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EDITED BY
Chonglong Gu,
Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hong Kong SAR, China

REVIEWED BY
Kangte Luo,
United International College, China
Guiqing Zheng,
Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hong Kong SAR, China

*CORRESPONDENCE
Hui Yang
✉ lanzhouyanghui@163.com
Bo Liu
✉ 55309730@qq.com

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A pilot study on the availability and reception of audio description in the Chinese mainland

Hui Yang^{1*}, Weiju Shen¹, Bo Liu^{2*} and Yi Wang²

¹School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou Jiaotong University, Lanzhou, China, ²Lanzhou Special Education School, Lanzhou, China

Introduction: Audio description (AD) is in its infancy in the Chinese mainland, both in terms of the provision of the service and as an academic object of study. In order to learn about the availability of AD and target audiences' reception of existing AD services in the Chinese mainland, we designed and carried out this study.

Methods: This paper first provides a brief overview of the availability of AD in the Chinese mainland and analyses difficulties encountered in its development. Then, it conducts a face-to-face questionnaire-based study on the reception of AD through a survey of 26 visually impaired persons.

Results and discussion: AD service in the Chinese mainland is only limited to movies and there is a big gap between supply and demand. AD practice is facing many difficulties such as copyright constraints, low quality of AD services, lack of professionals and insufficient theoretical research. Our empirical research shows that the participants are quite satisfied with the quality of existing AD services, although they do not have a high level of comprehension of movies. Over interpretation, revealing the plot, subjective speculations are common practices in AD services in the Chinese mainland but are applauded by the participants for which helps them to understand the film.

KEYWORDS

audio description, availability, reception, visually impaired, the Chinese mainland

1. Introduction

China is the country with the highest number of citizens with disabilities in the world. According to the data released by the China Disabled Persons' Federation, the total number of persons with disabilities in China was 85.02 million at the end of 2010, of which 12.63 million were people with visual impairments (CDPF, 2012). Currently, there is no official update on the data of persons with disabilities, but it is safe to conclude that with the natural population growth and the increase of the elderly in Chinese mainland, the number of the visually impaired is increasing, for sight loss is closely related to old age. "Vision impairment in the elderly has increasingly become a global public health and social problem. With the full arrival of China's aging population, the number and proportion of the elderly population with blindness or low vision problems will continue to increase" (Lu and Wang, 2018). "In the past 20 years (from 2000 to 2020), the elderly population has increased by 103.15% in the Chinese mainland" (Zhang and Yang, 2023).

It is quite inconvenient for people with visual disabilities to go out in the Chinese mainland, therefore television, mobile phones and computers have become the most important means for them to obtain information and participate in cultural activities. It is reported that "among the surveyed visually impaired, 30% of the visually impaired people stayed at home because of their vision limitations; 46% needed to be accompanied by family member or friends when they went out, and only 24% were able to go out without being accompanied" (CAPA, 2016).

Although China has achieved certain achievements in the construction of information accessibility for the visually impaired groups, the fact remains that the blind and partially sighted are not anywhere near their sighted counterparts when it comes to the access to information, especially to the audio-visual media. The government has not made specific regulations on the AD in the film and television industry (Yan and Luo, 2019). The needs of

the visually impaired for TV are still ignored and there is not any AD service in TV programs. The public has low awareness of the visually impaired people and AD services. Wu and Xie (2015) conducted a questionnaire survey on the public awareness of the visually impaired people and the awareness of AD services in China. Only 20.62% of the respondents said they had concerns about the visually impaired, while 88.75% of the respondents said they did not have any idea about AD services.

In order to provide an overview picture of AD services in the Chinese mainland and to survey the audience's reception of AD services, this paper first gives a brief overview of the practice of AD in the Chinese mainland and analyses difficulties encountered in its development. Then, it conducts a face-to-face questionnaire-based study on the reception of AD. It should be noted that the AD services in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau are different, and the AD services described in this article do not include that in the above regions.

2. Audio description in the Chinese mainland

The practice of AD in the Chinese mainland started in the early 21st century and has made some achievements, but at the same time the development is facing many difficulties. This section reviews the history and current state of AD practice in the Chinese mainland and analyzes difficulties encountered in its development.

