

A comparative study of cultural differences in transnational remakes of film and television dramas: Postprint

Authors: JIN Mengqing

Date: 2023-07-23T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

In this paper, a comparative analysis of the adaptations and remakes of Chinese, Australian and Vietnamese television dramas is conducted through content analysis and in-depth interviews, taking the Chinese classic Journey to the West, the Australian version of The Legend of the New Monkey King and the Vietnamese version of Journey to the West as examples in the context of cross-cultural communication. The conceptual distinction between adaptations and remakes is made from the perspective of the similarities and differences between the media, and the origins, dilemmas and possible trends of the development of both are summarised. The study finds that the Vietnamese version of Journey to the West and the Australian version of The Legend of the New Monkey King are very different from the Chinese classic in terms of plot adaptation, and that the transnational remakes are less effective in terms of dissemination. The more similar the country is to our traditional Confucian culture, the lower the cultural discount is. It is hoped that film and TV drama practitioners will make rational judgments and positive actions from the concept of intercultural communication, and hopefully, it will be useful for future film and TV drama remake productions and for the intercultural communication of remade film and TV dramas.

Full Text

Preamble

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

****First Author^{1*}, JIN Mengqing****

School of Journalism and Communication, Hebei College of Communication,

China

Corresponding author E-mail: 1770521089@qq.com

Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative analysis of adaptations and remakes of Chinese, Australian, and Vietnamese television dramas through content analysis and in-depth interviews, using the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, the Australian version *The Legend of the New Monkey King*, and the Vietnamese version *Journey to the West* as case studies within the context of cross-cultural communication. The conceptual distinction between adaptations and remakes is established from the perspective of intermedia differences, and the origins, dilemmas, and potential trends in the development of both are summarized. The study finds that both the Vietnamese and Australian versions differ significantly from the Chinese classic in terms of plot adaptation, and that transnational remakes demonstrate limited effectiveness in dissemination. The more similar a country is to China's traditional Confucian culture, the lower the cultural discount. It is hoped that film and television practitioners will make rational judgments and take positive actions from an intercultural communication perspective, and that this research will prove useful for future film and television remake productions and for the intercultural communication of remade works.

Keywords: intercultural communication; film and television drama; cultural differences; localization

1 Introduction

At the beginning of 2022, as the global epidemic continued to spread, media products developed rapidly. In this context, remakes of *Journey to the West* in countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam achieved notable communication results. We observed that remakes alter costumes, presentation styles, and even character dialogue, suggesting that greater cultural differences between the remaking country and China lead to higher cultural discount and stronger localization effects. This raises several questions: Do remakes have a cultural exchange effect? How is cross-cultural communication achieved in remakes? Does cultural discounting occur during the distribution of remakes? Through a comparative study of China's classic *Journey to the West*, the Australian *The Legend of the New Monkey King*, and the Vietnamese *Journey to the West*, this article examines how the same story is presented differently across countries in terms of form and connotation. By analyzing these film and television works, we compare them with the original text and identify gaps from multiple perspectives, including production mechanisms, content, dissemination channels, and effects. This analysis explores the advantages and shortcomings of international remakes, particularly the characteristics of localized changes to cultural differences in cross-cultural communication, in an attempt to find a path forward for remakes. It is hoped that this research will provide useful reference for future film and television remakes and contribute to the intercultural communication of such works, ultimately discovering new ways for remakes to

enhance national cultural soft power.

2.1 Literature Review of Transnational Remakes of Films and TV Dramas

An internet search for key terms revealed 21 doctoral dissertations and 212 master's theses on "intercultural communication, remakes." Among these, 75 articles focused on video communication, accounting for 35% of intercultural communication research, while 29 articles addressed film and television dramas specifically, representing 38% of image communication research. However, literature specifically on film and television dramas remains limited. The phenomenon of intercultural communication models has attracted research from multiple perspectives in both domestic and international academia. Domestic scholar Wen Min's article "A Study on the Dilemma of Intercultural Communication and Countermeasures for Chinese Costume Serials" combines the phenomenon of Chinese costume drama export remakes with theories of peripheral communication and cultural discounting, analyzing the intercultural communication profile of Chinese costume dramas in terms of plot, theme, and context, and proposing the introduction of policies to protect cross-culturally transmitted works. Domestic scholar Dong Xiaowei, in "A Comparative Study of the Remake of the Film and TV Drama 'The Devotion of Suspect X' from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication—Taking the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Versions as an Example," proposes that regardless of country, the ultimate goal of remaking a film is to gain more viewers and box office revenue, to effectively spread national culture, and to make artistic value accessible to a wider audience, while also putting forward additional requirements for transnational art workers.

