

A Comparative study on the cultural Differences of transnational remakes of movies and TV series Postprint

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Abstract

In cross-cultural communication activities, cultural discounts often lead to the devaluation of cultural products. What are the causes of this phenomenon? How can we mitigate the cultural barriers arising from cross-cultural communication? This constitutes the primary research question of this paper. First, this paper employs the film *Journey to the West*, which has been remade in numerous countries, as a case study, conducting a comparative analysis of cultural discount in these remakes across four dimensions: language, costume, props, and setting. Finally, it is argued that to reduce the magnitude of such cultural discount, it is necessary to cultivate outstanding translation professionals, enhance the international articulation of local culture, and strengthen cultural proximity.

Full Text

Preamble

A Comparative Study on Cultural Differences in Transnational Remakes of Film and Television Series

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Abstract: In cross-cultural communication activities, cultural discount often leads to a reduction in the value of cultural products. What causes this phenomenon? How can we mitigate the cultural barriers arising from cross-cultural communication? These are the primary research questions addressed in this paper. First, taking the film *Journey to the West*, which has been remade in numerous countries, as a case study, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of cultural discount in remade dramas across four dimensions: language, costume, props, and scenery. Finally, it argues that reducing the magnitude of such

cultural discount requires cultivating excellent translation talent, strengthening the international expression of local culture, and enhancing cultural proximity.

Keywords: Cultural discount, cross-cultural dissemination, Confucian culture, remake TV series

1 Introduction

In recent years, while most industries stagnated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the media industry began a process of “self-preservation,” leading to explosive growth in media products. Remakes such as the South Korean adaptation of *Shock of Every Step* and the Thai adaptation of *Legend of Zhen Huan* have swept across Asian countries. We observe that while remakes alter costumes, performances, and even dialogue, the narrative structure and discursive power remain fundamentally unchanged, making it difficult to transform the core of Chinese Confucian culture. This raises several critical questions: Can remakes effectively facilitate cultural exchange? Through what mechanisms is cross-cultural communication achieved in remakes? Will cultural discount inevitably occur during the dissemination process?

2.1 Literature Review on the Phenomenon of Film and Television Drama Remakes

“Remake” is a term originating from photography technology, primarily referring to the process of restoring or copying photographs, images, negatives, documents, and similar materials. However, the definition of “remake” in film and television drama extends beyond this photographic meaning. It is no longer limited to mechanical reproduction of images or negatives but incorporates a “creative” component that imbues remade works with new characteristics.

Since the turn of the century, the continuous development of the media industry has drawn scholarly attention to the phenomenon of film and television drama remakes from multiple academic perspectives. Benjamin, a foreign scholar and member of the Frankfurt School, provided a general analysis in his 1963 work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* of how artistic reproduction alters the value of works and transforms audience aesthetics. The author viewed the shock experience generated by mechanically reproduced artworks, such as films, as a potential force to disrupt existing orders and grant salvational power to artistic events. From this perspective, film and television drama remaking constitutes a process of image “copying” and “reproduction.”

Conversely, in *On the Recent Phenomenon of Remaking Domestic TV Series* (2014), scholar Baiyika argued from social, audience, and market perspectives that contemporary domestic TV remakes suffer from superficiality, poor content, and lack of distinctive characteristics. Baiyika contended that domestic TV remakes should timely explore and absorb the essence of original works while properly integrating local features, emphasizing marketing strategies and

enhancing secondary development of film and television market resources. However, in 2009, domestic scholar Wang Chunli conducted a more detailed study in *The Cultural Roots and Sustainable Development of the “Remake Craze” in Domestic TV Dramas*, identifying two cultural roots in TV drama remakes: first, the need to interpret classic works in different eras, combining them with contemporary times to reinterpret classics anew; and second, the pursuit of popular aesthetics reflected in the popularity and mass appeal of remakes. Nevertheless, although these studies examine domestic historical backgrounds and cultural roots, they neglect the dimension of transnational film and television drama remaking.

2.2 Literature Review on Transnational Film and Television Drama Remakes

The phenomenon of transnational film and television drama remakes has attracted multi-perspective research in academia. In 2018, foreign scholar Ruth Gutierrez Delgado provided a comprehensive analysis of this specific adaptation form in *The Theory of Screenwriter*, arguing that when adapting scripted TV formats, cultural characteristics must penetrate deeper narrative levels and storylines. However, their execution often lacks intrinsic cohesion, creating narrative consequences that ultimately undermine the coherence of the new story.