2.1. Practice of audio description in the Chinese mainland

The practice of AD has a long history worldwide. The first appearance of AD can be traced to the early decades of the last century. As Fryer (2016) reported, recent research in the RNIB archives unveiled that in 1917, British soldiers blinded during World War One were offered a verbal account of a documentary film about Scott's expedition to the Antarctic region and that experiments with descriptions of theater performances had already been done. Orero (2007) stated that the first audio-described films in Spain had appeared in the mid-1940s, even before Spanish public television began its broadcast. In the USA, the broadcasting station WGBH in Boston started its descriptive video service in 1987 (Fryer, 2016). Di Giovanni (2018) introduced that audio-described TV programs began to flourish worldwide in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The origin of AD practice in the Chinese mainland can be traced to the "self-entertainment" of some blinds in 2003. They tried to give a simple description of films in the online classroom run by the Chinese Braille Press, which was applauded by other blind persons (Duanmu, 2013). Scaled and organized AD services were initially provided by Beijing Hongdandan Education and Cultural Exchange Center (Fu, 2014). In May 2005, Wang Weili, the founder of Beijing Hongdandan Education and Cultural Exchange Center, established the Chinese mainland's first cinema for the blind in Gulou West Street, Beijing. It was named "Mind Cinema" and was dedicated to providing AD services for the visually impaired. "In the past 14 years, 'Mind Cinema' has provided nearly 800 films for the blind in Beijing, more than 20,000 blind persons benefited and more than 7,000 volunteers participated (Qianlong News, 2018)."

On April 23, 2009, the first DVD version of the AD film *Turning Point 1977* premiered at the Shanghai Library. On the same day, Shanghai Disabled Persons' Federation, Shanghai Library, and Shanghai Film Critics Association jointly established the nation's first accessible film studio. Marked by the premiere of the accessible film *Turning Point 1977* and the establishment of the accessible film studio, China's accessible film industry started officially (Pan and Li, 2013).

Up to now, AD services in the Chinese mainland are still only limited to films and there are mainly three types of projects of AD practice: (1) government projects; (2) non-profit organization projects; and (3) training projects;

- 1) Government projects are supported by the government and carried out by relevant professional institutions. The participating government agencies are Disabled Persons Federation, Radio and Television Administration, Administration of Press and Publication, Department of Culture and Copyright Administration. The participating professional organizations are radio and television stations, audiovisual publishers and public libraries. The China Accessible Film Project is a typical government project. The project, funded by the National Publishing Fund and undertaken by China Braille Press and Shanghai Audio-Visual Publishing House, aims to provide AD for the visually impaired, as well as subtitles and sign language interpretation for the hearing impaired. By the end of 2019, the project had published 440 accessible movies, which were donated or sold to public libraries, disabled federations and special schools. The relevant institutions then provide borrowing or viewing services to the visually impaired for free.
- 2) Non-profit organization project. There are some projects run by non-profit organizations, such as "Mind Cinema Project." As mentioned above, the project, run by the non-profit organization Beijing Hongdandan Education and Cultural Exchange Center, provides live AD services as well as recorded AD products services. The live AD service has been extended to more than 20 cities across the country, and the AD products have covered 101 blind schools nationwide, allowing blind students at school to watch AD movies regularly. Its AD products are also distributed to the visually impaired nationwide by DVD, radio, and internet.
- 3) Training projects. Audio describers are crucial to providing this accessibility service, but the Chinese mainland lacks unified training and standards that ensure the quality of their work. But some institutions also offer in-house training whiling providing AD services. For example, for teaching and research purpose, the Communication University of China runs the "Bright Cinema project." In 2018 the Communication University of China and Beijing Gehua CATV Network Limited Company jointly launched the Bright Cinema Project, which attempts to establish a "communication system from the theater to the community and families, from off-line to online, from traditional radio broadcasting to modern networks" (Gao and Chen, 2019). In 2019, the Bright Cinema Project team produced 104 AD movies and donated them to the blind associations in 10 provinces and 19 blind schools nationwide (Niu, 2019). The Bright Cinema Project plans to produce 104 AD films each year, which will give the visually

impaired the opportunity to enjoy two films a week. “In the process of barrier-free film production and dissemination, the training received by students is comprehensive, including text interpretation, audiovisual language training, and interview research practice” (Niu and Liu, 2021). Some Companies and NGOs such as Zhongshan Library, China Braille Press and Beijing Hongdandan Education and Cultural Exchange Center also conduct in-house AD training projects. Some “cities such as Guangzhou have already consulted foreign guidelines and AD books and have shown interest in learning how AD issues have been tackled in the West” (Tor-Carroggio and Rovira-Esteva, 2019).

