

Cultural Transmission in Korean Genre Films: Examining the Disaster Movie “Train to Busan” as an Example

Xinyi Shen^{1, *}, Minjie Wang²

¹College of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, Nanjing, China

²College of Directing and Art, Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Sichuan, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 20040115@njxzc.edu.cn

Abstract. In recent years, Korean films have become increasingly prosperous. In addition to borrowing from the classic Hollywood model, their genres have also widely incorporated local culture and values, revealing human nature. The combination of these two elements has broadened its dissemination worldwide and widely promoted Korean culture, providing some inspiration for the development of Chinese genre films. Taking the Korean disaster film “Train to Busan” as an example, this paper analyzes the general framework of cultural communication employed in South Korean films. By studying the film’s content and communication style, it becomes evident that Korean filmmakers blend local values into their narratives while referring to the Western film model. This nuanced approach not only captivates audiences but also carries cultural messages that resonate universally. At the same time, it is also compared with China’s films, which provides strategic reference for the international spread of Chinese films. By recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of both cinematic traditions, China’s film industry can refine its strategies, enhancing its global reach while preserving its unique cultural identity. In essence, the success of Korean films offers valuable lessons and inspiration for the continued growth and influence of Chinese genre films in the global cinematic landscape.

Keywords: Genre film; Korean disaster film; Train to Busan; Cultural dissemination.

1. Introduction

In the 1990s, the South Korea government proposed the culture-oriented external development strategy. In 1998, the government headed by then-President Kim Daejung put forward the development strategy of cultural nation-building and introduced relevant legislation [1]. Hence, South Korea canceled the film censorship system, leading to the rapid development of Korean film industry. With the import of different types of films in the open market, Korean films have gradually appeared Hollywood-style characteristics, and disaster movies are kind of them [2].

Genre film refers to films produced according to the commonly known genre requirements or principles, and they have similar themes, complexes, characters, scenes and film skills, which are the common product of commercial production and ideological production, taking Hollywood commercial films as a prototype [3].

In the early days, films from other countries were also forced to accept the output of American values in line with the trend of globalization by copying the Hollywood genre film model. However, with the continuous development of the culture and economy of various countries, each country’s own genre model has gradually formed. With well-designed stories and unique audio-visual language expressions, Korean disaster genre films represented by “Train to Busan” have gradually gone to the world.

Among them, the oriental values displayed in the film strengthen its localization characteristics. As a country where movies are often created from the perspective of small characters, the universal central idea of “humanity” was once again sacrificed, and “humanity” was successfully made the central vocabulary of the whole film pronounced in the film “Train to Busan”. This fully shows that South Korea is famous for its small-character movies, and the current situation of its large number of talents



makes amounts of high-quality films. As a real disaster film, the film not only leads the audience to the disaster scene through a fictional storyline, but also deeply reflects the importance of the test of human nature and the spirit of mutual assistance in contemporary society and conveys Korean values. From the perspective of cultural communication, this paper explores the localization of Korean genre films and considers the development path of Chinese genre films.

2. The Narrative Strategy of Hollywood Film Model Localization—Analysis of the Movie “Train to Busan”

Most Korean disaster movies follow the traditional Hollywood narrative templates, narrating in the order of beginning, development, climax and ending, combining Western values and their cultural and historical traditions to reflect real problems with local stories. Most of these Korean films promote the plot development with the image of ordinary people with both good and evil in human nature, pointing the finger directly at weak and corrupt governments, thus portraying more “man-made disasters” rather than “natural disasters” [4]. Korean cinema has gained recognition and popularity worldwide in recent years, partly due to its ability to integrate local culture into universally appealing genres.

