

Using films and television shows with a medical theme as a medium to accelerate the spread of medical humanities

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Summary

People have more visual experiences than ever before, and the same is true for situations in medicine. More mature films and television shows with a medical theme have been available over the past 20 years. In mainland China, the TV series "Angel Heart" has generated a wave of universal concern since it truly depicts the work of health care workers and it reflects the sharp distinction between doctors and patients to a certain extent. Riding this wave, many medical documentaries like *The Human World* have also been launched in China and have garnered sizable audiences. Such films and television shows with a medical theme strive to depict the lives of ordinary people. When watching these medical documentaries, audiences are able to better comprehend the work of health care workers in light of their life experiences and feelings towards current society. Audiences can gain a profound understanding of the medical humanities through films and television shows with a medical theme. We look forward to more such films and television shows with a medical theme that depict "hospitals-the realest place" on camera. Films and television shows with a medical theme can serve as a storytelling medium to accelerate the spread of medical humanities and to promote harmony among doctors, patients, and the public.

Keywords: Medical humanities, television programs, doctor-patient relationship

1. Introduction

According to one saying, "Modern life happens on the screen" (1). Nowadays, images have become an indispensable part of human life, and people have more visual experiences than ever before. In place of words, images have become a feature of contemporary culture, influencing our attitudes towards everything and changing our views on the world (2). The multi-dimensionality, vitality, and directness of images have a deep impact on all spheres of society. Looking at medical practices within the broad context of society and history, medicine has been shaped by social sciences and the humanities for only a century. People started using films and television programs to depict the medical community and society just 30 years ago. An outstanding television

program about medicine that successfully integrates medical topics, social values, and views on life will catch the eye of the public, providing a way for people from all walks of life to ponder upon social reality (3). People undoubtedly have an easier time understanding medical concepts and ideas conveyed by television programs, so those programs can overcome the barriers between different cultures and become a global language.

More mature films and television shows with a medical theme have become available over the past 20 years (Table 1). As a milestone in the field of medical TV shows, the American series *E.R.* has been continuously shown on TV for 15 years since its debut in 1994. The series *House M.D.* that debuted in 2004 and the series *Grey's Anatomy* that debuted in 2005 have also won public acclaim not only in the United States but also around the world.

In China, Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) launched the series *Healing Hands* in Hong Kong in 1998. The series called attention to the practices of medical personnel since it moved its audience through the emotions and feelings of its characters. Starting in 2012, the mainland TV series "Angel Heart" really generated a wave of universal concern in China (4) because of the

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Table 1. Television programs with a medical theme

No.	Program name	Genre	Number of episodes	Country	Debuted	Tagline	Website where the program can be viewed	Number of Clicks on that website
1	<i>The Human World</i>	Medical documentary	10	China	2016	Directly face this imperfect world.	www.iqiyi.com (Official link: www.kankanews.com/z/trenjianshi/index.shtml)	815 thousand (<i>Facing This Imperfect World</i>) 961 thousand (<i>Salvage on the Operation Table</i>) 606 thousand (<i>Persistence Originates from the Respect for Life</i>) 547 thousand (<i>A Mother-to-be with Cancer Faces Death</i>) 387 thousand (<i>Newborns, Pre-mature Infants, and Cesarean Sections</i>) 434 thousand (<i>Diseases Never Show Children Mercy</i>) 515 thousand (<i>A Tough Choice Regarding the Uterus</i>) 535 thousand (<i>Palliative Care and the Cycle of Life and Death</i>) 479 thousand (<i>The Difficulty of Receiving A Donated Organ</i>) 566 thousand (<i>Life Stories in Ambulances</i>)
2	<i>Come, My Child</i>	Medical documentary	13	China	2014	A heartwarming and extraordinary glimpse into the process of giving birth.	www.iqiyi.com	Total times played: 1.79 million; Score on the website: 8.5
3	<i>Fate of Life</i>	Medical documentary	5 seasons	China	2014	There is a kind of love called "never giving up".	www.youtu.com	Total times played (Season 1): 3,092,445; Score on the Website: 8.1. Total times played (Season 2): 8,640,088; Score on the Website: 8.9. Total times played (Season 3): 824,073; Score on the Website: 8.5. Total times played (Season 4): 13,985,386; Score on the Website: 9.2. Total times played (Season 5): 65,284; Score on the Website: 7.3.
4	<i>The Story in the ER</i>	Medical documentary	2 seasons	China	2014	Hospitals are the realest place.	www.youtu.com	Number of clicks: 241674; Score on the website: 8.0
5	<i>Healing Hands</i>	Fictional TV series	3	Hong Kong, China	1998	Real depictions of medical practitioners are shown. They face various relationship conflicts and save countless lives at work.	www.iqiyi.com	Number of clicks: 9,441 million; Score on the website: 9.4
6	<i>Angel Heart</i>	Novel/Fictional TV series	36	China	2002	Medical practitioners deal with life and death every day. Influenced by love, compassion, and morality, they experience all sorts of vicissitudes of life.	n.sohu.com	Number of clicks: 890 million; Score on the website: 9.0 (scored by 2,699,384 people)
7	<i>E.R.</i>	Fictional TV series	10 seasons	America	1999	Health is linked to disease while life is associated with death. This series depicts realistic and moving stories happening in the emergency room.	Official website: www.nbc.com/ER	
8	<i>House M.D.</i>	Fictional TV series	8 seasons	America	2004		Official website: www.fox.com/house	
9	<i>Grace's Anatomy</i>	Fictional TV series	13 seasons	America	2005	Personal relationships among a group of young medical interns and their progression and career challenges.	Official website: abc.go.com/primetime/greysanatomy/	