At present, the visually impaired in the Chinese mainland can enjoy barrier-free movies in three modes. The first is the “live mode,” which is mainly provided in accessible cinemas, public libraries, special education schools and some communities in big cities. The second is the “recorded mode,” which means to enjoy movies by recorded AD movies. The third is the “accessible channel mode,” which first appeared in Shanghai in 2020. In accessible channel mode, the visually impaired use the wireless headphones with AD channels to enjoy movies with sighted audience. The first “Accessible Channel” was put into use in Shanghai on January 6, 2020, in 50 barrier-free cinemas (CNS, 2020).

2.2. Main problems of the practice of audio description in the Chinese mainland

The AD practice has made some achievements in the Chinese mainland, but at the same time the development is facing many difficulties, which are mainly in the following four aspects:

1) Due to copyright restrictions, it is difficult to get the source movies to make AD.

The Marrakesh Treaty was adopted on June 27, 2013 in Marrakesh and it forms part of the body of international copyright treaties administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization. China signed treaty as a contracting party in 2013. Compared with the requirements of the Treaty and the legislation and practices of other countries, China lags behind in its implementation. For example, the works that can be provided without the permission of the copyright owner are limited to literary works, excluding film and television dramas and other works; the beneficiary is only limited to “blind people,” excluding other visually impaired groups; the format of the accessible version is limited to braille, excluding audio description or other forms, etc. Movies and TV series released in the Chinese mainland have no accessible versions; therefore, making AD and playing them online or off-line without the permission of the copyright owner will infringe the copyright owner’s rights. The good news is that “the Marrakesh Treaty officially entered into force in China on May 5, 2022. Combined with the requirements of the Marrakesh Treaty and the actual needs of China, the Copyright Law of the People’s Republic of China and the Regulations for the Implementation of the Copyright Law of the People’s Republic of China need to add corresponding provisions to achieve a balance between the rights of the visually impaired and the rights of copyright owners” (Jiang, 2022). It will still take some time. Most of the

organizations that provide AD services in the Chinese mainland are non-profit organizations or volunteers. Some projects have received financial support from the government or some funds; however, compared with the cost of buying the copyright, the support funds obtained are still quite small. The copyright of most of the published AD movies in the Chinese mainland is donated by copyright parties for free; others are old movies that exceed copyright restrictions.

2) The quality of AD services is far from satisfactory.

Partly due to the lack of professional staff and unified AD guidelines, the quality of AD services is far from satisfactory.

“Audio description is an extremely valuable tool that allows for the restoration of agency in the enjoyment of films and audiovisual texts by the blind and partially sighted: translating iconic signs into verbal sequences and combining them with the film’s soundtrack aims to provide the sensory impaired with the elements they need to form their own interpretation and reception of a film” (Di Giovanni, 2014). The creation of AD entails the collaboration of several professionals: audio describers, voice talents or voice actors, sound technicians and, ideally, blind consultants. In the Chinese mainland, although some professionals participated, most of the people engaged in AD services are part-time, amateur volunteers. Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost (2020) provided a profile of audio describers in China: “An overwhelming majority of those audio describing are volunteers aged 20–50, and most have a university education background which is not related to Audiovisual Translation. They come from a varied professional background, most have only been audio describing for a few years, they lack formal training in audio description and mainly audio describe films in Standard Chinese.”

Over the years, some countries have developed their AD standards or guidelines. Such as United Kingdom, ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description, published by the Independent Television Commission in May 2000; USA, Audio Description Standards, published by the American Council of the Blind in 2009; Australia, Audio Description Background Paper, published by Media Access Australia in September 2010—all these guidelines discuss the same categories of information, namely “what to describe,” “how to describe,” “when to describe” and more or less individual specific issues. In the Chinese mainland, there is no official, unified comprehensive guideline for AD so far, but there are unpublished in-house AD guidelines that mainly serve for training purposes among different AD providers. Among the published literature on AD, there is only one paper by Luo (2019) that urges public libraries to establish AD guidelines based on the principles of “accurate, objective, and interpreting appropriately.”

Partly due to the lack of unified AD guidelines, the AD services in the Chinese mainland show great differences in “what to describe” and “how to describe.” In the practice of AD in the Chinese mainland, telling the storyline, revealing the plot in advance, interpreting the characters subjectively, evaluating the movies, over describing and subjective explanations are common phenomena.

