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Cultural Discount and Cultural Proximity: A Comparative Study of Cross-Cultural Communication Effects in Chinese and Foreign Films

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Abstract. Given the development of globalisation, movies are now widely spread around the world, but many Chinese films still fail to achieve widespread recognition internationally. This paper investigates Chinese cinema to explore the impact of cultural distance and cultural proximity on the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. Through theoretical analysis, comparative case studies, box-office data, cross-platform ratings on Douban and IMDb, and audience reception analysis, representative films from different cultural backgrounds have been selected for this study. Based on the above results, cultural distance will limit the dissemination of the work by affecting audiences' understanding and emotional connection. The two factors do not work independently but rather in conjunction; films that integrate local cultural elements with universal themes tend to be more popular globally. Therefore, this study has developed a dynamic interaction model of cultural distance and cultural proximity to add to the existing theory and verify the ameliorative effect of cultural proximity. It also offers some practical measures to strengthen the overseas content design and marketing of Chinese films.

Keywords: Cultural Discount, Cultural Proximity, Cross-Cultural Communication, Film Globalization, Chinese Cinema

1. Introduction

With the advancement of globalisation, films are now important carriers of national culture that can spread around the world. In addition to the economy, there is also value communication and the strengthening of cultural identity [1]. China's film industry has developed and spread overseas at a high speed, but its influence in the West remains relatively small; Chinese films have not yet achieved widespread popularity abroad due to a lack of cultural adaptation. This gap shows structural problems in the spread of world cinema.

Scholars have generally used cultural discount and cultural affinity theories to explain these differences. The extent of cultural distance refers to the degree of difference in cultures; cultural proximity is how easily a foreign audience can be learned by cultural similarity. Based on the study above, cultural distance may be related to interpretation and evaluation bias, thus reducing the effectiveness of communication.

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Most studies so far have been purely theoretical in nature. Most studies of these two concepts separately have failed to consider how they affect communication outcomes together.

Therefore, this paper establishes an all-encompassing system for the above deficiencies through theoretical modelling, cross-cultural case studies and multi-source data analysis. Investigating the combination of cultural distance and cultural closeness in affecting the cross-cultural performance of films, focusing on Chinese cinema. Assess the reception of films in various cultural markets to explore the pathways of cross-cultural communication and provide theoretical and practical support for spreading Chinese films abroad.

2. Theoretical foundation and literature review

2.1. Definition of core related concepts

2.1.1. Cultural discount

This theory was first proposed by scholars such as Hoskins, and is used to explain the widespread phenomenon of value erosion in cross-cultural cultural exchanges. When overseas audiences fail to empathize with and accept the value concepts, narrative logic, folk customs and local traditions behind the film content, it will lead to a decline in the overseas reputation of the work and a decrease in its dissemination and influence [2]. Film creation rooted in local customs and culture is prone to cause cognitive barriers for foreign audiences due to differences in life experiences, thereby interfering with the public's perception evaluation and acceptance of the film [3]. Language barriers, ideological differences, and unequal cross-cultural experiences will all to varying degrees exacerbate the occurrence of the cultural discount phenomenon.

2.1.2. Cultural proximity

Audiences tend to prefer film and literary works that are similar to their native language system, narrative logic, values, and life background. This phenomenon is known as cultural proximity. Cultural Proximity can significantly reduce the cognitive barriers of the audience, deepen emotional connections and identity recognition, and thereby enhance the overseas recognition and dissemination vitality of the films [4]. Relevant academic research has confirmed that the acceptance of overseas films by the public depends not only on rational cognitive interpretation but is also deeply influenced by the laws of emotional resonance [5].

2.2. Review of research on cross-cultural transmission of media and entertainment

With the deepening of globalization and the continuous advancement of new media technologies, the cross-border and cross-cultural dissemination of films and television has long been a key research focus in the academic community. Most of the existing academic achievements have focused on three major aspects: cultural value utility, internal mechanism of action, and audience feedback experience. However, various theories are rather scattered and have not yet formed a complete and integrated system.

In the field of macro research, many scholars regard film and television production as a key carrier for international cultural exchange and cross-border economic and trade cooperation, affirming its significant importance in contributing to the construction of a country's cultural soft poweri . Such studies mostly focus on qualitative descriptions of the strategic position of film and

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television dissemination, and rarely delve into the internal operational logic of the differences in the cross-border dissemination effects of various films.