extent to which it truly reflects the work of health care workers and it reflects the sharp distinction between doctors and patients to a certain extent. Riding this wave, many medical documentaries have also been launched in China and have garnered sizable audiences, including *The Story in the ER* (2014), *Fate of Life* (2014), *Come, My Child* (2014) and *The Human World* (2016). Filmed in a hospital, *The Human World* focuses on the critical choices of doctors and patients in situations involving disease, life, and death. The documentary captures real scenes that are usually inaccessible to the public and it portrays the interactions between doctors and patients in a humane manner. Moreover, the documentary spurs public commentary and discussion. On *iqiyi.com*, the highest click volume of a single episode has reached 961,000, while the average click volume is about 580,000.

These medical TV programs have been well received because they attract the emotional interest of the public. Medical documentaries like *The Human World* accurately reflect the current medical environment and the doctor-patient relationship in China. Instead of focusing on serious medical incidents, *The Human World* opts for topics that are more familiar to the public, thus moving the audience and generating interest in the topic. Such films and television shows with a medical theme strive to depict the lives of ordinary people. When watching these medical documentaries, audiences are able to better comprehend the work of health care workers in light of their life experiences and feelings towards current society. Audiences can gain a profound understanding of the medical humanities throughout films and television shows with a medical theme.

2. Cultural recognition of the value of life

Confucius said, "Death will not be understood unless life itself is comprehended". A Taoist proverb says that "Life and death are all people's destiny". Views on life and death are a crucial part of a person's world view, outlook on life, and values. However, death profoundly disrupts values since those values crumble in the face of death. Chinese culture spares no effort to conceal death, and death has become a taboo in daily discourse. Most modern people encounter death only when a close relative dies.

The aforementioned medical TV programs look directly at life and death and extensively cover death in order to describe the possibilities, limits, and risks of medicine. Those programs also depict the concept that life is an accident while death is a must. One such scene can be found in *Grey's Anatomy*, where a patient is on the brink of death. Upon pronouncing the patient's death, Dr. Izzie whispers goodbye, saying "I know you've tried hard, so don't feel sad about it". In some sense, these medical TV programs make up for a shortcoming in Chinese culture by teaching views on life and death.

They also teach people to appreciate the joys of life and the serenity of death by depicting life through death, thus making them aware of their humanity.

3. A humanity that resonates beyond medicine

For many ordinary Chinese audiences, the experience of going to the hospital may involve "receiving a prescription full of professional terms and symbols and entering through the door of an operating room that is inaccessible to relatives". Medial expertise imbues doctors with mystery and it causes anxiety in patients (5-7). When patients place unrealistically high expectations on doctors, they are prone to overreact when faced with disappointment. Against a backdrop of escalating doctor-patient tension, *The Human World* enters the hospital, where it extensively documents the real doctor-patient relationship. Instead of selectively depicting successful cases to imply that man can conquer nature, the documentary presents both successes and failures in an attempt to place doctors and patients on even footing, revealing patients' hardships and yearning for life while revealing doctors' efforts and feelings of helplessness. *The Human World* also enhances people's comprehension of the essence of medical practice, which is "sometimes healing, often helping, and always comforting". The documentary encourages the public to recognize the possibilities and limits of modern medicine, prompting them to reflect on and be cognizant of the vicissitudes of life, thus helping to bridge the gap between doctors and patients.

