

National Narrative and Everyday Politics: A Brief Discussion on the Construction of National Image in Korean Film and Television Culture

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Abstract. Korean film and television culture has shaped a distinct and three-dimensional national image for South Korea in global communication. Its uniqueness lies not only in the successful export of film and television cultural products, but also in the high interaction between political power and popular culture, which embeds political discourse into everyday entertainment. Starting from the national narrative strategies of Korean films and television and the cultural participation mechanism of national leaders, this paper preliminarily analyzes how South Korea transforms the entertainment industry into a core resource for national image construction, forming an operation mode of "integrating the nation into everyday life".

Keywords: Korean film and television, national narrative, everyday politics, cultural soft power, national image

1. Introduction

In 1959, American political scientist Kenneth E. Boulding first put forward the theoretical concept of "national image", arguing that national image is a cognition of a country, and proposed three dimensions for national image construction: geography, psychology and strength. As an intangible asset of a sovereign state, it is the core component of national soft power [1]. As an important form of contemporary popular culture and art, film and television art plays an increasingly important role in the shaping and communication of national image. Through its unique narrative methods and visual expressions, film and television works can vividly show a country's culture, history, spiritual outlook and social development, thus forming an overall impression of the country among audiences at home and abroad [2]. Since the 21st century, South Korea has achieved a leapfrog improvement in cultural influence by virtue of the "Korean Wave". The global popularity of the Korean Wave has gradually freed South Korea from the single image of a "peripheral country in the Cold War" and a "poor country after the Korean War", and become a developed country with distinctive cultural logos. What is more noteworthy is that the construction of South Korea's national image is not only through the successful export of cultural products, but also reflected in the high interaction between political power and popular culture. For example, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung and his wife participated in the variety show Please Take Care of My Refrigerator and appeared at the Busan

International Film Festival. Such a phenomenon that national leaders frequently appear in film and television and entertainment fields is quite rare in the East Asian political tradition.

This paper aims to carry out thinking from two aspects: first, what narrative strategies do Korean films and television adopt to construct national image? Second, how does the cultural participation of South Korean national leaders embed the "nation" into the "everyday" and strengthen the construction of national image? The combination of political communication and national brand theory has made South Korea form an operation logic of "nationality as a product". Due to the operation of this logic, film and television narrative, popular culture and political practice form a closed-loop structure.

2. National narrative strategies in Korean film and television works

As an important part of the cultural industry, film and television works not only carry emotional expression, but also contain political implications. Film and television works have unique advantages in international communication. The pictures of films are visual, which can cross language and cultural barriers and directly act on the audience's perception system, thus being more easily accepted and understood by audiences from different countries and cultural backgrounds. This cross-cultural communication ability makes film and television works an important tool for national image communication [3]. The global success of Korean films and television is by no means solely dependent on production technology, but stems from its mature and complex national narrative strategies.

2.1. "Dust perspective": telling national stories from urban life

National image is not only an official narrative, but also a "folk national image" generated in the micro-society, daily life and interactions of ordinary people [4]. Korean films are very good at telling national stories through this "dust perspective", that is, their national narratives often do not start from grand narratives, but present the national structure from the life experiences of the bottom of society, marginalized people and ordinary families. The fourth-generation directors represented by Bong Joon-ho and Hong Sang-soo use films to change society and always live in the urban life rather than the cloud. This perspective frees national narrative from grand political propaganda, and instead conveys national values through the daily life of ordinary people. Director Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* is a typical example. Through the spatial contrast and class metaphor of two families, the film reveals social inequality, capital logic and intergenerational anxiety. This critical expression has not weakened South Korea's image, but strengthened the international perception of South Korea as a "democratic society capable of self-reflection". Thus, the national image presents complexity and maturity, which is richer and more three-dimensional rather than a single success narrative.

In addition, when Korean film and television works focus on the daily dining tables, conversations and living habits of ordinary Koreans through the "dust perspective", life details such as kimchi, Korean food, South Korea's "fast" culture and South Korea's "jeong" culture naturally become an organic part of the narrative. These repeatedly presented daily elements have settled into distinctive marks for international audiences to recognize Korean culture, enabling Korean culture to gain unique recognition and affinity globally.