In 2016, the Korean film *Train to Busan*, directed by Yeon Sang-ho, tells the story of people who are besieged in a closed carriage, mainly the protagonist Xiu An. With its compact rhythm, thrilling scenes and profound human description, the film has become a classic in the hearts of many fans. The film combines the disaster genre with elements of horror and thriller, creating a unique cinematic experience. At the climax of the film, for the sake of one’s own safety, the phenomenon of human persecution of human beings continues to appear on the train. This explores the theme of society, especially the stratification of society and the class division of the people. The passengers in the film come from different social classes, and they have different attitudes and behaviors with each other in the face of crisis. To some extent, this reflects the social differentiation in real life and people’s attitudes and behaviors in different situations. At the end of the film, the father jumped out of the carriage and left the opportunity of life to the pregnant women and children, showing the continuation of life and the glory of human nature.

Another aspect of cultural transmission in “*Train to Busan*” is its portrayal of Korean societal dynamics and human behavior under extreme circumstances. The film delves into themes of sacrifice, survival, and human nature, which are relatable and thought-provoking for a global audience. It showcases the concept of “collectivism vs. individualism,” a theme deeply rooted in Korean culture but with universal relevance. Additionally, the film incorporates elements of Korean daily life, such as language, etiquette, and interpersonal relationships, providing an authentic cultural backdrop. The diverse cast, including acclaimed actor Gong Yoo, brings these cultural nuances to life.

In the process of the film’s narrative, the brilliance of human nature and the goodness of human nature are the most profound in the character of Yoon Sang-hwa. Throughout the zombie riot, he was always in the most dangerous place, and he would rush to the front to fight with the zombies. When he couldn’t hold on, he still motioned to let others go first. He and executive Qian, who has the seemingly decent job, are two kinds of opposite people, one is responsible and selfless, but the other is extremely selfish without compassion. Therefore, “*Train to Busan*” is not only a disaster movie, but also a true portrayal of human society.

3. The Significance of Localizing Genre Films in Cultural Dissemination

Different regions have different climatic and geographical conditions, coupled with historical deductions, have formed unique cultures in different regions. Unlike the freedom and openness of Hollywood, the Asian region where Confucian culture prevails is more restrained. Therefore, if genre films blindly pursue the Hollywood model without injecting the core of local culture, they may fall into the dilemma of being completely Hollywood oriented [5].

From the origin, the historical and cultural accumulation of Asia is more than that of the United States, so it should have a greater advantage of building story background. Hollywood disaster films are mainly caused by unknown sources of meteorites, viruses and so on, lacking practical background interpretation [6]. However, the long history of Asia and its special situation of society and things like that can provide audience with more easily approached and accepted story background of films. Making good use of this merit can help to improve the narrative premise of movies and strengthen the spread of domestic culture at the same time.

Train to Busan introduces the zombie theme commonly used in the West, and make a successful try of the Koreanization of Western film themes by combining the common criticism of Korean films and the double narration of disaster and ethics common in its disaster films [7]. In recent years, a series of Korean films represented by it not only ensure the acceptance of the local people by maintaining the characteristics of Korean films, but also promote their Western narrative themes to the world, reversely spread their own culture and values, giving play to the role of cultural soft power [8].

Furthermore, “*Train to Busan*” has been successful in international markets, contributing to the global recognition of Korean cinema. It demonstrates how a well-crafted genre film can transcend cultural boundaries and resonate with viewers worldwide. “*Train to Busan*” exemplifies how Korean genre films effectively transmit cultural elements to a broad audience. Through its engaging storytelling, relatable themes, and authentic cultural portrayal, it has played a significant role in the global appeal of Korean cinema.

There are also many excellent disaster films in China, such as “*The Wandering Earth*”. In this film, there is also an obvious breakthrough in the Hollywood model. It is no longer the story of a super hero saving the world, but human beings unite to change their own destiny [9]. This breakthrough in Hollywood classic narrative mode also shows China’s view of a community of human destiny, which has a cultural core that can resonate with people from another region. At the same time, for its great success in both box office and audience’s criticism, the year 2019 was called “the first year of science fiction film” in China, showing the undoubtedly successful try in the combination of science fiction and disaster themes.

