

The Trend and Reasons for the Shift of Korean Dramas from Romantic Themes to Realistic Themes

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Abstract: In recent times, there has been a shift in the manifestations of Korean popular films and television works. With the advent of globalization, the impact and influence of streaming media and transcultural communications have surpassed traditional methods. Additionally, the dynamics between male and female characters in Korean dramas have undergone changes. Against this backdrop, this study explores how local TV dramas, promoted by Netflix, successfully transcend national boundaries while preserving their distinct cultural identity. To accomplish this objective, the study focuses on the Korean drama “The Glory,” which gained significant popularity on Netflix in the previous year. Through detailed analysis and examination, this paper sheds light on the strategies employed by these dramas to navigate the global market while maintaining their unique characteristics. At the same time, this paper also provides experience and a new direction for China’s cultural export to the world. By relying on film and television works and combining Chinese cultural symbols with the local social and cultural background, Chinese drama can weaken the cultural discount brought by different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Netflix, Korean dramas, realism, romanticism, women rights

1. Introduction

Since the Korean government promoted and implemented the cultural policy which was centered on ‘culture-oriented national development’, the export of movie and video culture has become a trend. Henceforth, movie and television culture has been exported to foreign markets massively [1]. The influence of Korean film and television works in Asia and the world even is increasing constantly. From 2000 to 2005, the most popular subject of Korean dramas in East Asian countries was romance (see Table 1).

Table 1: Popular Korean TV series in China, Japan and Korea, 2000-2005.

No.	Stage name (of a play)	Year	Theme
1	Autumn Fairy Tale	2000	Love
2	Winter Sonata	2002	Love
3	Full House	2004	Romantic comedy
4	My Girl	2005	Romantic comedy

Between 2006 and 2010, themes such as family and the workplace began to appear in highly-rated Korean dramas, and Korean dramas began to combine other factors with the romantic theme of love (see Table 2).

Table 2: Popular Korean TV series in China, Japan and Korea, 2006-2010.

No.	Stage name (of a play)	Year	Theme
1	Princess Hours	2006	Romantic comedy
2	Thank You	2007	Comedy, Love
3	The Glory Of The Family	2008	Family, Love
4	Splendid Heritage	2009	Trendy Drama, Romantic comedy
5	Prosecutor princess	2010	Romantic comedy

Starting from the subject which is around the sad and touching love stories such as “Endless Love” and “Full House” in the 2000s, to the subject which is famous for ups and downs plots and romantic scenes such as “Guardian: The Lonely and Great God” and “Descendants of the Sun” in 2010s, Korean dramas with fantasy, time-travel and workplace themes became popular with viewers (see Table 3).

Table 3: Popular Korean TV series in China, Japan and Korea, 2011-2015.

No.	stage name (of a play)	Year	Theme
1	City Hunter	2011	Action
2	Rooftop Prince	2012	Fantasy romantic comedy
3	My Love From the Star	2013	Fantasy romantic comedy
4	Pinocchio	2014	Workplace
5	Oh My Venus	2015	Romantic comedy

In recent years, fantasy love stories were popular, while suspenseful dramas, heart-healing and reality-focused films were equally popular (see Table 4). Dramas dealing with social class, real-life fallouts and revenge successes reaped a higher level of popularity (see Table 5).

Table 4: Popular Korean TV series in China, Japan and Korea, 2016-2020.

No.	stage name (of a play)	Year	Theme
1	The Legend of the Blue Sea	2016	Fantasy romantic comedy

Table 4: (continued).

2	Voice	2017	Mystery
3	Tge Beauty inside	2018	Romantic comedy
4	Hotel Del Luna	2019	Fantasy romantic comedy
5	Hospital Playlist	2020	Healing theme, Workplace

Table 5: Popular Korean TV series in China, Japan and Korea, 2021-2023.

No.	stage name (of a play)	Year	Theme
1	Squid Game	2021	Thriller suspense TV series
2	Taxi Driver	2021	Hero, Crime
3	Move to Heaven	2021	Heart-Healing
4	The Glory	2022	School bullying, Revenge, Crime, Dysfunctional families
5	Reborn Rich	2022	Mystery
6	Taxi Driver 2	2023	Revenge
7	The Glory 2	2023	Revenge
8	Revenant	2023	Mystery
9	Delightfully Deceitful	2023	Mystery

Korean movies and TV series transforming and keeping pace with the times constantly. Almost every popular TV series can trigger a burst of global discussion, leading to a new boom of prevalence [2].