2.2. De-exclusive nationalism: jumping out of the self-centered expression framework

Korean films and television have made efforts to adapt to global popularity. This effort is not to completely abandon national emotions, but to realize the "shareability" of national identity by jumping out of the self-centered framework and weakening exclusive nationalism. For example, the film *Escape from Mogadishu* tells the cooperative experience of diplomatic personnel from South Korea and the DPRK during the Somali civil war. The involved North-South relations are a highly politicized issue, but the narrative focus of the film is on "human cooperation in distress" rather than ideological confrontation. This approach not only retains national emotions, but also avoids closed nationalism, thus making the work easier to be understood and recognized by global audiences.

This open national narrative makes South Korea's national image flexible in cross-cultural communication. The country is no longer defined as an exclusive political subject, but a community that can share emotional experiences with others.

2.3. The reflective tradition of political films

The emergence and evolution of Korean political films are deeply influenced by their history, so their narrative themes naturally revolve around national politics, social classes, historical process and national attitudes. These factors jointly shape the political depth of film and television works. Such films, such as *The Attorney* and *A Taxi Driver*, shape the national image as a "political community that grows through pain" by reviewing and reflecting on the process of democratization. Different from one-way heroism, such films emphasize the interaction between citizen action and institutional reform, presenting the historical reflection ability of South Korean society to the world. It conveys South Korea's value pursuit of "reflecting on history and pursuing the path of democracy" to the world, and shapes South Korea's national image of daring to face history.

3. Cultural participation of leaders: the Korean plan for everyday politics

3.1. The Korean phenomenon of everyday politics: from president to idol

It has become normal for South Korean leaders to participate in cultural and entertainment activities. For example, former President Park Geun-hye called the hit Korean drama *Descendants of the Sun* a model and attended an event with the leading actor Song Joong-ki. When the official South Korean media account introduced the South Korean Han Kwang Unit stationed in South Sudan, it emphasized that the real peacekeeping soldiers are the "real descendants of the sun". This behavior is not only a rhetorical strategy, but also a re-encoding of popular culture by politics. In addition to indirectly contacting or quoting popular culture, there are many cases where presidents directly participate in popular culture. For example, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung and Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae performed Korean pop songs together, which is known as "drum diplomacy".

The frequent appearance of South Korean leaders in cultural activities is by no means accidental personal showmanship, but an organic part of the national cultural strategy. In 1998, South Korea, which had just experienced the Asian financial crisis, officially put forward the strategy of "building the country through culture". In the following more than 20 years, from Kim Dae-jung personally promoting the Five-Year Plan for the Development of Cultural Industry, to Roh Moo-hyun attending cultural activities such as the National Prayer Breakfast, the "Korean Wave Culture Revitalization Group" during Lee Myung-bak's term, Park Geun-hye listing "cultural prosperity" as a national

political goal, and even today Lee Jae-myung performing K-POP with foreign heads of state and attending film festivals, successive presidents have regarded cultural communication as the core carrier of national strategy. This phenomenon of "from president to idol" is the inevitable result of South Korea institutionalizing cultural diplomacy and integrating the role of leaders into the cultural promotion system. The cultural appearance of presidents has become a symbolic part of South Korea's tradition of "building the country through culture".

3.2. From the perspective of political communication: leaders as "narrative roles"

From the perspective of political communication, national narrative in film and television is a political communication activity in line with the national mainstream ideology carried out by non-political subjects [5], usually undertaken by the media or cultural products. However, in the Korean case, leaders take the initiative to enter the field of popular culture and make themselves part of the narrative. The cultural participation of leaders pushes this communication to the extreme, integrating themselves into popular culture and making leaders "characters in the play" of national narrative.

When presidents appear on the same screen with idols and interact with variety shows, political power becomes "everyday". National authority is no longer expressed only through institutional language, but realizes emotional connection through entertainment context. This strategy brings multiple effects: first, strengthening the national symbolic significance of cultural products; second, reducing the sense of distance of political power; third, embedding national authority into popular hotspots to achieve multi-layer breakthroughs across generations, national borders and circles. Political authority is flexibly presented in the entertainment space, thus enhancing the affinity of the national brand, showing the characteristics of the national brand and expanding the influence of the national brand.