Domestic scholar Chu Xiaoli conducted a more detailed study in 2021 in *Nostalgic Fashion in Transnational Reproductions of Asian Films—Taking the Film Versions of Strange She* in South Korea, China, and Japan as Objects of Investigation*. Her research demonstrated that the ultimate purpose of remaking and reproducing value lies in realizing the “reconstruction” of shared meaning and establishing cultural identity, eventually forming more universal cultural values. Meanwhile, domestic scholars Guo Zhengzheng and Hong Fan argued in their 2021 work *Cross-covering Reproduction and Environmentalism: A Preliminary Study on the Phenomenon of Transnational Remaking of European New Films** that, given the potential overexploitation and low utilization rate of film story resources today, remaking can be considered a new approach to achieving environmental and economic benefits from an economic perspective. However, while these studies examine economic benefits, fashion, and environmental protection, they overlook the cultural differences inherent in transnational film and television remakes.

2.3 Literature Review on Cultural Differences in Transnational Remakes of Films and TV Series

Since Hawkins proposed the theory of cultural discounting in 1988, it has garnered significant attention from scholars both domestically and internationally, yielding substantial research outcomes. In 2021, foreign scholar Sankil Moon studied the influence of cultural distance on online brand awareness in *The Influence of Cultural Distance on Online Brand Awareness*, supplementing the

theory that brand popularity is affected by a country's cultural characteristics, cultural distance, and interactions involving these factors.

In 2020, domestic scholars Xie Yuanyuan and Yu Zhenyao proposed in *Analysis of the Phenomenon of "Cultural Discount" in Cross-cultural Translation of TCM from the Perspective of High and Low Context Theory* that the form of TCM culture, developed within a high-context culture, should be transformed to supplement its inadequate context, making it more suitable for low-context cultural audiences and seeking more effective pathways for TCM's cross-cultural communication. In 2022, Chinese scholars Lu Min and Chen Yan argued in *Cultural Sharing, Cultural Discount, and Interpretation Deviation in International Communication—Based on the Analysis of Overseas Audiences' Interpretation of Chinese Historical and Cultural Documentaries* that copyright sales of Chinese documentaries in English versions should gradually shift toward global social media platforms rather than traditional media, and that the international communication of documentaries should deepen cooperation with new media to fully leverage contemporary communication advantages. However, these studies do not examine the phenomenon of cultural discount from the perspective of transnational film and television drama reproductions, leaving questions about cultural differences in such remakes unanswered.

2.4 Problem Formulation

Therefore, based on the theory of cultural discount, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: Can remakes play an effective role in cultural exchange? Through what mechanisms is cross-cultural communication achieved in remakes? Will cultural discount inevitably occur during the dissemination process of remakes?

3.1.1 Hypothesis Formulation

Based on the aforementioned questions, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: The closer a country's Confucian cultural tradition is to that of China, the lower the cultural discount will be.

To test this hypothesis, this study employs content analysis methodology to sample the population and develop a questionnaire.

3.1.2 Sampling Method

The research objects for this hypothesis are films and television series containing Chinese Confucian culture. First, we conducted representative sampling of such works and selected *Journey to the West* as our case study. This selection is justified by its significant influence, its status as one of China's four great classical novels, and its strong embodiment of Confucian cultural characteristics, making

it highly representative. Simultaneously, we selected Japanese and Australian remakes of *Journey to the West* for comparative analysis. Due to geographical proximity between China and Japan, the two countries share a long history of cultural exchange, with Confucianism becoming a prominent representative influence that has shaped Japan's historical development and even become an organic component of Japanese culture. In contrast, Australia is an immigrant society with a derived culture, geographically distant from China, resulting in considerably less cultural exchange.

Second, we conducted representative sampling of *Journey to the West* works from different countries based on their proximity to Chinese Confucian culture. Since foreign remakes of *Journey to the West* do not completely follow the domestic plot trajectory, we compared the Japanese and Australian versions with the Chinese original, focusing on changes in dialogue, content, and costumes. The Australian version, *The New Legend of the Monkey King*, comprises 20 episodes across two seasons, while the 2006 Japanese version contains 11 episodes. We randomly selected six episodes from each version for comparative analysis according to proportional sampling principles.

3.1.3 Category Construction

In this study, the magnitude of the cultural discount variable is operationalized as a country's distance from Chinese Confucian culture, while the closeness of Confucian culture is operationalized as the degree of similarity in dialogue, makeup, and props. The following tables illustrate this framework. Using content analysis, this study examines differences between the Australian and Japanese remakes of *Journey to the West* and the Chinese original, comparing similarity across makeup, discourse, props, scenes, and diverse plotlines. Higher scores indicate greater similarity.

