

Research On The Innovative Directions Of Global Dissemination Of East Asian Tv Dramas – Taking South Korean Tv Dramas As An Example

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Abstract:

In the established reality where values differ, how can TV dramas from East Asian countries successfully penetrate the European and American markets and better facilitate global dissemination? South Korea has repeatedly provided answers through the explosive popularity of dramas launched on Netflix. This paper studies South Korean dramas such as “Squid Game” and “The Glory”, which have successfully disseminated globally and attracted widespread attention in recent years. By analyzing the global dissemination path of South Korean cultural brands, the study examines the dystopian concept on the content level and the effective promotion of the international platform Netflix. It further discusses the theoretical dissolution of cultural barriers in the international dissemination of TV dramas, learning from the innovative direction of global dissemination of East Asian TV dramas, taking South Korean TV drama as an example, through the cultural hybridity of translingual culture and the commercial thinking of “low cultural context”.

Key Word: South Korean Dramas; Global Dissemination; Netflix; Cultural Hybridity

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I. Research Background

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an accelerator on the timeline of the era, propelling mass media to rapidly enter the streaming media era. The internet and mobile terminals have become the most routine media of human life. For people staying at home, time and space are no longer constraints, and cultural products from around the world are within reach. In addition to the factors of the era, the new generation of the internet that is eager to accept new things has also further accelerated this trend. Their open-mindedness and entertainment needs have facilitated the arrival of the post-film and television era that transcends national borders. At the same time, with the vigorous development of OTT (Over The Top) that provides various services to users based on the internet worldwide, the decline of the traditional TV business model has become an inescapable reality.

In the 1950s, American cultural anthropologist Edward Hall first coined the term “intercultural communication” in “The Silent Language”, defining it as interpersonal communication and information dissemination activities between members of societies with distinct cultural concepts and representation systems. In 2018, Professor Shi Anbin from the School of Journalism and Communication at Tsinghua University, in his paper “From ‘Intercultural Communication’ to ‘Transcultural Communication’”, proposed the concept of transcultural communication in conjunction with the ecological changes of digital communication. That is, by filtering and absorbing other cultures, a new understanding of oneself is achieved, and other cultures are internalized as part of one’s own cultural attributes, presenting a cultural hybridity of “Your culture encompasses elements of mine, and vice versa. “Transcultural communication aims to build a “holistic globalization” communication system, committed to creating an inclusive, harmonious, respectful, and equal communication environment (Shi Anbin, 2018).

East Asian culture, characterized mainly by the culture of this shore, relationship-based, and collectivism (Fang Zhaohui, 2013), differs greatly from Western culture, which is characterized mainly by individualism and equality and freedom. In international communication, the search for common ground while reserving differences in culture is indispensable. In the era of streaming media, non-Western cultural products represented by TV dramas, if they want to win a place in the international arena, they need to make better use of platform

advantages to seize opportunities, create new content from the perspective of transcultural communication, in order to speak with results and data. South Korea's mass cultural products represented by TV dramas and pop music have formed a "Korean wave" worldwide; South Korea's 2019 film "Parasite" achieved a global box office of 260 million US dollars and won the Cannes Golden Palm and four Oscar trophies; K-POP music has been widely recognized in Europe and America; the 2021 TV drama "Squid Game" and the 2023 "The Glory" co-produced with the streaming media Netflix have triggered a global phenomenon. Compared with China and Japan, which are also in the East Asian cultural circle, South Korea has more successful experience in the globalization of cultural dissemination in recent years.