At the level of exploring the mechanism of action, previous academic discussions have mostly focused on cultural discount. It is generally believed that the cultural gap is the core factor hindering cross-border film and television exchanges [6]. Such studies clearly analyzed the communication constraints brought about by cultural distance, but they overly emphasized the negative effects of cultural differences, ignoring the fact that similar cultural traits can offset communication losses. As a result, the overall research system has obvious flaws.

Recent studies focusing on the audience perspective have begun to pay attention to the influence of emotional resonance and online interaction on the effectiveness of communication [7]. Feedback from social media platform film reviews and discussions among netizens can further expand the overseas dissemination influence of the film. These studies, while going beyond the simple analysis of box office performance, have a single dimension and do not conduct comprehensive discussions by integrating deep cultural structural factors.

Although the previous research has offered many reference ideas from all directions, there are still two major deficiencies. First of all, scholars have long concentrated on the negative effects of cultural differences and have underestimated the positive promotion and compensatory functions of cultural similarity. Second, most of the research results are either purely theoretical or consist of single-case studies, and there is a lack of horizontal comparisons and quantitative data. Therefore, it is necessary for scholars to develop all-encompassing analytical systems at home and abroad based on multiple theoretical backgrounds and actual data.

2.3. Main research contents of this paper

Given the deficiencies in the current studies, this research project will integrate the concepts of cultural discount and cultural similarity into the same analytical system to address this deficiency [8]. This study no longer treats these two factors separately; instead, it will examine how they are correlated in the course of development and what impact they have together on the final results of cross-cultural dissemination of films and television

The three types of ways that will be used in this study are: first, the construction of a theoretical framework; second, cross-country comparisons of films; and third, multi-dimensional data verification. Therefore, the problems of limitations in the previous single-theory study and cases cannot be ignored. Based on all-round research methods, examine in detail how cultural differences and similarities affect one another, and identify the basic operating rules for cross-national film dissemination.

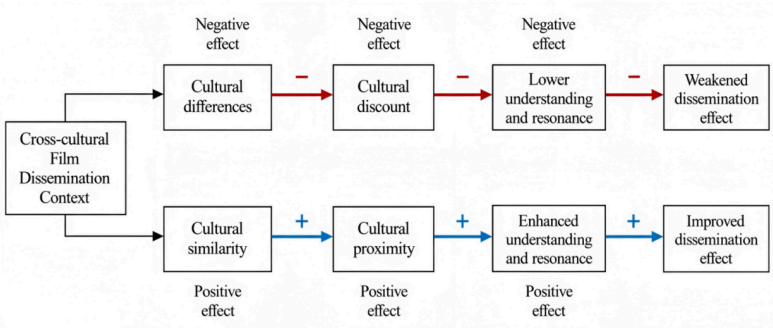

Figure 1. Integrated mechanism of cultural discount and cultural proximity

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Picture credit : Original

2.4. Constraints on cross-cultural film and television communication via cultural discounts

According to figure 1, it can be seen that the cultural discount is essentially a systematic transmission logic that, through the differences in civilizations, continuously restricts the actual effectiveness of cross-border film and television dissemination. The overall chain of effects can be summarized as:

Cultural differences→Cognitive interpretation barriers→Insufficient emotional empathy→ Decline in cross-cultural communication effectiveness

Different regions have differences in language habits, value orientations, social life, historical inheritance, etc., which make it difficult for audiences from other regions to accurately understand the metaphorical connotations, narrative structure and deep cultural implications of the film [3].

When audiences lack corresponding cultural accumulation and background knowledge, they cannot deeply recognize the core of the film, and their emotional investment in watching the film decreases accordingly, and the external reputation score also drops [6]. Once the plot logic, behavioral customs and emotional expression of the film exceed the daily cognitive scope of the audience, cross-cultural empathy is difficult to form.

As shown in figure 1, the regions have varying narrative habits and aesthetic interests; thus, the negative effects will be exacerbated. When the creative style and narrative pace of a film do not meet the long-term viewing patterns of overseas audiences, it is required for viewers to put in more effort to grasp the content, and consequently, the experience and active participation in viewing will gradually decrease.

