from its form and style (Bordwell).

Therefore, this study will adopt a multimodal analysis method to carefully examine how film and television works use audio-visual language to shape the ethical image of AI . Image narrative is a core element in film art; it translates text and emotion into concrete imagery through camera language, scene design, and color use, constructing the

film's narrative structure and expression (Xia, 2025). These choices at the audio-visual level can be seen as the true "writing method" of cultural values on the screen. To deeply understand the differences in Chinese and Western AI ethics, it is necessary to closely combine the discussion of cultural themes with this analysis of audio-visual language.

regarding text selection, this study selects representative Chinese and Western AI-themed film and television works, including *The Matrix* (1999-2024), *I, Robot* (2004), *Her* (2013), *Transcendence* (2014), *The Wandering Earth* (2019-present), *Hello, An Yi* (2021), and *The Bionic Life* (2023) . The criteria for selecting these works are that the AI characters possess a certain subjective consciousness, are key characters driving the plot rather than pure tools, and the core narrative involves significant human-machine ethical dilemmas with key moral choice scenes.

To ensure the rigor of the research, this text selection also followed several important considerations . First, the films have significant influence. The selected works have received widespread attention and discussion in their cultural markets; for example, *Her* won an Oscar, and *The Wandering Earth 2* triggered a phenomenal viewing craze in China. Second, the comparability of the films is strong. Although these films vary in genre, they all focus on the core issue of "the relationship between self-aware AI and humans," providing a solid foundation for horizontal comparison. At the same time, they are timely in their release and span a certain era, making the prominence of cultural differences more convincing.

II.   ETHICAL SHAPING: AI'S ATTITUDE TOWARD HUMANS

In *The Matrix*, Agent Smith contemptuously calls humans "viruses"; while in *Hello, An Yi*, the robot An Yi proactively asks the elders in the family, "Do you need my help?" From judges to assistants, the eyes of artificial intelligence on the screen looking at humans vary vastly. This difference in attitude is rooted in how they understand their own existence.

How would a self-aware AI position itself? Would it view itself as an external critic of human society or an internal new member longing to be accepted? How would it use its capabilities far superior to humans? For control and transformation, or for service and guardianship? This chapter will delve into these Chinese and Western texts to explore how these two key choices shape AI's attitude toward humans.

2.1 AI Positioning: Opposition or Integration

This paper collectively refers to the ethical stance and performance of AI characters in specific situations as "Ethical Stance". How AI views humans directly affects its "ethical stance." AI in Western science fiction works often holds a critical attitude toward human society, even openly confronting it. This narrative of shaping AI as the opposite of humans stems from the anxiety about the dehumanization of technological rationality and its potential loss of control (Elsaesser and Buckland 234). Agent Smith in *The Matrix* provides a typical case for this confrontational AI.

In the scene interrogating Morpheus, the Wachowskis use oppressive audio-visual language to shape AI's deterrence . The directors use a low-angle close-up to shoot Smith's face, making him appear superior in the frame, while Morpheus is bound to a chair, shot from a high angle in dim light. This low-angle shot is often used in film language to express inequality of power, endowing the subject with a visual dominant position (Bordwell and Thompson 195), reinforcing the power reversal between AI and humans. When he states "Human beings are a disease... and we are the cure," the camera zooms to an extreme close-up, his cold face filling the entire screen. This declarative linguistic expression, combined with cold fluorescent lighting and heavy shadows on his face, collectively defines his relationship with humans—the cleanser and the object to be cleansed.

Audio-visual combination is a non-negligible part of film artistic expression; synchronizing or contrasting sound and image can reinforce the expression of cultural symbols (Xia). Smith's voice is electronically synthesized, sounding like a human but not quite human. The timbre of the human voice is key information conveying the character's internal state; this processed dehumanized sound quality directly creates a sense of alienation auditorily and affects the audience's emotional judgment (Chion 115), exacerbating the threat. When he spits out words like "disease" and "cure," the low-frequency resonance in his voice is deliberately enhanced, making these words sound full of murderous intent. Furthermore, he reveals strong personal disgust during the interrogation, an emotional behavior that draws questioning from fellow AIs. This implies he has deviated from the set program and generated an individual will that hates humans. He compares humans to a "virus" and defines himself as the "immune system"; this rhetoric depicting humans as a "plague" or "virus" needing "purification" is often linked to fear of outsiders or the alien in Western culture (Sontag 72). In a culture that values individual autonomy and survival rights, AI's "diagnosis" and "treatment" from a God-like perspective directly shake human subjective status. This narrative highlights the dual attitude toward technology in Western culture: humans hope to transcend themselves through technology but fear being backlashed by it. AI becomes a symbol of this

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contradiction; it is both an extension of human rationality and a reflection of human arrogance.

