

The Phenomenon of “Cultural Discount” and Its Reasons in the Cross-cultural Communication of Domestic TV Dramas

--Taking The Legend of Zhenhuan as an Example

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Abstract: In the perspective of the dynamic global landscape, individuals residing overseas have several misunderstandings and prejudices towards China, resulting in a range of obstacles limiting the promotion of Chinese perspectives. Utilizing the story of an attractive Chinese narrative and cultivating a positive perception of a nation's greatness can serve as a potent strategy for mitigating opposition towards Chinese culture. Nevertheless, the occurrence of "cultural discount" frequently arises in the context of cultural export, so significantly impacting the efficacy of cultural communication. The majority of these investigations about this phenomena mostly centre around the cross-cultural communication aspects of documentary films, with comparatively less emphasis placed on TV dramas and other forms of film and television that exhibit greater efficacy in communication. This study examines the phenomena of "cultural discount" and its underlying causes by taking the TV drama *The Legend of Zhenhuan* as an example. *The Legend of Zhenhuan* was popular in China but not in the United States. The research reveals that various issues, including disparities in textual comprehension, absence of translation artistic elements, and fragmented narrative structures, have an impact on the comprehension of Chinese television dramas among western viewers. Moreover, these factors contribute to the exacerbation of the phenomena known as "cultural discount". These variables serve as a theoretical foundation for domestic film and television productions to enhance their outreach efforts, thus facilitating the more efficient dissemination of Chinese culture and the establishment of China's image.

Keywords: cultural confidence, “cultural discount”, Chinese stories, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The increasing global economic status of China has resulted in a shift in the perspectives and attitudes of numerous countries, particularly in Western nations, towards China. This change, combined with the influence of Western media outlets on influencing public opinion, has contributed to a heightened level of misinterpretation and bias towards China among the international population. Additionally,

this situation has posed a certain level of threat to China's political and cultural security. To spread the voice of China, it is imperative to transcend the prevailing paradigm of international communication and explore novel avenues, formats, and approaches to portray China's image on a global scale. In contrast to textual expression, TV dramas, being visual expressions, do not adhere to specific semantic constraints. Instead, viewers interpret visual symbols based on their own cultural experiences and integrate them into their own cultural understanding. Consequently, they are less inclined to resist accepting these visual symbols. Hence, television dramas has notable benefits in facilitating cross-cultural communication as a mode of communication.

The National Administration of Radio and Television (NARFT) published the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Radio, Television and Audiovisual Networks" in 2021. This plan makes it clear that in-depth cooperation should be encouraged among central and local radio and television media, audiovisual organizations, and international media. Policy guidance has provided Chinese TV dramas with new opportunities for cooperation on the international market; however, Chinese TV dramas face significant obstacles on the international market due to the impact of the viewing preferences of international audiences and the communication strategies of film and TV organizations. As an instance, following its initial public presentation in mainland China in 2011, the Douban-rated *The Legend of Zhen Huan* rapidly garnered extensive interest and transformed into a phenomenally popular palace drama. The American adaptation of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* obtained an average rating of 3.7 on the Netflix platform ten days subsequent to its initial broadcast. In contrast to the domestic trend of favourable reviews, *Legend of Zhen Huan* did not garner higher praise when screened in the United States. Certain scholars have noted that Westerners prefer an explicit and direct mode of communication, which is classified as low-context communication [1]. In contrast, China has historically prioritised the strategy of implicit relocation in expression, which is classified as high-context communication. Irrespective of the context, the exportation of film and television drama works will incur a "cultural discount" label. This concept primarily pertains to the notion that during cross-cultural communication, the comprehension of foreign cultural products by various recipients may be skewed as a result of the impact of historical and geographical factors. Consequently, this bias may diminish the intrinsic value of the cultural products [2]. A review of the relevant literature reveals that the majority of previous scholars' research has been devoted to documentaries, while TV dramas, which are more effective at conveying information, have received less attention. On this basis, this paper will analyse the phenomenon of "cultural discount" and its causes in the cross-cultural communication of television dramas using *The Legend of Zhenhuan* as an example.