In conclusion, cultural diffusion is not an all-or-nothing event, but rather the long-term collection and dispersal of many different reasons over time. The cultural gap continues to create a cognitive barrier, reduces the emotional connection repeatedly, and thus lowers the quality of cross-cultural film dissemination

2.5. The realization paths of cultural compatibility in cross-cultural film and television communication

As shown in figure 1, a reason for the communication barrier between cultures is that culture differs. At the same time, the same cultural elements can bridge the cognitive gap, increase the sense of community among the audience, and help spread film and television works across the border more smoothly. The Reason for this is as follows:

Cultural homogeneity attribute→Eliminate cognitive obstacles→Strengthen audience identity recognition→Improve the quality of cross-cultural communication

According to figure 1,similar language systems, value orientations, social paradigms and collective cultural memories can help overseas audiences quickly understand the narrative themes and cultural connotations of the film and thus reduce the cognitive load of cross-cultural interpretation [9]. It is also the basic support for the effect of cultural similarity in communication.

At the same time, cultural homogeneity will also influence the emotions of the people. When the main story, characters and relationships, and dramatic conflicts of a film are close to people's lives and cultural norms, they are more likely to arouse deep emotions in the audience and be appreciated more favorably. Universal themes such as family relationships, the aspiration for self-actualisation, sincere love, etc., can overcome differences in regional culture to create an all-encompassing emotional vocabulary that resonates with people all over the world [10].

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In conclusion, cultural similarity is promoted through the double effects of reduced cognitive load and enhanced emotional connection, thereby improving the efficiency of cross-cultural communication and boosting the international spread quality of films and television.

2.6. The interactive logic of cultural discount and cultural proximity

In the actual scenario of overseas distribution of films, cultural discount and cultural similarity do not operate independently. They mutually restrain and engage in a dynamic game, jointly determining the ultimate outcome of the cross-border dissemination of the film, forming a parallel two-way action mechanism:

Negative transmission link: Cultural ga→Restricted cognitive interpretation→Weakened emotional connection→Limited dissemination effect

Positive transmission link: Cultural homogeneit→Lower understanding threshold→Enhanced audience recognition→Strengthened dissemination effect

Two mechanisms operate simultaneously in the same communication scenario, jointly determining the overall performance of the film in the overseas market. When cultural barriers are prominent and the audience's unfamiliarity is strong, cultural discount takes the dominant role, making it difficult for the film to gain recognition in the overseas market; while a higher degree of cultural similarity can bridge the cognitive gap and effectively enhance the acceptance of overseas audiences.

From this, it can be seen that the success or failure of cross-cultural communication in the field of film and television depends on the dynamic balance between local cultural characteristics and cross-cultural universality. Film and television production should not only retain the unique cultural core of the local ethnic group, but also select narrative themes with universal values and empathetic expressions to reduce the difficulty of cross-cultural interpretation and help the works gain widespread recognition from global audiences.

3. Comparative case analysis of cross-cultural film communication

3.1. High cultural discount: the difficulties faced by domestic films in overseas distribution

When film and television works are deeply rooted in the local historical context, social system and cultural soil, the cultural discount effect will be significantly prominent, severely restricting the international dissemination performance of the films [11].

The war-themed film *The Long March* achieved a domestic box office of over 5.7 billion yuan, but less than 5% of its revenue came from overseas markets, and its audience was limited to the overseas Chinese community. The film's IMDb rating was only between 5.5 and 6.0, creating a huge contrast with the domestic reception. The film relied on national historical memory, exclusive war narratives, and expressions of patriotism to form a strong barrier for understanding among overseas audiences who lacked relevant cultural background.

The realistic-themed film *I Am Not a Drug Dealer* (2018) achieved a domestic box office of over 3.1 billion yuan and a Douban rating of over 9 points. It received a warm response domestically, but its international dissemination power was relatively weak, with an IMDb rating of only 7.8. The film deeply related to the domestic medical system and industry policy background. Foreign audiences had difficulty fully understanding the story context, and the emotional resonance was significantly weakened.

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The above cases collectively confirm the unified communication logic: cultural differences→cognitive barriers→attenuation of emotional resonance→weakening of communication effectiveness.

3.2. Low-culture discount

Films and TV works that focus on universal human emotions and adopt standardized narrative logic can reduce the impact of cultural barriers and successfully achieve wide dissemination on a global scale [10].

Avengers: Endgame (2019) achieved a global box office revenue of 2.79 billion US dollars. The Chinese mainland market contributed 4.2 billion RMB. The IMDb and Douban ratings were 8.4 and 8.5 respectively, and the cross-regional reputation was highly unified. The film unfolds around universal themes such as heroism, sacrifice and collective responsibility, completely eliminating cross-cultural interpretation barriers.