3) The available AD resources are insufficient and the distribution is uneven.

Although great progress has been made in recent years, the available AD resources are quite insufficient. The two largest scale production projects are the China Accessible Film Project and the

Bright Cinema Project. By the end of 2019, only about 700 films in total had been produced by these projects, which are incomparable with the films or TV programs produced every year in China: in 2018 alone, China produced 1,082 films, imported 109 films and produced 3,577,444 hours of TV programs (data source, National Bureau of Statistics).

Due to the imbalance of socio-economic development, the distribution of AD resources is uneven. AD services are mainly in the eastern region, while the number of the visually impaired in the western region is three times that of in the eastern region (CDPE, 2007); AD services are mainly provided in large cities, while the number of visually impaired in urban areas is only one-third of that in rural areas (CDPE, 2007).

4) Theoretical research is quite poor.

In the Chinese mainland, theoretical research on AD is quite poor and the practice of AD is lack of theoretical research and guidance. Since AD research is in its infancy and the AD service in the Chinese mainland is only limited to film, different terms are used to refer to AD: “accessible films (无障碍电影),” in which theoretically subtitles for deaf and hard of hearing and sign language interpretation are also added, “film description (口述电影)” and “image description (口述影像).” Some documents even equated AD with accessible films. For example, Pan and Li (2013) believe that “films are the most important component of audio description, so in the narrow sense, accessible films can be equated with audio description.” Luo (2019) argues that “accessible film is a branch of audio description. From the perspective of the scope of application, the concept of the accessible film is in the category of audio description.” Jiang Hongyuan, the founder and initiator of accessible films in the Chinese mainland, believes that “the so-called accessible film is to fit the descriptions of a film’s visual elements, characters, and plot into natural pauses in the film’s dialogue so that the visually impaired can understand movies with the help of descriptions” (Zeng, 2012).

Since many documents equate accessible films with AD in the Chinese mainland, the authors searched CNKI with “accessible film” and “AD” as keywords, excluding policy reports, there have been only 30 relevant papers since 2010. Papers before 2015 focused on the terminology and current situation of AD, and since 2019, scholars have focused on diversified issues, mainly reflected in the research of practice process, text analysis, accessibility, policies and regulations. While in developed countries in Europe and the United States, since the 1940s, scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth research on AD from multidisciplinary perspectives, namely translation studies, linguistics and semiotics, film studies, media studies, cultural studies, psychology, technology and etc.

3. A questionnaire-based research on reception of existing AD in the Chinese mainland

Szymańska and Zabrocka (2015) state that “Audio describers strive to objectively describe the picture, rather than provide their interpretation of it.” Łukasz (2016) states that “Common errors in the audio description include over interpretation, revealing the plot and using complex structures or compound sentences.” In the Chinese mainland’s existing AD services, these standards are not

strictly adhered to. Over interpretation, revealing the plot, subjective speculations are common practice. In order to learn about the target audiences’ reception of existing AD services in the Chinese mainland, we designed and carried out a reception study. This section focuses on the design and results of the study.

3.1. Previous research

What to describe, how to describe and when to describe are the focus of AD reception studies. The question when to describe is easily answered: between lines of dialogue and “never talk over dialogue or commentary” (ITC, 2000). What-to-describe strand gathers studies mainly focusing on linguistico-semantic priorities and characters’ descriptions. The quest for objectivity (Salway, 2007), the description of facial expressions (Di Giovanni, 2014) and AD guidelines (Orero, 2005; Vercauteren, 2007; RNIB, 2010; Mazur and Chmiel, 2012; Bittner, 2015) have been widely discussed by scholars. As regards the amount of what AD should cover, many guidelines are in line with Snyder’s (2008) phrase “the visual made verbal” and “describers must use as few words as possible to convey that visual image for the benefit of people” and Clark’s (2007) catchy reminder: “describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe.” Guidelines instruct the audio describer to “describe what is there” (ITC, 2000) or to “describe what you see” (ACB, 2009). As regards how to describe, in general, the AD narrator is supposed to be neutral, objective, and self-effacing. The style of AD should be factual, not interpretive; describing what can actually be seen without inferring any moods or attitudes (Bittner, 2015). The language used for AD should be clear and precise. “Clear and precise language is crucial to any good description. The description should be vivid and particularized” (ACB, 2009).