1.2. Overview of the research

Cultural self-confidence refers to confidence in all aspects of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, such as Chinese good traditional culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture. Scholars lay the groundwork for cultural self-confidence by delving deeply into China's outstanding traditional culture, citing the creative transformation and innovation of traditional Chinese music culture, which demonstrates its value in contemporary society and thus boosts cultural self-confidence [3]. By studying the logical level of red revolutionary culture in establishing cultural self-confidence, consolidates Marxism's dominant position in the field of ideology and concepts, and becomes a spiritual source for establishing cultural self-confidence, as well as comprehensively elaborating the promotion [4]. In terms of film shaping mainstream culture, it is pointed out that the rapid development of Chinese cinema not only lies in the telling of unique Chinese stories and sentiments of the time, but also demonstrates a gradually increasing modern awareness and global outlook [5]. These scholars' research reveals that there are good reasons to maintain our cultural confidence, adhere to the Chinese cultural stance, refine and display the spiritual identity and cultural

essence of Chinese civilization, and allow the spreading power and influence of Chinese civilization to be more fully demonstrated.

Since the 18th Party Congress, actively promoted Chinese culture abroad, and effectively conducted international public opinion guidance and public opinion struggle [6]. Many scholars, both domestic and international, have approached the subject of intercultural communication from various perspectives. In cross-cultural communication, the phenomenon that an individual may have an incorrect understanding of the other side's cultural products due to geography, history, values, and religion, hence decreasing the original worth of the cultural products, is known as "cultural discount".

Cultural discounting, also known as "cultural discounting", is expressed in English as Culture Discount. Colin Hoskins and R. Mirus first proposed and elaborated on the concept in their 1988 paper, "The Case for the Dominance of U.S. Television Programs in the International Market", in which they discussed the importance of cultural discounting in the international marketplace. elaborated. In the process of cross-cultural communication, various audiences may have a less accurate knowledge of cultural products from other places due to factors such as geography and history, resulting in a diminution in the original value of the cultural product [7]. Researchers have conducted a vast number of empirical investigations using this notion, yielding numerous interesting research findings. They stated that the primary reason for the creation of "cultural discount" is a difference in values, followed by a dominant position in the cultural field and cultural misunderstanding in the low context [8]. When studying the problems encountered in the export of Chinese documentaries and the solution strategies from the perspective of "cultural discount", to reduce the "cultural discount" of Chinese documentaries, it is necessary to strive to learn from the successful experiences of developed countries [9]. It is believed that in order to reduce and eliminate the mechanism and operation logic of "cultural discount", it is necessary to focus on the three key links of message reception, decoding, and identification, and conduct a detailed analysis of their formation principles, to improve the efficiency and quality of communication, which has great academic and practical value for promoting social consensus [10]. These materials are quite useful as references for this work. However, there is a gap in the study of "cultural discount" that allows for this paper's investigation of cross-cultural communication of home dramas aimed exclusively at the United States.

2. The relevance of the construction of cultural self-confidence and the cross-cultural communication of domestic TV dramas

Cultural self-confidence and cross-cultural distribution of film and television works complement one another. Cultural self-confidence not only provides critical strategic support for the global distribution of cinema and television works, but it also acts as a means of increasing China's influence and building cultural self-confidence.

Television drama, as a kind of culture and art, has rich cultural significance and values, and through its presentation and diffusion, individuals can better comprehend and know their particular culture. As a communication medium, the broadcast of TV plays encourages cross-cultural conversation and interaction. TV plays can serve as an effective medium for disseminating traditional Chinese culture and developing a Chinese discourse system. From another perspective, the international distribution of domestic films and television plays is a potent tool for demonstrating the allure of Chinese culture, increasing Chinese culture's global influence, and improving public cultural identity. In recent years, the quality of domestic TV dramas has risen dramatically, and they have steadily taken on the vital function of conveying China's stories, with their global diffusion effectively promoting the display of China's cultural confidence.

3. Cultural discount phenomenon in the cross-cultural communication of the domestic TV series *The Legend of Zhenhuan*

3.1. Differences in the understanding of the names of palaces

From the Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, the emperor's bedchamber was the Qianqing Palace; however, after Emperor Kangxi died, Emperor Yongzheng, out of filial piety, opted to live in the Yangxin Palace. Originally utilized as a production office (producing royal supplies), the title "Yangxin" signifies that suppressing desire is the most effective way to build a cheerful attitude. In the American version of *The Legend of Zhenhuan*, the translation of "Yangxin Dian" as "Yangxin Hall" does not accurately portray the historical story and context. If translated as Hall of Mental Cultivation, it may better express the cultural character, life attitude, and aesthetic sensibility of the Chinese people, making it more suitable for cultural interchange and dissemination.