China's foray into the combination of science fiction and disaster themes has opened up exciting possibilities for the genre. Following the movie “*The Wandering Earth*,” other excellent disaster movies produced in China, including “*China Captain*” (2020) and “*Meg 2: The Trench*” (2023), also emerged and gained international audience. Although the disaster genre films in China still have a certain gap in visual effects and narrative frameworks compared to those of Hollywood films, these kinds of films effectively convey the unity and determination of the Chinese people. The themes and emotions they portray are universally relatable, making them accessible to audiences around the world.

However, Chinese disaster films still face certain challenges, including a tendency toward a single narrative mode and limited international dissemination compared to Hollywood productions. To further enhance their cultural dissemination, it is crucial for Chinese filmmakers to break free from established styles while inheriting excellent thematic culture. They should explore more diverse means of expression and presentation, further promoting a broader level of cultural dissemination [2].

Similarly, in this pursuit, Chinese filmmakers must maintain a global perspective when creating their works. By infusing their narratives with richer cultural connotations and presenting stories that resonate with audiences from different cultural backgrounds, they can foster a deeper connection with viewers worldwide. This approach will not only contribute to the success of Chinese disaster films on the global stage but also promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

4. Conclusion

The development of Korean genre films provides a valuable blueprint for the film industry's development, marked by a journey from “The Host” in 2006 to the groundbreaking “Parasite” in 2019, both directed by the talented Bong Joon-ho. What sets these South Korean genre films apart is their ability to take local stories as their starting point and then follow the template of Hollywood films while breaking the routine with culturally specific storylines or unexpected plots. This approach has not only won the credit worldwide but has also been instrumental in promoting Korean culture on a global scale.

Drawing inspiration from the successful localization strategy of Korean genre films, China can similarly navigate the international film landscape. To be more specific, it involves taking the essence of others, imitating and using the mature film narrative mode while incorporating familiar creative themes and forms of expression from the West. Simultaneously, it is essential to creatively infuse these narratives with the rich cultural characteristics of China. This approach aligns with the international development trend of cross-cultural storytelling while injecting the unique cultural charm of the East into the cultural industry [10].

By adopting this approach, China's film industry can develop a niche for itself in the global market. Just as Korean genre films have achieved international recognition by blending elements from both Eastern and Western storytelling traditions, Chinese cinema can follow suit. In doing so, it can not only contribute to the global cinematic landscape but also promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture worldwide.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Li Jiashan, Zhang Yingyu. Overview and characteristics of South Korea's cultural and creative industries. *Beijing Cultural and Creative*, 2020(05): 90-94.
- [2] Zhang Ruixue, Lu Xiaoyan. Comparison of the narrative methods of Chinese and Korean disaster films - Take “Heroes of Fire” and “Train to Busan” as examples. *Research on Dissemination*, 2020, 4 (20): 55-56.
- [3] Li Xianjie. Type Construction and Audience Expectation - On the Basic Core and Characteristics of Hollywood Type Film Narration. *Huazhong Academic*, 2014(01): 201-215.
- [4] Liu Yucan. On the inheritance and breakthrough of the Hollywood model of Korean disaster films. *House of Drama*, 2021(36): 155-157+167.
- [5] Gu Lin. Hollywood characteristics of the Korean genre film “Train to Busan”. *Sichuan Drama*, 2019(06): 139-141.
- [6] Liu Tianhao. Analysis and enlightenment of the development of Korean disaster-type films after 2010. *Popular Literature and Art*, 2020(13): 140-141.
- [7] Lang Bin, Sheng Yuxin. Background, characteristics and enlightenment of Korean disaster films. *Journal of Anshan Normal University*, 2019, 21(03): 65-68.
- [8] Hu Yanchao. The importance of Hollywood genre film language to local stories – Take Hanjiang Monster as an example. *Film Review*, 2015(15): 85-87.
- [9] Li Chao. East Asian disaster movie “watch” and “being watched”. Southwest University, 2022. DOI: 10.27684/d.cnki.gxndx.2021.003563.
- [10] Zhou Qian. An analysis on the cross-cultural communication of film and television works: A case study of the film Train to Busan. *News Research Guide*, 2019, 10(04): 229.