

Exploring Chinese and Western Audiences Reception Regarding International Communication of Entertainment: Take Squid Game and Hellbound (2022) as Cases

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Abstract: Taking “Squid Game” and “Hellbound” as examples, this paper analyzes the extent to which Chinese and Western audiences have received and decoded international media works. Through the evaluations on IMDb and Douban, this paper aims to explore the dimensions of the evaluation of cross-cultural films by Chinese and Western audiences and study the dominant values and aesthetics of movie-watching in different cultures, so as to provide a critical reference for the study of how international film and television works to cater to audiences with different cultural backgrounds. On this basis, this paper also introduces the theory of film analysis and cultural studies to explore the possible cultural, social, and historical reasons behind the different audiences’ receptions to “Squid Game” and “Hellbound”. As mentioned above, the differences between Chinese and Western cultures at different levels are discussed, and some suggestions for future cross-cultural communication strategies are put forward.

Keywords: K-Drama, Netflix, audience reception, production

1. Introduction

This research takes the TV series “Squid Game” and “Hellbound” as research subjects to study the transmission of transnational TV programs. With the development of mass media technology, cross-media narration and transnational consumption on network and TV platforms have become the new normal of program production. “Squid Game” and “Hellbound” are both Korean TV series produced by Netflix. In particular, Squid Game was launched on streaming platforms on September 17, 2021, and has received positive reviews from both Chinese and Western audiences. Meanwhile, Netflix launched “Hellbound” on November 19 of the same year. Contrary to expectations, “Hellbound” received a lower score than its predecessor. Since “Squid Game” and “Hellbound” are both Korean Netflix releases, it will be interesting to examine the differences between the two films and the broader reasons behind the results.

2. Literature Review

2.1. South Korean Fad

2.1.1. The Communication Environment of South Korean TV Soaps

The emergence of new media at the start of the twenty-first century appeared to portend the decline of television as a source of entertainment for consumers. But recently, media convergence synergy between television and the internet has shown to be quite successful, as both platforms have engaged viewers and fostered a more active television culture [15]. The distribution and consumption of television programs are no longer restricted to national borders, for instance, thanks to the capabilities of video sharing technologies like YouTube. As a result, the TV audience of foreign TV programs has grown significantly, driven by network streaming media technology. Additionally growing in popularity is the internet fan culture created by the viewing of international TV programs.

Korean cultural items, including TV dramas, movies, pop songs, and actors and actresses, have been extremely well-liked throughout East and Southeast Asian nations since the late 1990s. South Korea was an unimportant nation with no impact on the popular culture sector a century ago. South Korea is currently one of Asia's top cultural exports. Korea has developed into a place where cultural industries and goods can expand and have an impact on other nations. The mass media has acknowledged the advent of Korean pop culture as a phenomenon. In Korean, it is called “South Korean fad.” People from all over the world embrace Korean pop culture, which is a South Korean fad [9]. Asian nations are currently embracing the South Korean trend, which typically consists of South Korean music, TV dramas, films, and games. One of the key contributors to the South Korean fad was K-Drama.

2.1.2. South Korean TV Soaps in Asia

In China, “South Korean fad” emerged in 1997, when the TV series “What Is Love for Everything” was aired on China Central Television (CCTV) and became a huge success. The show was recorded as the second-most-watched series in Chinese television history at the time [8]. After this surprising ranking, some South Korean TV soaps have gradually caught the attention of Chinese audiences. Since then, South Korean TV soaps have dominated TV stations in Taiwan, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

2.1.3. South Korean TV Soaps in Europe and America

The global influence of the Korean Wave has made K-pop and South Korean TV soaps increasingly attractive to Western media and society. South Korean TV soaps first entered the U.S. market in 2011 via Hulu, and less than a year later, other U.S. streaming providers (e.g., DramaFever, Netflix, and Amazon Prime) began offering South Korean TV soaps on their respective platforms. The growing popularity of South Korean TV soaps in the West is partly generated and sustained by the interest and consumption of K-wave fans. DramaFever.com, one of the most popular sites for watching South Korean TV soaps, reports that their audience is 40 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 15 percent black, and 15 percent Asian. With thousands of TV series and movies to choose from, DramaFever users stream more than 800 million minutes of content per month, and in April 2014, more than 3.4 million users visited the site, an increase of approximately 440 percent compared to the same month in 2013. That trend continued into 2014, with viewership up another 268 percent over the previous year.