Table 1 The coding result of the Australian version of Journey to the West – The Legend of the Monkey Sample episode category Episode 3 Episode 6 Episode 9, Episode 3, Episode 6, Episode 9, Average Season 1 Season 1 season 1 season 2 season 2 Season 2 score Clothing style Costume Character color image matching character Average score Language style Discourse pattern connotation Average score Scene decoration weapon Average score location

Table 2 Coding results of Japanese version of Journey to the West scene color Field of Average score category Episode Episode Sample episode Episode 5 Episode 7 Episode 9 Episode 11 Character image Discourse pattern scene Clothing style Costume color matching character Average score Language style Line connotation Average score Scene decoration weapon Average score location color Field of view Average score Average score

4.1 Differentiated Cultural Backgrounds Affect the Expression Forms of Cultural Products

Due to cultural differences, remakes exhibit variations in architecture, makeup, and other aspects, resulting in a phenomenon of cultural discount to some extent. As shown in Table 1, the Australian version *The New Legend of the Monkey King* received average scores of 3.55 for makeup, 3.81 for discourse, 3.34 for scenes, and 3.70 for props. According to the coding criteria, the Australian version bears considerably less resemblance to the Chinese *Journey to the West*, particularly in the scene dimension. For instance, in forest scenes, the Australian version employs shrubbery with local characteristics, whereas the Chinese version uses broadleaf forest settings. Similarly, in architecture, Australia adopts North American and European styles, while China employs retro Chinese architectural forms.

Fundamentally, these differences in architecture, makeup, and other aspects arise because films and television series are spiritual products that must satisfy diverse spiritual and cultural needs across regions. Consequently, variations in cultural backgrounds lead to changes in costumes, styling, dialogue, and other elements in remade works. Therefore, cultural discount inevitably occurs when foreign countries remake Chinese films and television series. While remakes attempt to localize character selection and styling to accommodate local audience tastes, this simultaneously creates problems of cultural discount for Chinese Confucian culture in cross-cultural communication. Cultural discount also significantly impacts cross-cultural communication, particularly regarding ideological values, which constitute the essential existential meaning of films and television dramas. Different works deliver different ideological values to audiences through varied content and methods, generating cultural discount to varying degrees. In terms of dialogue translation, translated scripts often fail to convey intended meanings during cross-cultural communication, struggling to preserve cultural connotations and nuances, and sometimes causing serious misunderstandings among overseas audiences. Numerous similar cases exist, though they need not be enumerated here.

4.2 Cultural Discount and Cultural Tradition as Opposing yet Complementary Forces

Despite differences between cultures, cultural discount is substantially reduced for film and television remakes in regions with similar cultural traditions. Countries sharing cultural traditions can better convey China's voice through the medium of remakes and achieve effective cultural exchange. The Japanese version of *Journey to the West* received total average scores of 7.92 for characters, 7.96 for discourse, 8.19 for scenes, and 7.99 for props. According to the coding criteria, the Japanese version demonstrates relatively high similarity to the Chinese original, particularly in scenes and props, where it substantially restores the Chinese version's characteristics. This primarily stems from the cultural

proximity between Japan and China. Consequently, Japanese remakes of Chinese films and television series require fewer modifications in character image construction, scene design, and other external expressions, as well as dialogue.

Our research also reveals significant differences between the Australian and Japanese versions of *Journey to the West* in character images, discourse patterns, props, and scenes. For example, the Japanese version's costume and props closely resemble the Chinese original, whereas the Australian version diverges considerably, tending toward Western sports and entertainment elements with more casual characteristics. This demonstrates that Japan's similar cultural traditions with China result in expressions and cultural connotations that differ markedly from Chinese films and television dramas. In contrast, Australia, with its vastly different cultural background, must make extensive adaptations to accommodate local culture and audience preferences when reproducing Chinese cultural works.