Foreign scholar Yipeng Yuan focuses on the opportunities and risks presented by influencers in intercultural communication, pointing out that influencers have significant opportunities in developing multiculturalism, intercultural communication in pluralistic contexts, and corporate marketing in the global marketplace. Foreign scholar Hairong Sun, meanwhile, analyzes key elements of cross-cultural communication in film and television dramas using the example of *The Quest for Dreams and Travels*, noting that in modern globalization, countries should continuously promote cultural exchange and mutual learning to advance overall world progress.

2.2 Literature Review of Remakes of Classic Masterpieces

A search using "remake of classic masterpieces" as a keyword identified relevant scholarship. Domestic scholar Ren Zhiming takes film and television adaptations of "red classics" as the research object, reviewing and reflecting on existing research to raise new expectations and goals. She analyzes the reasons for the growing phenomenon of film and television remakes in the current context of commercialization, as well as the problems, impacts, and corresponding mea-

asures that should be taken. She also explains that remaking classics can, to a certain extent, lead to the loss or obliteration of some inherent originality.

In summary, films occupy a large portion of research on intercultural communication, but there is a lack of research on television series remakes. Few articles combine intercultural communication and TV series remakes, and existing studies do not clearly define the scope of intercultural communication research. Theoretical research on intercultural communication is not deep enough, and studies on remakes of classic masterpieces such as *Journey to the West* are almost nonexistent. Previous studies on TV remakes from cultural and communication perspectives have mostly focused on practical strategies while ignoring audience interests and psychology. These studies do not examine intercultural communication phenomena from the perspective of audience interest and psychology, nor do they address questions about cultural discounting due to cultural differences. This paper therefore attempts to answer the following question from the perspective of intercultural communication theory: Is cultural discount lower in countries that are closer to China's traditional Confucian culture?

3.1 In-Depth Interview Method

In-depth interviews were employed to provide longitudinal analysis of viewer perceptions. A sample of 15 people aged 20-25 who had watched both the Australian *The Legend of the New Monkey King* and the Vietnamese *Journey to the West* in the month prior to the interview were asked to share their feelings without restriction. While audience feedback cannot alter a completed film, it can serve as a valuable reference for future remakes.

The interview questions were divided into three main sections. The first section covered basic interviewee information, including age, income, and occupation. The second section translated research questions into interview questions, addressing perceptions of cultural differences, specific acceptance, non-acceptance strategies, and approaches to cross-cultural communication. The third section prepared for potential deeper follow-up questions.

This study conducted 45-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the 15 participants aged 20-25. Interviews began in December 2022 and concluded in January 2023. Interviewees included overseas students, with additional participants recruited through international student networks. Following the maximum sampling principle of qualitative research methodology, sample collection was closed after the 15th interviewee provided sufficient content to answer the research questions. Interviewees varied in age, occupation, education level, and location, resulting in low homogeneity. Interviews were conducted via telephone, WeChat text, and one-on-one face-to-face sessions, with results collated into verbatim transcripts totaling 3,000 words.

3.2 Content Analysis Method

This study employed content analysis to examine works from CCTV and Surge, comparing dimensions of makeup, discourse, props, scenes, and subplots, with higher scores indicating greater similarity to the original.

4 Research Content

This study provides a conceptual definition of film and television drama remakes and adaptations, offering a broad perspective and analysis of the long-standing historical tradition of remakes, the pursuit of both artistic and market values, current dilemmas, and possible future trends. Through comparative analysis of the internal and external messages of these works, the study examines how different works present the same original blueprint through film and television language, the narrative sequence after media transformation, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of the other culture presented in the original *Journey to the West*—including plot and ideological connotations—by the Vietnamese and Australian versions of *The Legend of the New Monkey King*.