2.2. The Reasons for the Popularity of South Korean TV Soaps

Television is one of the most effective kinds of mass media when compared to other media. This is due to its distinctive qualities, particularly the audiovisual component and its capacity to inform the audience. Additionally, it has been said that viewing television may provide the viewer with a particular pleasure called as a "analog experience," which is a beneficial and novel feeling that the viewer enjoys [17]. According to their own demands, each person conceptually consumes media in a different way. Watching South Korean TV soap operas can be comforting and calming after a long day of activities, as well as bringing tears of joy, laughter, or grief. Some people find a wealth of nostalgic qualities of a life worth living in South Korean TV operas. These South Korean TV dramas may even be able to comfort some viewers and serve as a reflection of their own experiences. The performances of actors and actresses in the TV series have moved many people's hearts and inspired them to pursue their aspirations. South Korean TV soap operas continue to promote Asian and Korean cultural values at a time when modernisation and globalization are fast eroding cultural values. The ability of Korean pop culture to address Asian emotional issues, such as family values, is what makes it so successful [4].

2.3. Netflix and the Transnational Spread of K-Drama

The popularity of foreign TV programs has greatly grown thanks to network streaming media technology. Another trend that is gaining popularity is the internet fan culture created by watching international TV programs. Online streaming services have become popular, like Netflix, which oversees global video-on-demand and streaming TV services. Netflix is the most well-known and dominant TV streaming service in the market, and it has fundamentally altered the streaming content market. Variety in television and cinema genres has resulted from it, most notably an expansion of international content.

Since 2007, Netflix has been a leader in the streaming TV market, and its streaming service is now available worldwide. Korean TV shows were first offered to U.S. members as part of a foreign TV package in 2012, and "Korean TV" has its own category in the main "TV Shows" catalog, separate from Korean films. South Korean TV soaps began to be streamed in the United States through scattered fan-based video-on-demand sites such as mysoju.tv, DramaCrazy.net, and allkpop.com, which quickly replaced viewing on a handful of Korean or Asian channels. Audiences with new Asian and Non-Asian fans are consuming more content online.

3. Research Method

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a qualitative research method to analyze the collected audience comments. Qualitative research aids in the deeper investigation of specific circumstances' causes. After correcting the disorganized data, qualitative research can investigate a specific topic's issue through analysis. The author reasoned that this study methodology would be better suited to learning about viewers' perceptions of the work.

In order to investigate audiences' reactions to "Squid Game" and "Hellbound", this study collected reviews from two movie review websites named Douban and IMDb. Online commentary is considered valid research data, and brief content provided by website users is considered likely to provide critical perspectives [12]. In addition, the representativeness of the data is crucial, as this study is devoted to exploring the interaction between different cultural, social, and historical reference audiences and their understanding of the same work shadow. Taking "Hellbound" and "Squid Game" as examples, comments on Chinese Douban represent the ideas of Chinese cultural groups, while comments on IMDb represent the attitudes of other cultural groups. To be more specific, this difference is reflected in the understanding and interpretation of these two Korean works by Chinese

and English cultures, respectively. Douban is one of China's largest film sharing and commenting communities, covering more than 10 million users. Meanwhile, Douban users are all speaking Chinese, so the information collected on Douban is effective and representative. Meanwhile, the main language of IMDb is English, so it is also considered to represent the English culture of the Internet community. At the same time, although IMDb is aimed at a worldwide audience, from the perspective of website construction, Western audiences are more convenient to use [5]. At the same time, the United States and the United Kingdom were among the geographical regions with the highest use of IMDb [3], so it can be said that IMDb reflects the attitude of western cultural groups. In addition, since IMDb has many active registered users, it also ensures the social diversity of the sample. In this study, 30 “Squid Game” and 30 “Hellbound” reviews were collected from Douban and IMDb, respectively, for a total of 120 reviews. To ensure the representativeness and credibility of the sample, this study will conditionally select the most authentic and accepted comments. The comments were ranked by IMDb and Douban's rating system, and then the comments with high user approval and relevant content were collected.

4. Results and Discussion

The collected audience comments are analyzed to determine whether or not the audience's understanding of the film is consistent. The audience's comments on the film can be seen as part of their understanding of the film, combined with their social understanding in real life. Whatever the contradictions or consistencies between the audience's understanding of the film and the ideas it conveys, the reason for the end result should be traced back to social relevance. Therefore, in this step, I relate the above results to the larger historical, cultural, and social content for further analysis. Re-examine and consider these results with the help of the theoretical concepts mentioned earlier. In terms of the content and connotation of the selected comments, the positioning, perceived style, or expected style of the films, as well as the understanding of the story theme of the Chinese and Western audiences, have been fully integrated into the two TV series.