3.2. A misunderstanding of lines

In the third episode of the national version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, Xia Changzai receives the terrible penalty of "Yi zhang hong" for her arrogance and bossiness, infuriating Concubine Hua. In the first episode of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* in the United States, the phrase "Then honour Xia Chang Zai with Yi Zhang Hong" was translated as "Then I will award Attendant Xia the Scarlet Red." The phrase "Yi Zhang Hong" refers to an old kind of punishment in which a female prisoner was beaten from the waist to the legs with a five-foot-long, two-inch-thick wooden board until she was bloodied enough to appear blood-red. In the American version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, the word "scarlet" has two meanings: "bright red" and "sinful." The term "sinful" is also used in *The Scarlet Letter*, where the red letter "A" signifies the cruel penalty of the Puritan society. The term "scarlet woman" translates to "whore, slut". However, at the time of the occurrence, Xia Changzhai had not yet been favoured, thus associating him with the phrases "Scarlet" and "Red", which signify "lecherous", would be deceptive to Western audiences.

3.3. The loss of beauty in translation

A more significant point is demonstrated by the translation of various exchanges and ancient poems in the performance. The poem "Huan Huan Yi Niao Chu Gong Yao" serves as the first climax of the domestic version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, as well as heralding the start of her amazing life. Although the poem is translated as "the waist of a tightly bound Chu Palace maiden" in the English version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, expressing the meaning of a Chu Palace maiden's slender waist, the romantic poetic meaning of the original intention is not fully conveyed. At the same time, the names of various dim sums, teas, and items on the gift list, which feature frequently in the drama, have been translated, resulting in a loss of original mood and sense of language, as well as a lack of the ancient texture of traditional culture. As a result, the translation of lines from *The Legend of Zhen Huan* is another example of "cultural discount".

3.4. Disconnected storylines

The original 76 episodes lasted around 3,420 minutes but the US version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* was reduced and streamlined to a 6-episode, 540-minute edition. Whereas the original *Legend of Zhen Huan* depicts the fight within the Qing Palace from several angles, the accompanying description of emotions and humanity adds themes of struggle and vengeance. Viewers who enter this drama will notice that every scene, glance, and action throughout the 76-episode series is meaningful and reveals the human condition. The entire scenario teaches us that when confronted with a brutal environment,

we must act with moderation, set a bottom line, and be kind to others to gain harmony in the hearts of people. Zhen Huan, the drama's main character, rises to the position of Empress Dowager from a woman who shuns the world but pays for all the people and things she values with a lifetime of solitude.

4. The causes of "Cultural Discount" in the cross-cultural communication of the domestic TV drama *The Legend of Zhenhuan*

4.1. Cultural distinctions between high and low contexts

In a high-context culture, the communicator generally expresses far less through words than actual substance, necessitating a greater emphasis on the meaning behind the words. In contrast, in a low-context culture, the major vehicle for information transmission is the content of the communication, emphasizing the value of both participants' contributions to the exchange over the context.

Chinese culture is high-context, whereas English culture is low-context, due to variations in language and context that result in different patterns of thinking. For example, when Zhen Huan was first placed in the Suiyu Xuan, various lackeys began to intentionally cold-shoulder and alienate people in their palace because this location had previously housed one of the late emperor's disfavored concubines, and placing Zhen Huan here would most likely indicate that this newly-arrived young lord was not favoured. However, when the emperor himself holds this tiny master from the garden to almost half of the palace to Suiyu xuan, the palace suddenly boils, has not yet bedding sealed, but also makes Suiyu xuan like a crowded market. The contrast from coldness to bustle alludes to the people in the palace who see the wind in their sails, and at the same time demonstrates the supremacy of the imperial power under the centralization of authoritarianism. However, coupled with the editing techniques of the American version, it is very difficult for overseas audiences to understand the different behaviors of the lackeys in front and behind the scenes.