From the 2000s to 2010s, Korean TV plays have made good achievements overseas because the main audience is women. At the same time, Korean TV plays with love as the main line using the plot of “Cinderella and Prince” to meet the psychological needs of female audiences for fairy tale love [3]. This is because traditional Korean TV dramas are mixed with traditional gender concepts, and female characters are often required to follow the traditional patriarchal social rules which are not accepted by young female audiences [4]. Nowadays, Korean dramas have gradually changed from romantic subjects that focus on love to realistic subjects that reflect social phenomena. The relationship between characters has also changed significantly. Some of these episodes reveal the unique heroism in American dramas [5]. These changes are particularly obvious in the Korean dramas produced by Netflix [6].

With the rapid growth of academic research on Korean popular culture in the past decade, it is easy to find that a large number of studies about Korean pop are mostly inclined toward Korean pop music culture. However, most of the research on Korean dramas focuses on how the dramas are popular around the world [7]. In response to this problem, this article aims to analyze Netflix’s economic strategy and current social phenomena in Korea. Exploring how Netflix’s investment in the Korean production team can promote qualitative change in the content of Korean TV series. The case study “The Glory” is used to examine audience ratings in China, Korea and the United States, as well as the play’s production team and social phenomena in Korea. In addition, this article will discuss the popular phenomenon of “Netflix+ Korean drama” through the concept of “cultural discount” in the theory of cross-cultural communication. In other words, the phenomenon of influence is caused by different social backgrounds and historical traditions [8]. Therefore, providing new ideas for the external communication of Chinese culture.

2. Literature Review

With the rapid growth of the global streaming media market, streaming media is becoming a new mainstream media [9]. Korean pop culture ushered in a new upsurge of research [7]. With the rapid development of the streaming media industry, Korea's streaming media platforms are in an extremely competitive state. There is not only local competition but also competition with foreign platforms. As of October 2022, six major streaming media platforms in Korea had more than 1 million active users per month (see Table 6), of which Netflix, the foreign platform, had the largest number of users [9].

Table 6: Main streaming media platforms and users in Korea (October 2022).

Rank	Platform Name	Number of Users	Notes
1	Netflix	11 million 370 thousand	Foreign platforms
2	Tving	4 million 310 thousand	Local platform
3	Wavve	4 million 160 thousand	Local platform
4	Coupang play	3 million 550 thousand	Local platform
5	Disney+	1 million 800 thousand	Local platform
6	Seezn	1 million 250 thousand	Local platform

Netflix is a high quality streaming medium which is from America [10]. Netflix entered the Korean market and reached a production partnership with the Korean team, which is also the reason why the research focus of the new wave of Korean pop culture has shifted from “K-pop” to Korean TV dramas [5,6]. Netflix has a large audience and fan base in the United States. It attaches importance to and has always adhered to the principle of high-quality original content. Netflix is a high-quality streaming medium, which can easily attract the attention of the audience. Therefore, it can ensure the market effect of the work.

Under the background of globalization, trans-culture communication is a way for multinational companies to improve their influence on overseas markets. After entering the Korean market, Netflix combines the heated discussion of Korean society with the original production of Netflix to explore the Korean market according to local conditions [6]. In trans-culture communication, symbols are usually used to carry a social phenomenon or a certain cultural characteristic. TV series is a good cultural symbol that can reflect the condense of social life [1]. It is worth noting that trans-culture communication will inevitably reduce the effect of communication due to two different social and cultural backgrounds. This phenomenon is called cultural discount [8]. Colin. H believes that film and television dramas can counteract some discounts. Film and television dramas usually integrate the characteristics of a certain culture and the social background of a certain country. It is generally regarded as secondary creation. Therefore, they are more easily accepted by audiences as a carrier of cultural output.