II. New Perspectives On Content:

Dystopian Concepts and National Image

In recent years, internationally popular South Korean dramas have shifted away from traditional love stories to bold insights into human nature and social realities. After the COVID-19 pandemic, paused economic development, solidification of social classes, and suppressed personal emotions, a series of social reality issues have also been brought to the screens of streaming media platforms. "Parasite" and "Squid Game" feature social competition, class confrontation, and the warmth and coldness of human nature, while "The Glory" focuses on school violence and cathartic revenge, all highlighting the ills and darkness behind a seemingly peaceful society. The dystopian concept directly criticizes social oppression and authoritarian systems, presenting social ills to the public, an effective way to analyze international real issues (Chen Hao, 2023). This characteristic of focusing on negative social issues inherits the strong social criticism consciousness of South Korea's "386 era". In "Squid Game", the absolute authority of the game organizers and the passive obedience of the participants metaphorically reflect South Korea's wealth gap, the solidified class controlled by chaebols, and the plight of the marginalized who cannot turn over. At the same time, the competition and betrayal among the game participants also highlight the environment where competition is omnipresent and pervasive in South Korea, where "even the blood flows with coffee". In "The Glory", scenes of school violence, teachers and schools' inaction leading to the victim's dropout, the comfortable upper-class life of the bullying group, domestic violence, and tense doctor-patient relationships, these series of social issues are not only present in South Korea but also have the same or similar dark sides of society in various places around the world. These two dramas follow the dystopian concept to reveal common problems of South Korea and the world, extending the issues of social situations from one country to the global scope, using international issues based on the plot to trigger discussions and resonance among global audiences, driving the breadth and depth of related topics, and expanding the dissemination effect of the drama.

However, it should be noted that dystopian and satirical dramas that criticize social injustice do not damage the dissemination of the national image but instead evoke positive emotions from audiences around the world towards South Korea's cultural soft power. A study conducted an emotional analysis using the text analysis software Leximancer on 8,808 English texts of newspapers, magazines, TV news, and industry publications articles generated by keyword searches of the movie "Parasite". The results showed that 88% of the texts displayed a positive attitude; among the 18 core concepts, "South Korea" was the highest-scoring positive concept (Lee, Seow Ting, 2022). From the perspective of cognitive psychology, the impression people have of a country through a certain thing is formed through four processes: cognition, experience, attitude, and behavior, based on the information they have obtained. People's satisfaction with cultural products is not determined by the positivity or negativity of the content, but by their viewing experience, aesthetic feelings, the tone of the drama, soundtrack, camera language, and other final presentation effects. Even if the content is negative, as long as the quality of the work is strong enough, the audience will also be interested, fond, and positively recognize this cultural product because of the ideas of "well-shot", "good-looking", and "want to continue watching". Subsequently, they will have a positive impression of the brand image of the country's movies. Moreover, in some countries, people will have a natural psychological bias towards the shooting and distribution of such topics because of the idea of "dare to shoot it out". Regardless of the plot content, just being able to broadcast smoothly without any deleted scenes, people will also support such movies that reveal social realities.

III. New Platforms For Dissemination:

The Powerful Boost of International Streaming Platforms

Why were the series that sparked a global phenomenon specifically "Squid Game" and "The Glory"? Why didn't other high-quality dramas with star-studded casts and superior scripts become popular when broadcast on local South Korean television stations? Perhaps the answer lies in these comments: "Please translate into French!" "I hope there are Spanish subtitles, thank you!" "Who can tell me where to watch the series with English subtitles?"

International communication still primarily relies on the English language, and the global dissemination media is dominated by Western countries. Since 2011, Netflix has expanded beyond the United States to target

overseas markets and subsequently partnered with Japan and South Korea in 2015 and 2016 to launch original series. It also changed the landscape of international streaming platforms by purchasing copyrights of Asian dramas to meet the needs of subscribers in different countries. As a subscription-based paid viewing platform, at the peak of its first glory, according to industry data analysis library Statista, by the fourth quarter of 2021, Netflix had 221 million paid subscribers worldwide. The global market share reached over 50%; in terms of user coverage, Netflix provides movie and TV drama playback services in 190 countries worldwide, a scale unmatched by other platforms. The extensive reach and high market share allow dramas from all over the world on Netflix to equally enjoy the right to “be seen by the world”. It is the two major driving forces and a core mindset behind Netflix—content-driven, technology-driven, and user experience-first business thinking—that have won relatively successful data results in all aspects.