Similarly, *Legend of Zhen Huan* represents the most iconic Chinese drama in the recent wave of Chinese television series, achieving top ratings upon broadcast. However, as it spreads abroad, it encounters substantial cultural discount. First, this manifests in script translation. Language serves as a crucial medium for information transmission in cultural dissemination. Qing Dynasty palace dramas contain numerous classical lines and complex harem character titles, making it difficult to preserve artistic charm while remaining faithful to the original. In *The Biography of Zhen Yuan*, various official positions and titles such as "Guiren" and "Cairen" exist alongside Empress and imperial concubines. Except for "Empress," which has a direct English equivalent, other translations prove unsatisfactory in conveying rank and hierarchy. For instance, "Shen Guiren" was translated as "Lady Sher," and "Consort Hua" as "consort Hua." Second, cultural discount appears in viewing habits. The United States has virtually no dramas like *Legend of Zhen Huan*, which spans 76 episodes, whereas the average American television series runs approximately 500 minutes across 10 episodes. When *Legend of Zhen Huan* entered the US market, it was condensed to six episodes (approximately 540 minutes), eliminating many crucial plotlines and failing to highlight the interconnected narrative of the original series, ultimately being dismissed as a clichéd tale of imperial revenge with poor ratings. Finally, cultural discount reflects differences in cultural background. Under the feudal system, the Qing Dynasty imperial palace maintained a rigorous and orderly hierarchy. The etiquette, customs, and ceremonial rules displayed in the drama, while novel to foreign audiences, also prove difficult to understand and accept, not to mention the characters' names and titles. The resulting cultural discount substantially diminishes the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication for Chinese films and television dramas.

Nevertheless, foreign films and television dramas that interpret Chinese cultural connotations through foreign cultural thinking transmit Chinese stories to different cultural groups to some extent, generating cultural collisions and fostering new cultural achievements.

4.3 The Key to Telling Chinese Stories Well Lies in Reducing Cultural Discount

Currently, films and television dramas are increasingly popular vehicles for cross-cultural communication among nations. However, this form of cross-cultural communication requires careful attention to the phenomenon of cultural discount during the dissemination process.

In this process, it is inadvisable to merely convey plotlines sensationally while distorting character images. Instead, attention must be paid to the cultural connotations embedded within film and television dramas. By deeply understanding these connotations in conjunction with the target country's cultural background and through collision and integration with local culture, creators can produce works that preserve the original country's cultural core without losing the essence and style of the local culture. Only then can cross-cultural communication through film and television achieve effective results.

First, we must cultivate excellent translation talent. The Report to the 18th National Congress emphasizes that quality translation can help Chinese culture go global. Only by reducing linguistic cultural discount in cross-cultural communication can the content conveyed by television series be accurately expressed, while also considering the language expression habits of overseas audiences. This enables overseas audiences to understand and even accept the content expressed in Chinese films and television dramas, experience the linguistic charm and profound connotations of Chinese culture, and genuinely enhance the soft power of Chinese culture—a particularly crucial step in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese television dramas.

Second, we must strengthen the international expression of local culture. To reduce cultural discount, capture the attention of overseas audiences, and gain their acceptance or even attraction, Chinese films and television dramas must learn the entertainment habits of overseas audiences, develop awareness of cross-cultural communication production and adaptation, and satisfy the viewing habits of foreign audiences in terms of production and broadcast formats. Regarding broadcast content and form, production agencies should compensate for differences between domestic and foreign TV series production by adjusting series length, episode count, and narrative mode to reduce cultural discount, provide excellent local international expression, align with international standards, and gain recognition from overseas audiences. Only then can the cross-cultural communication effectiveness of Chinese TV series be improved, achieving the goal of better global dissemination of Chinese culture.

Finally, we should strengthen cultural proximity. As the famous French director René Clair once stated, “The audience is not necessarily right, but the writer who ignores the audience is certainly wrong.” In the process of cross-cultural communication, Chinese TV dramas should produce cultural products that align with the aesthetic preferences and interests of audiences in different regions, or find common ground in the emotions and values of diverse audiences,

guiding them to overlook cultural differences while emphasizing cultural proximity. This reduces the cultural discount of Chinese TV dramas in cross-cultural communication, thereby better exporting our cultural products worldwide.

5 Summary and Reflection

Through content analysis, this paper examines the cultural discount theory as applied to cultural differences generated by transnational remakes of films and TV series, attempting to answer whether cultural discount phenomena occur during the transmission process of remakes. The study finds that the closer a country's cultural tradition is to China's Confucian culture, the lower the cultural discount; conversely, the farther a country's cultural tradition is from China's Confucian culture, the higher the cultural discount.

This study demonstrates that cultural discount is closely related to cultural differences among nations, reflecting the varied development of transnational film and television drama remaking. On the other hand, it also provides insights for remaking films and TV series within different modern Chinese cultural contexts. However, it is noteworthy that this study also found that transnational film and television drama remaking can produce negative effects such as cultural distortion, dissemination issues, and demonization, which warrant vigilance and reflection.

Nevertheless, due to the limited number of countries involved in remaking *Journey to the West*, this study has a singular cross-cultural dimension and cannot fully examine cultural discount differences caused by various cultures across different nations. Future research in cultural discount theory should pay greater attention to the multi-dimensionality of cultural discounts arising from different cultural contexts and extend both theoretical and practical investigations.

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