The reception study of AD in the Chinese mainland is still in its infancy and the literature mentioning it is very limited. Xiao and Dong (2020) compared artificial-voice AD with human-voice AD through an experiment and survey on visually impaired people in Shanghai, and found that Chinese visually impaired people preferred human over artificial voices. Shen and Lei (2021) illustrated some AD interpreting skills based on practical operation of the Hangzhou barrier-free film project. Zhang et al. (2000) used case studies, questionnaire surveys and interviews to understand how AD movies help the visually impaired audience have an equal experience as people without visual impairments. Wang and Wang (2020) discussed issues like the transformation between rhetoric of videos and texts, the preservation of forms and styles of the original films. There have been also some recent efforts to take a comprehensive snapshot of AD in China by scholars outside china. Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost (2020) have drawn the profile of Chinese audio describers. Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020) has investigated Chinese users’ satisfaction and experience with AD. Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020) have compared the Chinese situation in terms of guidelines to that of Europe.

3.2. Research questions

In order to learn about the reception of existing AD by the visually impaired in the Chinese mainland, we designed this research focusing on the following five questions:

- 1) What the participants' general viewing habits and preferences as well as their experience with audio description are;
- 2) What the participants' opinions on the common practice at the beginning of Chinese barrier-free movies are;
- 3) What the participants' opinions on the subjective interpretations are;
- 4) How satisfied the participants toward the AD currently delivered are;
- 5) What their needs of AD are.

3.3. Participants

In order to facilitate the face-to-face questionnaire-based interview, we only recruited participants from Lanzhou City, where the authors of this article work. Participants were recruited *via* Lanzhou Special Education School, Lanzhou Association of the Blind, Lanzhou Disabled persons Federation and Lanzhou Public Library. Although we only recruited 26 volunteers, the heterogeneity of the blind population was represented in our experimental groups.

The participants aged 13–68 (mean age = 30 years, SD = 19.90; male = 16). Fifteen participants (57.69%) were blind (10 congenital, five acquired) with little or no light perception. Eleven participants (42.31%) had low vision and, although they had some residual vision, were not able to make out detailed images on screen. Fifteen were school student (12 junior high school students, three vocational high school students). Among the 11 non-students, seven had elementary school education and four had university education. The participants were informed about confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. All participants gave written consent.

3.4. Research design

This reception study was in the form of a face-to-face questionnaire-based interview. Each participant had a volunteer to assist in completing the questionnaire and interview. The volunteers read questionnaires to the participants and gathered their responses by mobile phone recorder. In order to prevent participants from learning from each other's answers and compare the impact of different versions of AD (subjective vs. objective) on understanding, participants were randomly divided into 4 groups. Each group participated in the experiment separately in an audio-visual classroom. Their seats were far enough away that they wouldn't hear each other's answers.

The study consisted of five parts and lasted ~150 min. After completing the first four parts, we had a 20-min tea break.

The first part questionnaire was aimed at eliciting general information about the respondents, such as age, gender, education, type of visual impairment, general viewing habits and preferences and prior experience with AD.

In the second part, we aimed at gathering the participants' opinions on the common practice of AD at the beginning of the barrier-free movies in the Chinese mainland. An AD clip from the very beginning of *Wolf Totem* (2015) was showed to the participants. The AD clip includes introducing cast information and production background, evaluating the movie, telling the storyline, etc. After watching the clip, all participants were asked whether the content

described in the clip was necessary. They were also asked to explain the reasons behind their choice and to rate in a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat satisfied and 5 = very satisfied).

In the third part, we aimed at gathering participants' opinions on subjective interpretation and testing whether subjective interpretations improve the audience's comprehension of the movie. We showed participants two different AD versions of the same clip from *Waterloo Bridge* (1940). One is the original AD version produced by China Accessible Film Project, relatively subjective, and the other is the test version made by our research team, relatively objective. In this study, we only examined subjectivity and objectivity at the word level. During the production process of the test version, we imitated the original oral delivery styles. In the first step, we showed the subjective version to the first and second groups and the objective version to the third and fourth groups. Then all the participants were asked five multiple-choice comprehension questions to test their understanding. In the second step, we showed the other version clip they didn't watch to each group. After watching the two clips, they were asked to choose whether they preferred the subjective version or the objective version and to explain the reasons behind their choice. They were also asked to rate each version in a 5-point Likert scale.