Netflix deduces the trend of film and television internationalization based on the data experience of popular dramas on its own platform and formulates a global localization strategy accordingly. In terms of production, Netflix is relatively well-funded compared to other streaming platforms. On the one hand, it allows local teams in the target market to complete works without restrictions and boldly; on the other hand, it controls filming and post-production with Netflix’s own industrial standards. During the production process, it adheres to the macro standards of serious themes, innovative concepts, highlighting film and television aesthetics, building a cross-national value system, and using a variety of languages (You Da, 2022), ultimately forming high-standard dramas that integrate rich imagination of local elements with innovative and diverse global factors, ensuring their dissemination power.

Ultimately, “Squid Game” not only directly brought more than 2.17 million new user increments to Netflix after going online but also boosted Netflix’s stock price. Netflix stated that based on when viewers registered and the frequency of their use of the service, and inferring the viewing share adjusted from the estimated life cycle of the drama, “Squid Game” will create an “impact value” of \$891 million (Kelsey Sutton, 2021). “Squid Game” has also become the most successful drama on the Netflix platform since it covered the global streaming media market in 2021. “The Glory”, which premiered in December 2022, has been the top of Netflix’s popularity for two consecutive weeks, becoming the TOP1 in the global top ten TV (non-English) field on Netflix, and the website even crashed due to the influx of viewers. On March 10, 2023, all eight episodes of “The Glory 2” were released at once, and Netflix once again won the dual harvest of topic degree and reputation. South Korean playwrights have made huge profits in the international market through cooperation with Netflix and have also gained an international reputation for the national cultural brand; the platform has won the dual harvest of viewership, new users, membership subscription fees, and rising stock prices, achieving a win-win situation for both parties.

IV. Analysis Of The Reasons For The Explosion Of “Masters In Forbidden City” Cultural Hybridity: Transcultural Reduction of Contextual Differences in Dramas

In a discussion, Shi Anbin believes that in the digital media era, the production of media culture in the context of globalization will inevitably move towards a deeper “cultural hybridity”. On the one hand, producers are more inclined to use multiple materials that span a single culture to fit different markets; on the other hand, consumers worldwide also hope to see products with more cultural affinity (Liu Ying & Zhang Yuqiang, 2021). The biggest feature of culturally hybrid products is that it is not a one-way export of a single culture, but a clever combination of different cultures, under the background of the local culture. Supplemented by other characteristics of multiple cultures, such as narrative methods, character settings, scene construction, etc. In dramas aimed at overseas audiences, South Korean dramas and “The Glory” output the integration of South Korean pop culture and universal culture in a manner of cultural hybridity. For example, “Squid Game” presents the civilian culture of South Korea, and after the game starts, it combines traditional games, popular in the entire East Asia and even other countries around the world in the 1970s and 1980s (including “One, Two, Three, Wooden Man” “Sugar Candy” “Tug of War” “Playing Marbles” “Squid Game” and other simple children’s games) with the elimination mechanism where the lower-class edge people struggle desperately at the cost of life; the former is the common childhood memories of people, and the latter is the current situation of the whole world, mixing cultures from different periods, thus creating a strong visual conflict, which can make the audience more involved. In terms of character setting, the weak groups of women and the elderly, and Pakistani workers from different cultures, this kind of casting method similar to K-POP idol groups highlights the characteristics of each member, breaking through the single cultural model, and mixing identity, generational, and regional cultures, which is conducive to expanding the audience range. In terms of scene construction, the unique East Asian bunk bed and the Western retro theater circus take into account the acceptance of people from different cultures, and the use of large solid colors and simple geometric patterns also greatly reduces the threshold for other cultural audiences to watch the drama.