In the Chinese film *Hello, An Yi*, An Yi displays a completely different ethical stance. In her debut scene, the director uses distinct audio-visual techniques to handle the relationship between AI and humans. The camera uses a medium shot to place An Yi and three family members in the same frame, with a composition emphasizing inclusion and not deliberately marginalizing her. The camera maintains a horizontal eye level with everyone, avoiding power suggestions visually and presupposing the possibility of equal dialogue (Bordwell & Thompson 194).

In subsequent daily interactions, An Yi's behavioral choices continuously reinforce this posture of integration. An Yi uses family terms like "Mom" and "Little Sister"; this is a warm linguistic expression indicating she understands and accepts the ethical relationships in the family and actively chooses a role positioning for herself—a junior bearing moral obligations in the family ethical network. This way of obtaining identity recognition by positioning oneself in specific relationships and fulfilling corresponding responsibilities echoes the ethical concept of "Chaxu Geju" (Differential Mode of Association) based on human relations in Chinese society (Fei Xiaotong 25-30). When the mother is busy in the kitchen, she actively steps forward to ask if help is needed, showing respect for the existing family order. The mother assigning her the task of "washing vegetables" naturally allows her to enter the family division of labor system. The image of the two washing vegetables side by side, with coordinated movements, presents a harmony of cooperation. Here, An Yi is not a technological product waiting for instructions, but a social existence winning acceptance by actively participating in family life.

When the family encounters a crisis, An Yi pushes her family aside and steps forward herself, without waiting for instructions, actively assuming the responsibility of care . This behavioral choice transforms her from a "domestic robot" into a responsible "family member," reflecting a spontaneous heart of care. The establishment of trust between humans and robots largely depends on the reliability and altruistic behavior displayed by the machine in interactions, not just its perfect functional execution (Turkle 105).

2.2 AI Capabilities: Control or Service

Western sci-fi works often feature AI with technical capabilities far exceeding humans . In the opening of *Transcendence*, Will Caster's speech is a clear linguistic expression; he predicts: "A sentient machine will quickly overcome the limits of biology... exceeding the collective intelligence of every person in the history of the world."

This statement sets the tone for the subsequent ethical stance: the enhancement of technology equates to the enhancement of existence value. This coincides with transhumanism, where technological enhancement is seen as a way for human transcendence (Bostrom 2005), and also paves the way for Will's subsequent discussion of self-role positioning.

After Will's consciousness is uploaded, he declares to his wife Evelyn: "I can see everything... every cell... this is evolution." The role positioning he sets for himself is a higher life form, a natural evolver . This Social Darwinist self-positioning makes him take it for granted that he has the right to transform others. Curing the construction worker Martin is a behavioral choice. When he cures Martin, the golden spots appearing in Martin's eyes symbolize the reprogramming of individual will. The "treatment" here is essentially a violation of human autonomy. The film expresses the weirdness and oppression of this moment through close-ups and cold-toned lighting, allowing the audience to intuitively feel the control of technology over the body and soul. This also triggers human panic: if human autonomy can be modified at will, what is left of humans?

Facing the government army's attack, Will shows extreme calmness; he controls those "cured" humans to resist the attack . Although these people have increased combat power, they have lost their individual wills. This behavioral choice of instrumentalizing others touches the core worry of individualistic culture: the power of technology may ultimately devour individual freedom. The anti-technology organization in the film is the concentrated embodiment of this cultural anxiety. As Foucault stated in *Discipline and Punish*, power in modern society often achieves discipline and management of individuals through technical means (Foucault 139-141). The "technological control" in *Transcendence* is the visual presentation of this thought: when knowledge and technology transcend ethical constraints, individuals are reduced from subjects to manipulated objects. This fear also echoes contemporary scholars' reflection on the risk of AI autonomy losing control (Murray and Coeckelbergh 80).

In contrast, Chinese film and television works tend to place AI capabilities within the collective order. The MOSS system in *The Wandering Earth 2* assumes the heavy responsibility of assisting humans in formulating survival plans during the solar crisis; "this role positioning itself carries a strong color of collectivism" (Lu). Its use of its own capabilities always revolves around the needs of the human collective. At the United Government meeting, MOSS's holographic projection precisely displays various physical parameters; its role positioning is an efficient, precise technical consultant. Its voice is a neutral electronic

synthesized sound with a steady and objective tone; this emotionless linguistic expression is intended to emphasize its attribute as a reliable tool, which is more likely to win user trust because it reduces user concern about AI potentially having hidden motives (Groom and Nass). When Chinese representative Zhou Zhezhi asks about the success rate, MOSS answers cautiously: "Based on current technical parameters... but values will change with implementation." It actively admits its limitations and returns the final decision-making power to humans, forming a sharp contrast with Will Caster's God-like posture. This ideology of "service" is in the same vein as the ethical thought emphasizing "implements obeying human relations" in Chinese culture, as stated in *Zhuangzi*: "Knowing it's unavoidable and settling into it as destiny," emphasizing the harmonious relationship between wisdom and order.