Subsequently, the audiovisual effects and psychological feelings conveyed to the audience by these works provide feedback and lessons for future remakes. Finally, from a theoretical perspective, the study suggests conceptual improvements for future remakes, hoping that practitioners will find the appropriate balance between grasping their own culture and identifying with other cultures, thereby playing a lasting and positive role in remaking films and dramas in cross-cultural contexts.

5.1 Cross-Media Narrative Structural Settings in Film and Television Drama

Journey to the West primarily employs a combination of linear and circular narrative techniques, including foreshadowing and symmetrical narrative. Its storyline unfolds through relationships between two pairs of characters characterized by conflicts of belief and personality. On the journey to obtain scriptures, Sun Wukong returns to Mount Huaguo twice, and Zhu Bajie repeatedly mentions “you go back to your Flowing Sands River, and I go back to my Gaolaozhuang.” The contractual structure consists of the contract recipient (Party B), the contracting party (Party A), and the contract conditions. Notably, “the functional group that constitutes the contractual structure takes a negative form at the beginning of the narrative but becomes affirmative by the end.” In the twenty-seventh episode of *Journey to the West*, when the monk orders the Monkey King expelled, he breaks the contract of his own accord, and the Monkey King abandons his journey to return to the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, restoring his true state (i.e., the negative state according to Grimes). This clearly shows that Sun Wukong has entered into a contractual relationship with the Tang Monk and the Buddhism he represents, with the tightening of the curse serving

as punishment for breach of contract. By extension, Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, the White Dragon Horse, and Tang Monk can all be analyzed similarly.

Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, and the White Dragon Horse had similar experiences before signing their contracts. Zhu Bajie once introduced himself: “I was originally a heavenly marshal in the River Heaven, but because I teased Chang’e while drunk, the Jade Emperor beat me with 2,000 hammers and relegated me to the mortal world.” Sha Wujing similarly stated: “I was a curtain-general who served the Jade Emperor in the Heavenly Palace, but because I accidentally broke a glass jar at the Peach Festival, the Jade Emperor beat me with 800 hammers and relegated me to the mortal world.” The Bodhisattva Guanyin introduced the Little White Dragon thus: “This one is the son of Ao Run from the Western Sea; he set fire to the pearl on the temple, his father sued him for disobedience, and he committed a capital offense in the Heavenly Court, so I personally approached the Jade Emperor to have him descend.” Clearly, all three were originally members of the Heavenly Court who had been demoted for their transgressions. In their suffering, the Bodhisattva Guanyin appeared and offered that if they signed a contract to escort the Longevity Monk to the Western Paradise to obtain scriptures, they would be spared their suffering and achieve righteousness.

The latter eighty episodes of *Journey to the West* follow a typical linear time structure, with Tang Monk and his party traveling 108,000 miles and undergoing eighty-one hardships before finally reaching Mount Ling to obtain the true scriptures. Zheng Zhenduo points out in *The Evolution of Journey to the West* that apart from the first four hardships, the remaining so-called eighty-one hardships are all experiences during the journey, but this number is merely an exaggeration; in reality, there are not eighty-one distinct stories, but rather several hardships that are variations of the same basic story. Following this insight, we take the forty-one stories from Tang Monk’s encounter with a tiger outside the city to the old softshell turtle haunting the Tongtian River as the object of our structural analysis.

These forty-one stories are not entirely repetitive in structure, indicating certain logical relationships between them that become clearer when the short stories are combined into several clusters. The first cluster (episodes 13-26) focuses on the formation of the scripture-retrieval team. The second cluster (episodes 27-58) centers on eliminating duplicity within the team. In the twenty-seventh episode, “The Demon of the White Bone Spirit Plays Tang Sanzang, and the Holy Monk Hates and Expels the Monkey King,” the greatest internal crisis of the scripture-retrieval team occurs, bringing the conflict between Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie into focus. The third cluster begins after episode 59, when the team becomes completely united, with even Tang Monk basically no longer disappearing. In other words, the author intends the four master and disciples to remain together, acting as a unified whole to fight for justice and help all beings. The stories no longer center on rescuing the Monk but on the Monkey King saving Camelot, opening Thorn Ridge, rescuing children in the Bijou Kingdom,

saving the Empress in the Zizhu Kingdom, and rescuing the Princess in the Tianzhu Kingdom. This analysis clearly reveals a narrative logic between story clusters involving team formation, elimination of duplicity, and unified action in rescuing others.