As a senior and high-quality streaming medium, Netflix is easier to get the attention and interest of the audience with its strong data collection and computing capabilities [11]. In the 1990s, the Korean government began to use cultural products to expand foreign cultural industries and achieved good economic benefits [12]. It enabled the government to invest more energy and policy preferences in the film and television industry [13]. This move aims to expand the competitiveness of Korean TV dramas, but caused the homogenization of products and reduced the market competitiveness. The big data collection of Netflix has brought opportunities and huge benefits to it in an instant. As a high-quality American streaming media company, investing in the Korean production team makes Netflix's works containing the characteristics of American heroism and the current social characteristics of Korea. It not only shows the conflict of real society to audiences,

but also caters to the audience’s desire that a person who is oppressed can be redeemed. Korean dramas produced by Netflix triggered a new upsurge in Korean dramas in Korea [2].

The model of Korean drama plus Netflix has promoted the transformation of the style and theme of Korean dramas. At the same time, it has once again set off a craze around the world [2]. Invested by Netflix and produced by the Korean team, the first season of “The Glory” was broadcast on the Netflix platform for two weeks, ranking first in the non-English TV series TOP10 on the Netflix platform [14]. This is also where Chinese film and television dramas need to learn from. How to combine the actual local background and the market needs of other countries, and use the symbol of TV dramas to better spread Chinese culture is a current problem.

3. The Reason Why Netflix Can Produce the Popular Korean Series

3.1. The Arrival of the Era of Streaming Media

First, in the so-called ‘streaming media era’, compared with traditional media, streaming film and television works are more likely to be discovered and noticed by the public. As a high-quality streaming media that adheres to originality, Netflix has public attention before entering the Korean market. Moreover, Netflix uses its algorithms so that its users can always receive the content they are interested in, and constantly attract new users through market strategies [11]. Therefore, its episodes can always be noticed by more people. Take the “The Glory” as an example, with the release of season 2, “The Glory” topped then Netflix’s global top ten list of titles. Meanwhile, “The Glory” also stepped into No.7 on the Most Popular List. Table 7 shows Netflix’s Top 10 lists for the week of March 13-19, starting with a series of English-language, then followed by a series of other languages TV shows, then English-language movies and then non-English-language movies [14].

Table 7: Netflix’s Top 10 lists for the week of March 13-19(non-English-language TV shows).

No.	TV	WEEKS IN TOP 10	HOURS VIEWED
1	The Glory: Season 1	7	123,590,000
2	Wrong Side of the Tracks: Season 2	3	20,100,000
3	Sky High: The Series: Season 1	1	19,180,000
4	Rana Naidu: Season 1	2	16,410,000
5	Crash Course in Romance: Season 1	7	14,360,000
6	Wrong Side of the Tracks: Season 1	8	10,030,000
7	Mr. Queen	5	9,770,000
8	In the Name of God: A Holy Betrayal: Season 1	2	8,100,000
9	Triptych: Season 1	4	8,010,000
10	Maestro in Blue: Season 1	1	7,300,000

3.2. Strategic Layout of Globalization of Netflix

Netflix is committed to improving its globalization and forming its unique development strategy around the world according to local conditions. Since Netflix entered the Korean market in 2016, it has been connecting with Korea’s local network to establish diplomatic relations and adheres to its original and rich strategy. So that the episodes he participated in have local characteristics of Korea and are in line with the popular trend [5].

4. The Theme of Social Reality: Effective Cancellation of Cultural Discounts in the Trans-culture Communication Background

4.1. The Reason Why Korean TV Series Turn the Theme from Mainly Romantic Love to Social Reality

The Asian financial crisis of the 1990s forced Korea to embark on a strategy to transform its economy by exporting cultural products [12]. From 1998 to 2004, the TV drama as a production quickly opened markets in China and Japan and brought enormous economic benefits to Korea [12]. The economic gains convinced the Korean Government of the wisdom of the “cultural export” policy and increased policy assistance to the television and film industries [13]. Based on the government’s preferential policies, the Korean film and television industry has ushered in a period of prosperity. The economic benefits brought by Korean dramas have attracted a large number of people to enter the market. At the same time, the works loved by the audience have been “copied” many times, resulting in the homogenization of film and television work [12]. Netflix entered the Korean market in 2016, which made the film and television market under the control of traditional Korean TV stations impacted by the new media platform.

4.2. Symbol Presentation in Semiotics Theory

TV series is an artistic product reflecting social culture and a miniature landscape that highly condenses social reality. It stimulates the emotional communication between the work and the audience by carrying element symbols [1]. The dressing style and architecture, as well as the unique food culture and language elements of “The Glory” make audiences easy to recognize where the series is from. It has certain image presets through external factors before watching the series, so the differences among living environments are relatively easy to accept.