4.2. Differences in language and script

Language and writing have traditionally been the primary forms of cultural communication, serving as important mediators in cultural development. According to specialists, the number of languages we presently have ranges from 5,000 to 7,000, with 3,000 different styles of writing. However, deciphering the language and characters of foreign cultures is the most difficult obstacle for viewers when viewing films, which is also the primary cause of the "cultural discount" phenomenon in films and television shows. As a result, in international film and television exchanges, distributors typically add subtitles or dubbing to their films, but there are frequent mistakes in the translation process, which leads to the audience's misinterpretation of the work. Although the translator may attempt to emulate the original film's language style, it is frequently difficult to properly communicate the passion and taste of the original work. For example, when the Emperor was dying, Xi Guifei said "Si Lang, Na Nian Xing Hua Wei Yu." This was translated as "My dear, long ago, we met in the rain, surrounded by apricot blossoms...". "Chen Qi Zuo Bu Dao A" is translated as "But I could not", "I cannot bear it" or "I truly cannot bear it", "truly cannot bear it"..... Although this kind of translation does show the whole picture and even the details clearly, the flavour of classical Chinese poetry is completely lost.

4.3. Distinctive aesthetic expectations and appraisal habits

The Chinese value "harmony" and highlight the completeness and coherence of everything. In terms of editing procedures, the mainland version uses a chronological, interlocking set of steps. The American version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* is edited into six separate chapters that are introduced independently, which is consistent with the viewing habits of the American audience, but has a

significant impact on the plot's promotion and development. In terms of visual style and composition, the first version of the opening credits used a coloured peony as a prelude and placed it as the background tone in a long-term fashion, with eye-catching and soothing colors. The peony denotes noble majesty and majestic elegance, symbolizing the palace's indestructible queen and emphasizing the story's feminine theme. However, the American adaptation of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* has been newly edited, presenting relatively dark colors and continuously displaying Chinese cultural elements rich in imperial features such as dragon robes, dragon chairs, dragon pillars, dragon decorations representing imperial power, and the exquisite headdresses and decorations of the palace consorts. Although the peony is preserved at the conclusion, the tone shifts to silver-grey, creating a dark and enigmatic atmosphere, emanating an unusual attitude, and providing the American audience with a sense of the exotic.

5. Future direction and suggestions for intercultural communication in domestic TV dramas

Since the 18th Party Congress, cross-cultural communication in Chinese film and television has been an important component of its high-quality development. Interaction and communication across different cultures have grown increasingly common as a result of widespread globalization. Domestic TV dramas must undertake the important missions of shaping national spiritual symbols, providing moral examples, and providing healthy entertainment, while also possessing full cultural self-confidence to firmly tell China's stories, disseminating China's voices, and innovating the presentation of Chinese images on the international stage.

5.1. Strengthen the international expression of culture and tell a good Chinese story

Learning is a critical prerequisite for domestic dramas to improve cross-cultural communication and prevent the phenomena of "cultural discount". To capture the interest of foreign audiences, it is necessary to adapt to their viewing habits and preferences, actively learn from mature overseas production experience, cultivate a sense of change and a sense of problems, engage in authentic international expression and output, cultivate an international perspective, and selectively process local culture.

5.2. Develop professional translation skills to support domestic TV drama overseas communication innovation

Language and word translation are critical components of cross-cultural communication. Correct and appropriate translation can serve as the topping on the cake of spreading Chinese culture, whereas incorrect translation will detract from the original work's appeal. The poor performance of the American version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* can be attributed in large part to the line translation. As a result, it is critical to pay attention to text translation, cultivate excellent translators, express the content correctly, and even use the local audience's enjoyable way of translating correctly, in order to assist the overseas audience in understanding the theme of the TV series and the ideas they wish to convey.

5.3. Finding cultural "commonalities" to enhance acceptability to overseas audiences

In the process of cross-cultural communication of domestic dramas, a very important part is to find the common concerns of both domestic and overseas audiences, as well as the parts that can resonate with their emotions, and to emphasize the commonality, it also advances Chinese culture and the Chinese spirit, gaining acclaim from both domestic and international audiences. The edited American

version of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* retains the female protagonist's growth process, which is a story of her seeking survival and thus transforming and growing up in the midst of a deep dilemma. This is consistent with the mainstream values expressed in many American films, as well as the quest of individual freedom and equality.

6. Conclusion

In the new era, intercultural communication of domestic TV dramas, as the "main battlefield" for telling China's story and spreading China's voice, should be based on cultural self-confidence and international vision, strengthen the international expression of culture, cultivate professional interpreters, look for the "commonalities" between Eastern and Western cultures, enrich the selection of materials, innovate technology and improve aesthetics, to help China actively participate in global security governance. People should strengthen the international expression of culture, cultivate professional translators, look for commonalities between Eastern and Western cultures, enrich the selection of materials, innovate technology, and improve the aesthetics, so that we can do a good job of propaganda for China's active participation in global security governance and international affairs.

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