4. From cultural products to national image: the operation logic of South Korea

Some Chinese scholars believe that the achievements of Korean film and television culture benefit from the long-term implementation of the policy of building the country through culture by the South Korean government, the strong support of South Korea for network technology and film and television media platforms, and the successful cultural export of film and television works, all of which have shaped a positive national image of South Korea for the audience [6]. Combined with previous scholars' research and the previous analysis, this operation mode actually forms an interlocking chain of "institutional policies—industrial development and narrative transformation—national brand and image", and its internal logic deserves further dismantling.

4.1. Institutional foundation: building the country through culture and industrial autonomy

After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the South Korean government regarded culture as an important industry, led and fully supported it by the government. The South Korean government officially put forward the policy of "building the country through culture" in 1998. In the eyes of Koreans, the revitalization of the cultural industry is related to the national lifeline [7]. Up to now, this strategy has maintained a high degree of continuity. It is this national will beyond party rotation that provides stable institutional expectations and resource investment for the cultural industry. Moreover, the relationship established between the South Korean government and Korean film and television is not only a regulatory relationship, but also a very benign and normalized win-win relationship [8]. The government provides financial support and policy guarantee, but "keeps an arm's length between the

government and the industry", does not interfere with content creation, does not censor subject selection, and does not limit expression. Filmmakers can criticize society, idol groups can lead trends, and screenwriters can touch sensitive issues, maintaining relative autonomy in creation. This model of "supporting without excessive intervention" makes cultural products not only have market vitality, but also form national consensus on key issues.

4.2. Transformation mechanism: how film and television works carry national narrative

The process of national narrative in film and television works is to integrate political information into three aspects: role subjects, plot materials and emotional conception, so as to produce national soft image, national hard image or integrated image [5]. Taking Descendants of the Sun as an example, the drama combines fictional peacekeeping operations with confident nationalist narrative. By omitting historical background, othering the involved countries and the sense of justice shown by the protagonists, the sensitive political issue of overseas troop deployment is "normalized" in popular culture. After the drama was broadcast, the official South Korean media directly quoted the drama name when introducing South Korean peacekeeping troops, forming a complete cycle of "film and television narrative → public recognition → political discourse".

4.3. Theoretical interpretation of "nationality as a product"

The core of the Korean model is to construct and operate "nationality" as a product. The final result of national branding is to construct a "nationality as a product", which brings economic benefits and cultural influence to the country. The Korean Wave includes not only K-pop and Korean dramas, but also extends to the global communication of lifestyles such as K-Food and K-Beauty, forming a complete cultural industry chain. Leaders' participation in entertainment activities is not only a people-friendly gesture, but also a strategic act of national brand building.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Core findings

The core findings are mainly from three aspects:

First, the successful construction of "sense of everyday life" by film and television culture makes South Korea's national image more three-dimensional. Through the "dust perspective" and de-exclusive nationalist narrative, Korean films and television integrate national values into the stories of ordinary people, providing the possibility for constructing a widely spread Korean national image and national image.

Second, the cultural participation of national leaders constitutes a key link in integrating the "nation" into the "everyday". From "building the country through culture" to "drum diplomacy", the interaction between South Korean national leaders and popular culture has enabled the national image to achieve continuous brand exposure.

Third, the operation logic of "nationality as a product" has been formed, and Korean culture naturally has the characteristics of being exportable and consumable. The balance between government support and industrial autonomy, the cycle between film and television narrative and political discourse, and the extension between cultural products and daily life together constitute a complete chain of this model.

5.2. Research implications and limitations

This paper provides a non-Western perspective case for understanding cultural soft power. The Korean experience shows that the construction of national image does not necessarily rely on grand political propaganda. Combining everyday politics with popular culture and strengthening national brand cognition through leaders' participation can also form a very penetrating and influential path.

Since this paper only gives a brief discussion based on an observational perspective, follow-up research can further explore the specific narrative strategies of Korean film and television works and the differences in the acceptance of national image in the "Korean Wave" by audiences of different generations and regions from a certain angle through methods such as discourse analysis and audience research.

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