Parasite (2019) by the South Korean people is now one of the highest-grossing films worldwide, over US$260 million. It has performed well in the foreign market and the ratings on IMDb and Douban are still at 8.5 and 8.8. The film has taken some actual social problems, such as the division of classes and problems in families, and built a story world that people all over the world can understand.

In 2016, the Japanese animated film *Your Name* was released in over 380 million units worldwide and was very successful. Among the most famous eternal themes include the budding of youth, first love and destiny, and the pursuit of an ideal life; all have been treasured by people around the world.

The successful films have followed the same communication model: universal themes+standardised narratives→break down barriers to understanding→improve the effectiveness of global communication.

3.3. High cultural similarity

Cultural homology is an effect that can reduce the cognitive load of the audience and enhance cultural identification; thus, it helps film and television works achieve widespread dissemination in certain areas.

The family film *Hello, Mom* (2021) earned more than 5.4 billion yuan in China and performed well abroad. The typical family ethics and emotional expression methods in the region have reduced the psychological distance between the audience, and as a result, the acceptance rate in the local market has been relatively higher than that in Western areas.

In 2000, the Chinese martial arts film *Hero* made more than US$213 million around the world, and over US$128 million of this was earned in North America. IMDb-7.9 is the movie's rating. The film will incorporate the beauty and morals of Eastern martial arts and traditional values, as well as universal themes in storytelling, and is expected to attract audiences around the world.

In general, the spread performance and stability of the reputation of film and television works in the East Asian cultural circle in regional markets are relatively higher than those of cross-cultural transmissions. There are general values and stories in that area. Discussion

For a long time, the process of internationalisation for domestic films has been restricted by structural communication barriers. Building on the previous studies of cultural distance, this paper also proposes that a high degree of cultural homogeneity may be relatively accommodating to reduced barriers for cross-cultural communication.

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4. Issues and reflections

4.1. The realistic challenges of cultural discount

An excess of the local social system may lead to an increased cultural discount effect on historical narratives and values. The high-context local narratives are prone to creating cognitive barriers, and the highly localised value expressions are also likely to cause interpretation deviations; in short, the core problem is not the cultural differences themselves but the lack of appropriate cross-cultural translation ability in the film and television work.

4.2. Leveraging the communication advantages of cultural similarities

The general cultural characteristics offer a feasible and realistic way to spread films and television abroad. Given that the cultures in East Asia and Southeast Asia are similar, their shared cultural context can make it easier for the audience to process the content cognitively and strengthen their sense of belonging; by selecting common subjects such as family, growth, and problems in daily life, we can also promote empathy. Compared with direct cross-civilisation dissemination, the regionalised dissemination model based on cultural kinship has higher efficiency and sustainability.

4.3. Practical strategies for optimizing communication

Based on the research results, this paper proposes three adaptive optimisation schemes: First, at the level of market layout, follow the logic of expanding from near to far, prioritise the deep cultivation of regions with similar cultures, and then gradually expand to the global market; Second, at the level of narrative creation, deeply integrate universal core themes with local cultural elements; Third, at the level of content expression, reduce the accumulation of high-context cultural symbols and focus on conveying the emotional core that all humanity can empathise with.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above research, cultural differences are believed to be the reasons why films and television shows have not spread throughout the world; such deficiencies include cognitive barriers and a lack of emotional connection. The two mechanisms work together to have an impact on spreading in a joint manner. Reduce the adverse effects of cultural differences caused by common topics and standardised narratives.

In theory, this paper extends the traditional cultural distance theory by adding the compensation mechanism of cultural similarity and constructs a dynamic integrated analytical system. The research offers some practical solutions to enhance the quality of cross-cultural communication for domestic films, including gradient market layout, universal core narrative creation and adaptable cultural expression.

This study still has two deficiencies: First, the analysis data mainly focuses on box office and platform ratings, and thus fails to fully explore the micro-psychological reasons for audience acceptance; Second, the scope of the case samples is relatively small, so the results may not be generally applicable. The three directions for future research will be as follows: compare films from different genres, conduct in-depth audience research through questionnaires and interviews, and use quantitative methods such as machine learning to model and calculate the effect of cultural discounts accurately.

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