Words that appear more frequently in the comment sections of “Squid Game” on IMDb and Douban include “runaway story” and “adaptation,” as well as terms related to films such as “Alice in Borderland” and “Gambling Apocalypse Kaiji.” This shows that audiences tend to view “Squid Game” as one of the Great Escape genres and thus evaluate it based on pre-established expectations. In this case, the audience that compares “Squid Game” to existing works in the Great Escape genre is the one that tends to give lower scores. When the original is a successful masterpiece, the failure of the “adapted version” is more likely to elicit negative comments and reactions from loyal audiences. Although some viewers felt that “Squid Game” should be considered a standalone product, most viewers said they still subconsciously compared it to the original film. In this case, audiences who view “Squid Game” as a relatively independent work will give it more positive reviews.

Stylistic expectations that extend through positioning also influence the viewer's judgment and perception when examining the story itself. Therefore, both Chinese and Western readers focus on the logic of the story, such as the incoherence and inconsistency inherent in the plot. The pursuit of logic is the common denominator of global culture and the result of systematic education dominated by reason [7]. Both “Hellbound” and “Squid Game” have been cited as having irrational logic that makes it difficult for the audience to understand the story correctly, which further contributes to low overall ratings for both sides. For example, some viewers of “Squid Game” felt that the plot developments of the last two episodes broke the previous rhythm. “Hellbound,” on the other hand, was deemed to have too much information to deliver in six episodes and too much to connect with in three.

In the eyes of some viewers, “Hellbound” and “Squid Game” are essentially realistic works that reveal social issues such as class religion. In the eyes of others, the two works are seen primarily as

fantasy, with the social realities revealed in them as a secondary concern. Because of this perceptual difference, audiences who see “Hellbound” and “Squid Game” as realistic stories can’t stand the potholes and fantasy elements of the stories. Their pursuit of authenticity requires more rigorous logic and a more complete story structure. At the same time, the incompatibility between fantasy and reality can also create a sense of confusion for another part of the audience. The fantasy genre allows stories to be interpreted in an exaggerated style, and a certain amount of plot irrationality is tolerated. However, the pursuit of authenticity requires more rigorous logic and a more complete story structure. However, reviews from IMDb and Douban show that the two works failed to overcome the contradiction between the two genres. For example, there are comments on IMDb and Douban that “Squid Game” are too bloody, and Fisher [6] confirms the relationship between depictions of violence and realistic views of film. Violence that is illogical and unconnected to the social structure is seen as unreal and unreasonable.

But some IMDb and Douban audiences have expressed a positive attitude towards “Squid Game” and “Hellbound,” which map social issues in their work. Some viewers believe that the class issues that “Squid Game” attempts to expose have real relevance. The psychology of communication literature shows that narrative enhances the persuasive effect of information, especially in terms of entertainment. Thus, narration in TV series and films can become a more attractive and subtle form of persuasion, making the message conveyed more acceptable to the audience [14]. For example, Hollywood film production is regarded as a powerful tool to manipulate public opinion for political purposes [1]. Similarly, “Hellbound” tries to reflect some religion-related social issues, which many IMDb viewers affirm. However, compared to Western audiences, Douban audiences don’t show much emotion. The results may be due to cultural differences.

Understanding cultural differences is often considered a prerequisite for successful international communication campaigns [10]), in part because cultural values influence and are influenced by various marketing communication tools [2]. Due to the acculturation of consumers to the country of origin, consumers respond to marketing communication messages in a manner that is consistent with their cultural norms and values [20]. Georg Simmel put forward the concept of “stranger” in 1908 about cultural differences. He believed that people in different social or cultural systems were strange to each other. In the study of cross-cultural communication, such unfamiliarity may cause communication barriers.

There is a complicated history and relationship between Han and ethnic minorities in China [13]. Chinese law prohibits citizens from inciting hatred or discrimination against ethnic groups, destroying ethnic unity, and disrespecting ethnic customs to protect inter-ethnic relations and maintain stability [18]. In addition, in order to prevent negative or controversial information from causing disputes that are detrimental to the harmony between different ethnic groups, various rules have been proposed to regulate the Internet, games, publishing, entertainment products, and news media. Therefore, there are relatively few religion-related themes in Chinese films and television works, let alone religious issues such as mujahideen and religious extremism. It’s so far from the lives of most Chinese viewers that “Hellbound” allusions may make some Chinese viewers feel unengaged, thereby affecting their perception of what the show is about.

Based on the concept of strangers, Robert E. Ark studied the cultural collision brought about by population migration. He found that the situation of double strangers also endowed them with unique resources that could solve the cultural tension and conflict through individual adjustment and adaptation, thus providing new directions and possibilities for the innovation and evolution of civilization. In other words, the differences between communication participants can also be used to achieve a good information dissemination effect. This is one of the reasons Squid Game has been well received on IMDb and Douban, as it adds fresh and traditional cultural elements such as sugar cake carving and Hibiscus flower opening to the repertoire of previous escape genre movies.