In the fourth part, participants were told to enjoy a full movie as usual, but there would be 10 comprehension questions afterwards. After the participants watched the whole movie *Son of the Stars* (2012), which all participants reported they had not watched, we used a 5-point Likert scale to survey their satisfaction with AD of *Son of the Stars* and designed 10 multiple choice questions concerning the plot and character image (characteristics, appearance, etc.) of the movie to test their comprehension.

Finally open-ended questions were asked to collect their needs for AD in a free and relaxing environment.

3.5. Research results and discussion

1) Participants' general viewing habits and preferences

Regarding the most commonly used medium for watching audiovisual programmes or films, 11 chose smart phone, 10 chose TV, five chose computer, no one chose DVD or cinema, which showed that smart phone and TV played a very important role in their lives. When asked about how they watched audiovisual programmes or films without AD, all of them reported they just tried to pick up as much as they could from the sound of the film or programme, and if possible, they asked someone to assist them by explaining what happened on the screen. When asked how much time they spent daily on watching audiovisual programme or films, four reported less than an hour, 13 reported 1–3 hours and nine reported more than 3 hours. When asked what kind of movies they liked the most (they were able to choose three of the eight types presented), the top three they chose were romantic films (80.77%), comedies (73.08%), and action films (65.38%), followed by sci-fi, suspense, war, history and terror. 80.77% of the respondents said they preferred to watch domestic movies and 88.46% preferred to watch the latest movies or movies within 5 years.

This survey results showed there was a big gap between the existing AD service and participants' general viewing habits and

preferences. They often watch TV, but there is no AD service on TV. The existing AD services do not meet their viewing habits and preferences well in terms of film genre and release year. This study did an analysis of the release date and film genre of 440 films released by China Accessible Film Project. The comedy films only occupy 15.2%, and romantic films and action films occupy 21.4 and 16.5%, respectively. The latest films and the films within 5 years only occupy 8.4%. As mentioned above, due to copyright restrictions, it is difficult to get the source movies to make AD. The publishers of AD admit that many films involve several copyright owners, and it takes a lot of trouble to find and communicate one by one (Li, 2020). They wish to publish and distribute movies that are popular with audiences, but they often fail to obtain the copyright.

2) Participants' experience with AD

Regarding whether participants were aware of the existence of audio described movies or barrier-free movies, 88.46% of the respondents claimed to know about it and have used it, whereas three participants (11.54%) admitted they did not know. Those who answered "no" in this question were asked to stop answering the questions in this part. When asked about how they came to know about this service, 16 revealed that they had learned about it through school, three through blind associations, two through public library, and two through family or friends. When asked about how often they watch barrier-free movies, 15 (all of them were school students) reported that they watched more than once a week, because the school showed barrier-free movies once a week or more. Six reported 1–3 times a month and two reported once more than a month.

3) Participants' opinion on the common practice of AD at the beginning of the movie

After watching the AD clip from the very beginning of *Wolf Totem*, participants first rated the degree of their satisfaction with this description in a 5-point Likert scale. It was observed that the participants were quite satisfied with the quality of the audio description (mean = 3.79, SD = 0.95).

Regarding whether it is necessary to provide cast information, 80.77% of the participants thought it was necessary. We summarized and sorted out their reasons, they are: (1) we just want to know the cast and crew information; (2) when talking with friends with normal vision about movies and movie actors, we will have something in common; (3) if there are directors or actors that we like or are familiar with, it will increase our interest in watching. Two participants who thought it was unnecessary to provide cast information said that what was important was the plot of the movie and it didn't matter who played it.

Regarding whether it is necessary to introduce the production background (money and time spent on shooting, main shooting locations, whether it is a literary adaptation/true story or not, etc.), 76.92% of the participants thought it was necessary. The reasons given by them are: (1) it gives us more additional necessary information; (2) it helps us comprehend the movie. The reasons given by participants who thought it was unnecessary are: (1) the information has nothing to do with understanding the movie; (2)

I am not interested in this information; (3) I feel overwhelmed by that information.

Regarding whether it is necessary to evaluate the movie at the beginning of the movie, most (69.23%) thought it was necessary. The reasons given by them are: (1) high rating of the movie can increase our viewing interest; (2) I just want to know whether other people's opinions of the movie are the same as mine. Participants who thought it was unnecessary said: (1) I wanted to evaluate the movie myself; (2) It would be better to evaluate the movie at the end of the movie.