4.3. Cultural Discount and the Theme of Social Reality

Trans-culture communication is unavoidable in the background of globalization. Cultural discount is also unavoidable in different cultural backgrounds and social developments [8]. However, TV series or films that are made by transnational corporations can counteract some effects of cultural discounts. “The Glory” has the investment of Netflix and the production team of Korea. It takes Korean society as the background, also getting rid of the American style of plots. Therefore, the storytelling and narrative aspects are in accord with Korean social reality.

In the trans-culture communication background, the cultural elements of a country are usually carried by symbols. “The Glory” integrates the campus bullying of Korean social phenomena, directly showing the social problem. Therefore, the plots of the series are easy to resonate with audiences. As a result, Netflix can capture the interest of the local audience in Korea.

To guarantee the propagation effect, breaking the cultural discount of trans-culture communication is necessary. In detail, it has to show the original culture and take the proper strategy of communication to ensure all audiences under different cultural backgrounds can easily understand. “The Glory” is made by a native team from Korea. It focuses on a hot topic, school bullying. Netflix is committed to the development strategy of globalization and adheres to the principle of adapting to local conditions [6]. Netflix absorbs local social events and social background issues to produce its own original dramas by investing in local enterprises of TV. Meanwhile, Netflix can obtain topics that users are interested in through big data and computing. Therefore, it has grasped the focus of audiences precisely [11]. Netflix firmly captures the original customer base and creates a new user group through the process that adjusts its marketing strategies by using big data operations to collect information [11]. The overseas ratings of “The Glory” can be

seen through the views of Netflix. In addition to reflecting the local social topics and hot events in Korea, the social hot spots concerned the audience have also opened up the overseas market for the series.

The phenomenon of cultural discount in trans-culture communication has been partially solved through the accurate use of realistic themes in film and television dramas. The realistic spirit of film and television dramas just responds to the humanistic care spirit of the outside audience [15].

5. Conclusions

This article mainly focuses on the transition and reasons for Korean TV drama. In detail, from romanticism-mainly about the theme of love in the early years of the 20s to realism-mainly about the theme of social reality in recent years. This article also discussed the experiences and merits which can be learned from the external dissemination of Chinese film and television.

Korean film and television works have been constantly transforming and changing since they began to be produced for overseas markets. Therefore, these works can move with the development of society and meet the changing needs of the audiences. That's why Korean dramas are popular in Asia and even the world. The connotation of the transition of Korean drama has actually revealed the promotion of female status. The audience of Korean TV dramas is not satisfied with the theme mainly about love in which the female characters always need to rely on the male characters. Conversely, they are more willing to accept the drama that female characters are more independent and powerful. The theme mainly about social realities is more fitted in the circumstance.

The reason why Korean drama can get the transition successfully and be popular is that the theme and project of it are easily accepted by audiences. On the other hand, the production teams of Korean dramas begin to cooperate with international organizations such as Netflix. Netflix comes from America and developing around the world, it is also a high-quality streaming medium. This kind of media has an international view which the local team is lacking. The cooperation makes their productions superior and has more audiences. Actually, Netflix has more international audiences, so the publicity effects of it are better than local's. Therefore, helping Korean dramas spread across the world. The series "The Glory" is made by a local team of Korean, so the story can reflect the special traditions of Korean. Netflix blends the series with international mode and view.

Episodes with the theme of reflecting social reality like "The Glory" can cross the "cultural boundaries" to global audiences has a vital reason. The story of the series shows the true social problems, so it can resonate with the audiences. The story of the series is simplified in the process of communication, and the expression of it is easy to understand in different cultural contexts. This kind of series does not make local audiences feel strange or difficult to understand from other cultural backgrounds. This is the success of culture-crossing communications.

Some of the ways of production and dissemination of Korean dramas which have been successfully transformed into international are worth learning through China's film and television. There are many dramas in China's film and television works that reflect China's social problems. Among them, the unique cultural elements and expressions belonging to China should not be abandoned, and improved to a way that is easier to be understood in the context of cross-cultural communication. Retaining Chinese characteristics and elements while adding international elements to overcome cultural boundaries in the world.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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