In addition to the visible cultural hybridity on the surface, the reason why South Korean film and television works can pry open the door to the Western market to some extent is because they use patterns familiar to

European and American audiences, reflecting similar elements and themes. In the view of Andrew Clark, a senior columnist for the “Australian Financial Review”, the violent culture in “American-style narrative” has been absorbed by other countries: from “Parasite”, “Squid Game”, to “The Glory”, all are full of violence, bloodshed, and death. “Parasite” caters to the revelation of inequality and is similar to the themes presented in American TV dramas such as “Joker”. For the current situation of widening wealth gap, solidification of social classes, and the powerlessness of individual struggle, people in European and American countries also feel the same, and it is easy to find a familiar feeling in these South Korean TV dramas and produce a strong resonance. This similar element of the drama is the hybridization of culture and values, which greatly plays the commercial nature of the drama’s dissemination. The viewing threshold is low, and audiences from different cultures are easy and willing to accept, and can expand the dissemination power and form discussions on related topics, thereby expanding the influence.

Restraint in Cultural Output: “Low Cultural Context” Commercial Thinking

The “Great Escape” game in “Squid Game” and the revenge throughout “The Glory” have a simple and straightforward theme. Such dramas that do not engage in excessive cultural exposition are more readily able to surmount cultural barriers. Behind the distinct theme, there is a universal critique of the shortcomings of modern capitalist society, which is the core of the narrative strategy of “low cultural context” in these two dramas. The content of a drama allows people from all over the world to quickly grasp the key points, easily understand, and derive interest in exploring the subsequent plot, and such “low cultural context” dramas are relatively easy to disseminate globally. The South Korean drama “D.P”. is another drama with the same expressive power and social connotation as “Squid Game” that was launched on Netflix at the same time, and it also had a good response in South Korea, proving its high level of drama; However, in terms of international communication power, it is far less than “Squid Game” and “The Glory”. This is because “D.P”. tells the story of the unique military camp culture in South Korea, which belongs to the “high cultural context” content, and too much cultural output will make it more difficult for audiences from other cultural backgrounds to understand the story background, character motivation, and plot development logic, and they will choose to give up the drama or have no interest in watching it at all.

The restrained cultural output behind these two successful dramas also reflects the commercial thinking behind South Korea’s “cultural country” to a certain extent. The South Korean government has indeed provided a lot of policy support and inclination for the cultural industry, but the main force driving the development of “Korean wave” is still the enterprises. South Korean enterprises place a significant emphasis on market research during the preliminary stages of projects, often conducting meticulous studies on the styles and formats that are favored by the general public, readily accepted, and capable of widespread dissemination. Whether it’s the evolution of idol groups or the determination of music album styles, they need to cater to market demands and public tastes. The advantage of this approach is that the focus of cultural product output seems to shift from cultural elements to content that the general public enjoys and genuinely wants to consume. While catering to the market and ensuring effective dissemination, there is a subtle cultural export taking place. After the first season of “The Glory” was aired, many people were eagerly anticipating the plot of the second season while also fearing that the subsequent storyline might feature the bullies being absolved by the scriptwriters, the protagonist forgiving the villains, and a reconciliation leading to a happy ending. Such straightforward and pure revenge is not commonly seen in East Asian mainstream culture; the more familiar narrative template in East Asian culture advocates for the protagonist to ultimately choose to repay grievances with virtue, to forgive sins, and to showcase a human arc of growth. A forgiving conclusion is the most conservative and comfortable choice for producers and broadcasting platforms, but precisely because it starts from a commercial mindset, understanding what the audience truly desires, the carried-through true revenge hits the audience’s sweet spot, earning unanimous praise.

V. Conclusion

In the reality of differing values, how have East Asian countries’ TV dramas successfully penetrated the European and American markets for better global dissemination? South Korea has repeatedly provided answers with its hit dramas on Netflix. Dystopian and critical realist dramas have achieved unprecedented dissemination on international streaming giants. To eliminate cultural barriers in international communication, a transcultural approach that blends multiple cultures has been adopted, reducing contextual differences in various cultural environments. At the same time, the restrained use of a “low cultural context” for cultural output, along with a commercial mindset, has garnered unanimous praise from audiences. The study of the innovative path of drama dissemination, taking South Korea as an example, is worth our reference and learning.

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