Many commenters believe that actors in K-drama are always overacting, and most such comments come from IMDb, while similar opinions are rarely found in Douban reviews. This phenomenon clearly reflects the difference between Western audiences and Chinese audiences in their acceptance of South Korean films and TV shows, and this result can be related to South Korean fad. South Korean fad spread in Asia earlier, and South Korean TV soaps began to be broadcast in China in 1997 and gained a warm welcome. At the same time, both China and South Korea belong to the Asian cultural circle and have a certain acceptance and recognition of Confucian culture. Because of this cultural proximity and commonality, Chinese audiences can more easily interpret some values and concepts unique to Asian culture contained in South Korean TV soaps, as well as recognize and accept the moral standards embodied in South Korean TV soaps. This also makes it easier for both sides to communicate with each other and accept each other's views in the communication process, which to some extent improves the acceptance of South Korean TV soaps by Chinese audiences. Moreover, with the early spread of South Korean fad, Chinese audiences were relatively familiar with the work of Korean actors and actresses earlier than Western audiences, which is why Douban users are more receptive to Korean acting than IMDb users. Meanwhile, Douban reviews often mention actors Lee Jung-jae, Gong Yoo, and Lee Byung-hun, and those mentions tend to give the works high marks. This can also be seen as the influence of South Korean fad.

At the same time, both Chinese and Western audiences pay close attention to the character setting and development of the script. After "Squid Game" and "Hellbound" audiences agreed that the storyline was flawed, they both agreed on the shallow portrayal of the characters. Another common problem, the inability to feel emotion or connection to the plot, is also revealed. In other words, emotional resonance comes from identifying with the characters and understanding the plot. He should be able to arouse the emotional resonance of the audience as an ordinary "Squid Game" protagonist, but he always passes through the difficulties without the assistance of efforts, which greatly weakens the audience's resonance for him. In this case, depicting the development of the main character lacks complexity. "Hellbound" characters, on the other hand, don't get too much development because the story moves too fast. When both the main character and the supporting character lack a deep narrative, the interaction and emotion between the main character and the supporting character will not affect the audience. For example, in "Squid Game," the abrupt removal of the main female character caught the audience off guard, leading them to believe that the plot was designed to make way for two male characters.

Furthermore, many IMDb users have expressed dissatisfaction with "Squid Game", "Hellbound" English subtitles, and English dubbing. A dubbed or subtitled version is the only option for non-native Korean audiences to fully understand the content of the film. And these two audio-visual translation methods are actually very important for successful transnational communication. Dubbing allows the viewer to focus on both the visual and aural elements, as there will be no separate alphabetic text presentation affecting the image [11]. And since the audience is hearing their own language, dubbing can also create a sense of familiarity [11]. However, the subtitled version allows those with a lower level of foreign language to benefit from overlapping information in the form of spoken and written translation [16]. At the same time, because the audience can hear the original audio, the subtitled version avoids the loss of authenticity to some extent [19].

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine the communication of transnational film and television works and the acceptance of these works by Chinese and Western audiences. "Squid Game" and "Hellbound" were selected as case studies to investigate. It can be said that because cultural attributes and cultural identity distinguish Chinese and American cultures, the audience's receiving focus and the explanatory structure constructed vary with cultural characteristics. Both works have received high

recognition from Chinese and Western audiences. However, possibly due to the audience's different positioning and expectations of the two works, the reviews on IMDb and Douban present different standards of realism for the films. Some audiences want fewer unrealistic fantasy elements, while others have a lower need for realism. Similarly, in addition to the logical plot line, both Chinese and Western audiences want scenes to avoid depicting gory details. And class issues and religion, which are considered universal topics, are also revealed in "Squid Game" and "Hellbound". The audience was generally supportive of the topic. Still, the religious sensitivities that "Hellbound" attempts to map are more readily perceived by Western audiences because of their familiarity with the setting and cultural distance. As for cultural identity, it is easier for Chinese audiences to understand the cultural connotation and intention of the work. One limitation of this study is that only 30 comments from each comment community were selected as samples, so the analysis of these samples cannot fully represent the views of Chinese and Western audiences. In addition, the sample data only involves two online communities, Douban and IMDb, while there is a lack of surveys on offline audiences. Subsequent studies can conduct further longitudinal research from these perspectives and expand the sample size to help us explore the dynamics of the audience in a more comprehensive way.

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