One of the main points of this test was to gather their opinions on telling the storyline at the beginning of the movie. 73.08% of participants thought it was necessary. The reasons they gave were surprisingly consistent: it made the film easier to follow and made them more eager to watch the film.

Participants opposed to telling the story in advance thought that it gave away too much information and weakened the appeal of the movie. It is worth noting that four of the seven participants who opposed to telling the storyline in advance are non-congenital blind. They believed that based on AD and the original movie's dialogue, it's not difficult to understand the movie's story. One participant said that even without AD, he could understand the main plot of a movie, although he couldn't get a lot of details.

4) Participants' opinions on subjective and objective descriptions

We showed participants 2 different AD versions of the same clip from *Waterloo Bridge* (Table 1) to gather their preferences and test the impact of different versions on comprehension.

In the first step, the first two groups watched the subjective version and the second two groups watched the objective version. After watching the clips, the participants were asked to answer five multiple-choice comprehension questions. The comprehension questions are: (1) why does Roy keep looking around on the platform? (2) How does Roy feel when looking around on the platform? (3) Why did Roy lean out the window after getting on the train? (4) How does Mara feel when staring at the departing train? (5) Did they meet at the station? The results showed that the scores of the two groups were similar (total five points, subjective version: mean = 3.21, SD = 1.19; objective version: mean = 3.17, SD = 1.03). We did not find strong relevance that subjective description was more effective than objective description in improving participants' comprehension of the movie.

In the second step, each group watched the other unwatched version. After watching the clips, participants were asked to choose whether they preferred the subjective or objective version, and give reasons for their choice. Then they were asked to rate the degree of their satisfaction with each AD version in a 5-point Likert scale. Although the rating scores varied slightly (subjective version: mean = 4.17, SD = 0.66; objective version: mean = 4.08, SD = 0.78), most participants (69.23%) reported they preferred the subjective version and said that subjective description: (1) made the film easier to follow; (2) provided much more additional information and helped me comprehend the movie better; (3) confirmed my understanding of the movie; (4) helped bring the film to life; (5) made me feel I watch movies like people with normal eyesight. The participants who preferred objective descriptions said that subjective descriptions: (1)

TABLE 1 Subjective vs. objective description clips from *Waterloo Bridge*.

| Context: On the night before the wedding of Mara and Roy, when Mara was preparing to go to the theater to perform, she received a call from Roy saying that the army order had been changed and he had to go to Waterloo station to set off immediately. | |
|---|---|
| Original version (subjective) | Test version (objective) |
| Mara hangs up the phone anxiously and walks out the door. In order to bid farewell to his beloved, Mara gives up the performance and rushes to the station regardless of the consequences . The clock at London Waterloo Station shows 9:28. Roy is looking around on the platform, anxiously waiting for Mara's arrival . The departure whistle keeps ringing, and helpless Roy has no choice but to board the departure train. After getting on the train, Roy still leans out the window and looks anxiously toward the entrance, looking forward to the appearance of Mara . The train starts. Mara rushes through the gate of the station and runs toward the train. She squeezes away from the crowd. At this moment, Roy saw Mara, but the train runs farther and farther away from the station. The two young people in love separated before they could say goodbye to each other . Mara stares at the beloved far away, sadness filling her eyes. In the morning they were still sweet, affectionate, and romantic, but at this moment their hearts are filled with sadness of parting | With a sad face, Mara hangs up the phone anxiously and walks out the door. Mara rushes to the station. The clock at London Waterloo Station shows 9:28. Roy is looking around on the platform anxiously. The departure whistle keeps ringing. Roy boards the departure train. After getting on the train, Roy still leans out the window and looks anxiously toward the entrance. The train starts. Mara rushes through the gate of the station and runs toward the train. She squeezes away from the crowd. At this moment, Roy saw Mara, but the train runs farther and farther away from the station. Mara stares at running train, sadness filling her eyes |

The above AD is originally in Chinese, and the authors have translated it into English when writing this article.

gave away too much information; (2) told me things I could find out for myself; (3) weakened the charm of the movie.

5) **Participants' comprehension of the whole movie and satisfaction with the AD**

After the participants watched the whole movie *Son of the Stars*, they were asked to rate the degree of their satisfaction with the AD in a 5-point Likert scale and to answer 10 multiple-choice comprehension questions related to the plot and character image (characteristics, appearance, etc.). The test results showed that the level of understanding and appreciation of the film *Son of the Stars* was relatively low (total score = 10 points, Mean = 4.76, SD = 1.77). However, they rated a high score for the quality of AD (mean = 4.40, SD = 0.65).