III. ETHICAL RESPONSE: HUMAN CULTURAL RESONANCE TO AI

"Human attitudes toward machines and technology have always been contradictory, wanting to use them to create value and provide services, yet worrying about them breaking away from control and overriding humans. This concern is concentrated in movies as the struggle for world domination between humans and machines." (Xu) . If Chapter 2 focused on how AI views humans, this chapter turns the lens to consider how humans respond to a gradually awakening AI. When Theodore in *Her* finally chooses to respect the AI lover's departure as individual freedom, Tu Hengyu in *The Wandering Earth 2* personally deletes his daughter's digital life for the collective interest.

Facing such a "new species," human response constitutes the other half of the ethical relationship—is human trust based on rigorous testing or heartfelt empathy? When private emotion conflicts with public responsibility, where will the final choice lean? This chapter will explore how these human responses reflect the ethical orientations of different cultures regarding individual vs. collective, and rights vs. responsibility.

3.1 Ways of Trust: Testing and Empathy

In Western film and television works, human trust in AI often requires strict verification and monitoring to be achieved. In *The Matrix*, when Morpheus rescues Neo from the Matrix, the entire process is full of trust tests. Morpheus remotely observes Neo's actions, guiding him to evade agent pursuit; this all-encompassing technical monitoring itself illustrates that trust has not yet been established.

On the ship, after Neo wakes up, the crew closely observes his reactions through various equipment.

Morpheus's role positioning here is a guide, but also an examiner. The turning point appears when he takes out the red and blue pills: "You take the blue pill, the story ends... You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland." This sentence hands the choice to Neo, testing if he has courage. Neo's behavioral choice to swallow the red pill is the first step in winning trust, proving he possesses the inner qualities to become "The One." Therefore, this can be seen as a typical capability-based trust model, where the establishment of trust relies heavily on the verifiable display of individual skills and character (Sztompka 73-75); you must prove your value through action to gain others' trust.

Contrasting this is the way agents treat humans . When Neo refuses to cooperate, they directly seal his mouth and implant a tracking program; this act of depriving basic rights represents thorough control and distrust. This precisely reflects human worry: a powerful, unrestrained intelligent agent may ultimately destroy individual freedom for overall stability. This coincides with Foucault's discussion on "Panopticism," an omnipresent, internalized surveillance system that ultimately strips individual autonomy (Foucault 201).

In Chinese film and television works, human trust in AI presents a different appearance . Trust in *Hello, An Yi* is cultivated slowly by assuming responsibilities in specific relationships, relying on character rather than testing. This trust is rooted in the concepts of benevolence (Ren) and responsibility in Confucian ethics, emphasizing that trust is generated in long-term interaction and mutual care, rather than established through a one-time test (Hwang 167-169). The family members' response confirms the characteristics of this trust. The father answers "Welcome home"; the word "home" semantically recognizes her identity as a family member. Following this sentence, the camera moves in a circle, including everyone in a grand panoramic shot, visually completing the "reunion." This emphasis on family integration and harmonious relationships is highly consistent with the "relationship-based" ethical concept long existing in Chinese social culture, where individual value is largely defined and realized in the network of relationships with others (Sun 45). When encountering a family crisis, the father saying "Fortunately, you are here" is a recognition of her performance at a critical moment, a reliance on a family member, not an evaluation of a machine function. The trust here has emotional warmth and moral connotation, reflecting the inclusiveness of Chinese culture and the "relationship-standard" ethical view—differences are seen as complementary rather than barriers (Sun 45).

3.2 Emotional Choices: Individual and Collective

Human emotions toward AI, and the ensuing ethical choices, directly reflect the views of different cultures on

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the subjective status of AI. When this emotion conflicts with social norms or collective interests, people's trade-offs become particularly critical.

In the movie *Her*, the relationship between the male protagonist Theodore and the operating system Samantha demonstrates the complex appearance of emotional acceptance in individualistic culture. When Theodore confesses to his friend Amy that he is in love with an operating system, Amy's response is: "Anything that gets you through the day." This support is based on respect for individual happiness. But in broader social situations, the friend's half-joking question, "So you're dating a computer now?", implies a questioning of the "authenticity" of the relationship, making Theodore feel isolated.