4. Multi-channel media have combined forces to promote the spread of medical humanities

An outstanding TV program is not significant if it cannot be shared with people. Every medical TV program mentioned thus far has garnered recognition from both online media and mainstream media. With the support of various channels of communications, medical concepts can be propagated, doctors and patients can better understand each other, and medical humanities can begin to shine.

New media such as Weibo, WeChat, and video networks are becoming new means of disseminating content, and medical documentaries are using the same approach to attract audiences. Online media helped *The Human World* to become the latest Internet sensation in China in 2016. According to data from *douban.com* (an influential film critic website in China) (8), the documentary scores 9.6 out of 10, ranking first in documentaries of the same genre. Weibo posts regarding *The Human World* have sparked thousands of comments, and popular posts forwarded more than 100,000 times continually emerge on WeChat. As one netizen commented, "I was often moved to tears when watching this documentary. There are points that moved

me in every single episode. Though it makes me sad, I will stick to watching this documentary". As another netizen remarked, "There are people who are doing their jobs in hospitals. Many people have endeavored to tell us there are too many unknown stories in a city, too many gaps that medicine cannot fill in an emergency room, and too many interactions that people cannot engage in calmly".

In addition to the extensive attention from audiences and netizens, *The Human World* is also spoken highly of by Chinese authorities and mainstream media. Notices and proclamations have been made by officials from the Shanghai Municipal Government and the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CPC. According to these pronouncements, "A harmonious social atmosphere has a significant impact on further medical reform. *The Human World* looks directly at the limits and problems of medicine as well as sensational topics such as successes and failures of medical practices and life and death. This promotes a correct, objective, and comprehensive understanding of medicine and doctors by the public and it also helps enhance the professionalism of medical practitioners and give them hope. We hope that more programs like this are created to foster a harmonious atmosphere for further medical reform". Authorities have required that domestic media promote the documentary. A spot on the *News Network Show* on July 21, 2016 (9) described *The Human World* with the caption "The documentary *The Human World* has garnered extensive public attention". The spot featured remarks like "portraying the real doctor-patient relationship and presenting all aspects of life in a hospital" and "looking directly at problems with and limits of modern medicine as well as sensitive topics like life and death, and garnering considerable attention from the public". Quality coverage has also been provided by *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, *Wen Hui Bao*, *China Youth News*, *Beijing Youth Daily*, *Youth Travel*, *Southern Weekly*, *Xinhua Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, *Dazhong Daily*, *Xinmin Evening News*, *Qianjiang Evening News*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, *xinhuanet.com*, *thepaper.cn*, and *eastday.com*.

5. Using films and television shows with a medical theme as a medium to accelerate the spread of medical humanities

The launch of every successful medical TV program starts a public conversation on medicine and lays the foundation to reach a consensus. *The Human World* provides a bridge between doctors and patients and it fosters a better relationship between the two. The documentary was well crafted, as indicated by its veracious coverage and earnest depictions, just like computerized tomography equipment in a hospital. Although fictional, *E.R.* was a landmark among TV series with a medical theme. Every time a new season

was launched, audiences and netizens were drawn to it and discussed it passionately. Mainstream media highlighted and pondered over it, and it prompted emotions and pride among medical practitioners. An adaptation from a Chinese bestseller, *Angel Heart* has provided a pathway for communication between hospitals and patients. The Chinese documentary *The Story in the ER* motivates hospitals to open themselves to the public, while patients suffering from diseases are inspired to express their real emotions despite their fear over loss of privacy.

Television programs shape how people spend their time and they also shape the views of audience members. The American TV series *E.R.* and the Chinese documentary *The Human World* have provided successful models for TV programs with a medical theme to deal with topics and morals and to depict expressions of emotion. These programs provide examples of how a program should look and feel and how it can be disseminated. We look forward to more such films and television shows with a medical theme that depict "hospitals- the realest place" on camera. Films and television shows with a medical theme can serve as a storytelling medium to accelerate the spread of medical humanities and to promote harmony among doctors, patients, and the public.

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