We did further interviews on why they were satisfied with the AD service. We classified and summarized the main responses: (1) the AD added so much more and let me know that previously I hadn't really understood what was happening; (2) the AD saved having to ask questions about what is happening. (3) AD did help me understand more; (4) this was the first time I watched it, so I liked it.

We specially compiled the answers of the three participants who watched AD for the first time and found that they were very satisfied with AD. One of them said "I didn't know blind people could watch movies like this. It's amazing. I'm very, very excited." The findings are in line with Zhao's previous findings. "Respondents who have not been in contact with AD of movies are more likely to experience

the spiritual and cultural satisfaction that the AD film brings" (Zhao, 2019).

This research shows that the participants are highly satisfied with the quality of current AD service, which is consistent with the previous research done by other scholars. In 2018, *Tor-Carroggio and Rovira-Esteva (2019)* did a research on how satisfied are users toward the AD that is currently delivered in China. They concluded that "elderly persons with little or no education and who are already retired seem to be the users that most attend AD sessions in Shanghai and Beijing and users are satisfied with the service provided so far." In 2019, Zhao Xijing surveyed 187 students from the 19 blind schools nationwide and conducted a quantitative analysis. The results show that "Most of the interviewees who have enjoyed AD of movies rate it highly; 56.6% of these respondents report they have a basic understanding of the content of accessible movies, 32.9% of the respondents believe with the help of AD, they can fully understand the content of the film" (Zhao, 2019).

6) **Participants' needs and expectations for AD**

In the last part, open-ended questions were asked to allow participants to make any remarks they thought were appropriate. First, their suggestions mainly focused on quantity rather than quality. Many participants said that more AD movies or TV programs should be provided. Second, they wanted to be able to enjoy the latest and most popular movies. Third, some respondents thought that AD movies needed to be screened more often and better publicized so that more users could benefit from them. Fourth, some participants thought that if possible, TV stations should provide AD services.

7) **Why the current practice of AD in the Chinese mainland is quite different from the norms widely accepted by developed countries?**

Over interpretation, revealing the plot, subjective speculations are common practices in AD services in the Chinese mainland, which is quite different from the norms widely accepted by developed countries.

The audience's low level of education and poor cultural life may explain why the current practice of AD in the Chinese mainland is quite different. According to the statistics from China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF, 2014), in 2013, 27.3% of school-age disabled children did not receive compulsory education; 74.3 % of disabled persons aged 18 and above had never attended school or only attended primary school. While in USA in 2019, "of Americans who have vision loss and are 25 years of age and over, 4.7 million have less than a high school diploma, 8.1 million have a high school diploma or a GED (but no further), 9.2 million have some college education but not a bachelor's degree, and 7.5 million have a bachelor's degree or higher" (AFB, 2020). In EU Member States in 2016, of people who are 25 and over with disabilities, 36% have lower secondary or below education, 43% have upper secondary or post-secondary education, 21% have tertiary education (EQLS, 2016).

Due to poor education and cultural life, their demand for the films is often only "understanding the storyline," which is in line with the current goals of the Chinese mainland's AD service, namely letting the visually impaired understand the movie instead of appreciating it.

4. Conclusions

The AD practice in the Chinese mainland has made some achievements, but at the same time its development is facing many difficulties. There is a big gap between supply and demand and the existing AD resources are unevenly distributed. Due to copyright restrictions, it is difficult to get the source movies to make AD. Partly due to the lack of professional staff and unified AD guidelines, the quality of AD services is far from satisfactory. Our empirical research shows that the participants are satisfied with the quality of existing AD services, although they do not have a high level of understanding of movies. Over interpretation, revealing the plot, subjective speculations are common practices in AD services but are applauded by the participants for which help them to understand the film.

In this reception study, the number of participants is relatively small, and they only come from Lanzhou city. The study can give a glimpse but cannot reflect the overall picture of AD reception in the Chinese mainland. Further research needs to be carried out in more regions and in more diverse and heterogeneous groups.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Lanzhou Jiaotong University. Written informed consent

to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

HY determines the topic of the article, writes and revises the article, and controls the direction of the article. WS, BL, and YW collects data, participates in research design and writes the article, and revises the format. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1114853/full#supplementary-material>

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