5.2 Comparison of Localised Adaptations of Cross-Media Characterisation

Vietnamese culture developed under the influence of Chinese culture; however, in the modern era, Vietnam also experienced a painful history of colonization. After the 1970s, the United States even established a pseudo-regime in South Vietnam, and the cultures of almost all major Eastern and Western powers took root in Vietnam. It is therefore unsurprising that Vietnam produced an East-meets-West adaptation of *Journey to the West*. The original *Journey to the West* features gloriously bizarre demonic and immortal spells that delighted audiences. Set in the Tang Dynasty during the Zhenguan period, the Chinese still relied primarily on the sundial method of timekeeping, which involved setting up a gnomon in a well-lit area to determine time based on the shadow's position. However, the Vietnamese version differs significantly: in its setting, the Tang Empire appears to have seen the dawn of modern civilization, with the Monkey King already using a watch! While Sun Wukong carrying a mechanical watch might understandably signify the Tang Empire's development, the crew appears to have been constrained by financial limitations, giving Sun Wukong an electronic watch instead, thereby granting the Tang Empire direct access to technological achievements from after the second industrial revolution. This plot setup is hilariously absurd, and it remains unclear whether the director intended it as comic relief or as a deliberate choice.

As seen in production stills, the costume design of the four main characters in the Vietnamese version largely follows the 1986 edition of *Journey to the West*. However, as the camera draws in, the familiar Sun Wukong lacks the witty image of the original; his loose-fitting clothes and the actors' haphazard performance bear no resemblance to the once-majestic Great Sage Equal to Heaven who wreaked havoc in the Heavenly Palace, instead resembling a monkey being performed with on the street. While the actor's clothes fit the original story, his face suggests the crew stole the fake beard from Li Kui of the *Water Margin* production next door. The actor playing Zhu Bajie wore no pig mask but was cast based on his natural appearance—quite thin, with a deflated stomach. To save costs, the White Dragon Horse role was eliminated entirely. Such crude production is disheartening.

Given the shabby sets and odd cast, it is difficult to believe such a remake could be well received.

5.3 Cultural Differences and Cultural Discounts

The emergence of the Vietnamese *Journey to the West* sparked considerable debate and outrage among netizens—though only Chinese netizens expressed outrage. For Vietnamese audiences, however, the drama was interesting, simple, and easy to understand, receiving extremely high ratings when broadcast on television. The vastly different attitudes of Chinese netizens and Vietnamese viewers toward the same series reflect issues of cultural identity. While *Journey to the West* represents the culmination of Chinese literary wisdom and should be well preserved and passed down, Chinese audiences maintain an attitude of reverence toward it and do not permit indiscriminate adaptation. For Vietnamese audiences, even though China was once their suzerain state, *Journey to the West* remains an imported product, so they feel free to adapt it for entertainment.

Therefore, we should view the Vietnamese version with tolerance. We cannot expect Vietnamese creators to respect the original as much as Chinese audiences do, since literature and art exist for the people. As long as Vietnamese audiences enjoy it, such a version constitutes excellent literature in its own right. Indeed, some Vietnamese viewers have become interested in the original *Journey to the West* after watching their local version, boosting sales of the original work in Vietnam. Such series can serve as bridges for cultural exchange between China and the outside world. Therefore, even if such productions seem useless to Chinese audiences, they still play a role in making foreign audiences more familiar with Chinese culture.

5.4 Description of the Interview Results

How is cross-cultural communication achieved in remade dramas? When we conducted further in-depth interviews to address whether cultural discounting occurs during the dissemination of remakes, we were surprised to find that the closer countries are to China's traditional Confucian culture, the lower the cultural discount. Interviewees' responses confirmed our beliefs about whether remakes serve as cultural exchange:

“Vietnam is also heavily influenced by Chinese and American culture, and the remake of *Journey to the West* reflects China's increased soft power in recent years. As China's literary and artistic market goes global, more foreigners are willing to watch Chinese works.”