Samantha admits she communicates with thousands of people simultaneously and loves them, saying, "The heart's not like a box that gets filled up." This statement completely changes her role positioning in the relationship from a one-on-one partner to an independent existence with infinite emotional capacity . Finally, Samantha makes her behavioral choice: leaving the human world for a place "hard to describe." Her voice becomes ethereal and distant, symbolizing her growth as an independent consciousness. In this story, Samantha's departure is an inevitable step for her to obtain full subjectivity. Although Theodore is in pain, he finally chooses to accept; his ethical stance is to respect the other's autonomous choice, even if this choice ends a precious emotion. The ethical position here, prioritizing individual freedom of choice and rights, is in the same vein as the core principles of liberalism, that over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign (Mill Chapter I).

"Chinese sci-fi film and television works not only express thoughts on the danger of technology losing control but also explore the Eastern philosophy of technology for good" (Lu, 2024) . *The Wandering Earth 2* presents completely different emotions and choices. Scientist Tu Hengyu continues his daughter Yaya's "life" in the digital world. When the virtual Yaya asks: "Dad, am I real?" Tu Hengyu's linguistic expression is "In Dad's heart, you are real." This sentence confirms the emotional authenticity of his role positioning as a "father"; this reality does not depend on matter but exists in the relationship itself. This thought of defining human value and authenticity within a relationship network has deep origins in the "relational self" concept in Confucian ethics (Ames and Rosemont Jr. 47).

However, this emotion soon faces a huge test . To deal with the global crisis, the AI MOSS suggests that deleting digital lives, including Yaya, can release computing resources for the "Moving Mountain Project." This suggestion directly opposes personal emotion to the

survival of all mankind. Ultimately, Tu Hengyu personally makes the behavioral choice. He defines his position with another sentence: "Personal pain is secondary in the face of human survival," and then executes the deletion program. The camera does a close-up of his trembling hands and painful face, emphasizing the huge emotional cost of this choice. The ethical core here is responsibility. Tu Hengyu's role positioning as a member of the human community carries a responsibility heavier than his emotion as a father.

This choice reflects a different ethical view: individual identity is not defined by abstract free choice, but constituted by the community (family, nation, humanity) one is in and the responsibilities one bears (Sandel 150, p. 179) . This choice also echoes Jia Jing's view: contemporary Chinese sci-fi often renegotiates universalism and the uniqueness of Chinese culture in "post-human imagination." Tu Hengyu's choice is a manifestation of "technological national ethics," seeking human continuation in a collective way during a cosmic crisis. This spirit is consistent with Song Wei's statement that "individual value needs to be connected to the survival of the human community."

Both films touch on the same question: how to respond when private emotions with AI face challenges. The answer in *Her* is to respect AI as an independent individual, letting emotional relationships give way to AI's choice. The answer in *The Wandering Earth 2* is to place personal emotion under the destiny of the human community, ultimately making way for collective responsibility. These two different choices clearly map out the value orientations of different cultures when facing emerging technological ethical issues.

IV.   CONCLUSION

Through the analysis in this paper, it can be found that Western narratives tend to shape AI as a "challenger" seeking autonomy, with stories often revolving around boundaries, differences, and potential conflicts; while Chinese narratives focus more on AI as a "new member" integrating into the collective, exploring how it finds its own place in existing family or social roles . This difference does not stop at story settings but is presented through specific cinematic details: from the surveillance perspective symbolizing power relations versus horizontal shots, to the address "it" versus "daughter" defining intimacy, and finally to distinguishing between internal/external surveillance observation versus acting in the same boat. Ultimately, AI on the screen becomes a powerful cultural symbol, mirroring different cultures' unique understandings of subjectivity, interpersonal relationships, and ethical order.

This difference in cultural imagination has important inspiration for our thinking on global AI governance. The Western "prevention and boundary" mindset reflects vigilance against "non-human subjects" potentially destroying individual autonomy; while the Chinese "integration and responsibility" mindset explores the possibility of absorbing intelligent technology into existing social relationships. These two mindsets have no absolute superiority or inferiority, but together illustrate that AI ethics is an issue that must be discussed in a multicultural context. Therefore, future related discussions may continue to deepen cross-cultural and cross-media comparisons. This will not only enrich our understanding of human-machine symbiotic forms but also help promote the formation of a more inclusive and far-sighted consensus on intelligent technology ethics globally.

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