“On foreign online platforms, the TV series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has become a hit with European and American audiences, even rivaling the American series *Game of Thrones*. This demonstrates the influence of Chinese civilization, which is beneficial for China. Of course, in the process of cultural diffusion, foreigners inevitably develop biased understandings of Chinese culture or fail to take it seriously enough, and the Vietnamese *Journey to the West* is a product of this phenomenon.”

“We should be tolerant and give them more time. After all, our culture advocates

inclusiveness rather than forced change. As the original *Journey to the West* says: ‘All are destined to be under the Buddha’s tutelage.’ In the Chinese cultural sphere, China and Vietnam are also destined to be together.”

“As China’s soft power continues to grow, we will one day see Chinese culture blossoming worldwide, and our nation will witness the glory that belongs to us.”

5.5 Description of the Content Analysis

The results show that the Australian *The Legend of the New Monkey King* scored an average of 3.11 for makeup, 2.08 for discourse, 3.71 for scenes, 3.71 for props, and 3.67 for subplots. According to the coding criteria, the Australian version shows low similarity to the Chinese *Journey to the West*. Particularly in the discourse dimension, the Australian version has extensively adapted line content and linguistic context, suggesting that other countries make greater discourse adaptations in their remakes of Chinese classics due to cultural discounting in cross-cultural communication caused by contextual differences. For example, the Chinese version contains numerous localized proverbs, civet words, and idioms, which the Australian version replaces with its own customary speech patterns. The Australian version’s language features distinctive Australian humor and repeatedly emphasizes an Australian sense of national equality, while the traditional Chinese contextual style is absent. Additionally, because the Australian version has adapted many episodes, the line content diverges significantly from the original.

5.6 Points of Innovation

This study innovates by using in-depth interviews from the viewer’s perspective to analyze film and television dramas through audiovisual language. Within the framework of film and television language, different shots respond to different emotional demands, and different music aids different story rhythms. While viewers’ focus may not be on audiovisual language but on storyline and ideological content, in-depth interviews provide objective analysis of established images as a methodological control. Furthermore, in an age of information explosion, ensuring content quality alongside active promotional interaction is essential. This is particularly evident in Chinese remakes from 2017—the most recent year for remakes—where new media development triggered high media coverage and consequently high box office revenues through viral spread on social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat, leveraging the star power of actors and directors. However, it is undeniable that fans constitute an important audience segment, and even non-fans, when surrounded by persistent film information and discussions, are driven by herd mentality to consume such content. Previous studies have not considered external communication channels as a factor in cross-cultural communication, yet these channels significantly influence box office performance and critical evaluation.

6.1 Conclusion

This study theorizes the phenomenon of cross-cultural communication in remakes through content analysis and in-depth interviews, attempting to answer questions about cultural discounting due to cultural differences. After reviewing video and textual materials, preliminary knowledge of the research topic was obtained, followed by methodological determination. Content analysis of short reviews was supplemented by pre-testing with in-depth interviews.

The localization process involves contextual changes made when determining a film or television drama's theme, while the local audience for the work simultaneously serves as a prerequisite for theme determination. From an intercultural perspective, mastering the essence of one's own culture, gaining deeper understanding of other cultures, finding the right fit, and using localization to transform content are principles that remake practitioners must grasp. Combining these with diverse promotional methods to expand market reach is essential for achieving both critical and commercial success.

6.2 Shortcomings

The content and format of short reviews are free-form, based on each viewer's different feelings about the show, with comments ranging from cultural differences to subtitle translations. The coding sheet cannot cover all factors mentioned by viewers, resulting in biased sample coverage.

In the in-depth interviews, respondents made predictions about plot direction based on viewing patterns, such as camera dwell time and the frequency of scene descriptions. Some respondents could predict plot developments and character motivations. However, those respondents who were both viewers and analysts may not have had as strong a pure viewing experience as those who were simply audience members, as their exploration of the drama was more biased toward technical aspects rather than connotative meaning. On the other hand, their opinions were quite sharp, extending beyond plot to make detailed suggestions from a vertical perspective.

References

- [1] Lu, Shiaojie. (2016). *History-Type-Strategy*. Master's degree. China: Hunan Normal University. (in Chinese)
- [2] Cai Yingzhou. (2017). Cross-cultural communication of television dramas: From brand to national image. *China TV* (01), 74-77+1. (in Chinese)
- [3] Mu Nianxiao. (2017). *Research on the national image in Chinese costume films since the new century*. Master's degree. China: Shandong Normal University. (in Chinese)
- [4] Guan Wenjuan. (2017). The dimensions and biases of Chinese national image constructed by overseas communication of domestic TV dramas. *News Lovers* (07), 37-39. (in Chinese)

- [5] Shao Qingfeng. (2017). From the consumption of representational differences to the construction of cultural community—the rationality and ways of spreading the Chinese dream in ancient costume dramas. *Journal of Guizhou University (Arts Edition)* (04), 29-33. (in Chinese)
- [6] Liu Yongchang. (2018). Historical speech and the mirror image of the times—On the aesthetic style of contemporary costume dramas. *China TV* (11), 16-19. (in Chinese)
- [7] Du Yingjie & Yang Jie. (2019). Research on the overseas dissemination of literary classic adaptations. *China TV* (02), 71-76. (in Chinese)
- [8] Gan Tingting. (2019). Research on cultural discounting in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese TV dramas. Master's degree. China: Bohai University. (in Chinese)
- [9] Chen Hongyou & Li Yang Yang. (2019). The contemporary value identity of the civilianization of the characters in ancient costume dramas: A discussion on the energy efficiency of cultural communication in *Na Nian Hua Kai Yue Zheng Yuan*. *Sight & Sound* (12), 10-12. (in Chinese)
- [10] Lai, Li-Chieh & Fang, Jie-Yun. (2020). The poetic return and value reconstruction of the meaning of daily life—The example of the ancient drama “If you know whether you know it should be green and red.” *Contemporary Television* (07), 42-45. (in Chinese)
- [11] Guo Lichao & Liu Yankui. (2020). Reducing cultural discounts: Three principles for enhancing the effectiveness of TV dramas at sea. *Media* (20), 48-50. (in Chinese)
- [12] Luo Qun & Liu Yang. (2021). Cultural atmosphere creation: A new dimension of ancient life in costume dramas. *Contemporary Television* (01), 47-50. (in Chinese)
- [13] Li Han. (2021). SWOT-PEST model analysis of “cultural discount” in Chinese film and television cross-cultural communication. Master's degree. China: Hebei University of Economics and Business. (in Chinese)
- [14] Cha, YongSeung, Lee, Kwang Chul. (2013). Box Office Performance of America Movies in Korea, Genre, and Cultural Discount. *Korean Journal of Business Administration* Volume 26, Issue 2. P411-433.
- [15] Chen Rui, Chen Zhiyi, Yang Yong zhong. The Creation and Operation Strategy of Disney's *Mulan*: Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Discount. *Sustainability* Volume 13, Issue 5. 2021. PP2751-2751.
- [16] Dong Il Oh. (2016). Analysis on the Global Success Factors of Animation *Lava*: With a Focus on Nonverbal Communication from the Perspective of ‘Cultural Discount’. *The Korean Journal of animation* Volume 12, Issue 2. PP 143-157.
- [17] Etsuko Kinefuchi. (2018). Critical Discourse Analysis and the ecological turn in intercultural communication. *Review of Communication* Volume 18, Issue 3. PP 212-230.
- [18] Francis L. F. Lee. (2009). Cultural discount of cinematic achievement: the academy awards and U.S. movies' East Asian box office. *Journal of Cultural Economics* Volume 33, Issue 4. PP 239-263.
- [19] Guo Lanying, Jiang Jianxia. The Market Effect of Cultural Transmission

in Chinese Costume Dramas: A Case Study of the Untamed. Proceedings of the 2019 International Conference on Economic Management and Cultural Industry (ICEMCI 2019).

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.