

The Translation and Dissemination Mechanism of Cultural Symbols in Film and Television Works--Taking the Korean Drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* as an Example

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Abstract:

In the wave of globalization driven by streaming media technology, Korean dramas have attracted wide attention due to their unique emotional narrative and ability to translate cultural symbols. Taking the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* as an example, this study uses data analysis methods and mixed content analysis methods to reveal the influence of different narrative strategies on the effect of cross-cultural communication and systematically analyze the cross-cultural translation mechanism of emotional symbols through a positive and negative group comparative study. The study found that the play reconstructs the cultural output content through common emotions, realizes the psychological resonance between the target language and the source language audience, and the Chinese audience has a systematic preference for highly translatable emotional symbols. Based on this, this paper proposes that Chinese film and television need to transform regional cultural symbols into universal emotional themes, reduce the direct transplantation of traditional cultural symbols, focus on modern issues, and use natural landscape and regional culture as carriers to convey universal emotional value. On the other hand, Chinese film and television can strengthen the cooperation of international streaming media platforms, and adjust the presentation of emotional symbols according to different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Korean drama; cultural symbols; cross-cultural translation; emotional resonance

1. Introduction

Under the dual impetus of the digital technology revolution and the wave of globalization, the streaming media platform has become the core carrier of contemporary cultural communication. As an important part of streaming media content, Korean drama is reconstructing the global cultural pattern through the mode of “localized production + global distribution”. This change is not only reflected in the digitization of communication channels, but also reflects the fundamental change of cultural consumption logic: the audience is no longer satisfied with passively accepting cultural products, but reconstructs cultural significance through participatory behaviors such as barrage interaction and second creation, which puts forward higher requirements for the cross-cultural adaptation ability of film and television works. The globalization process of Korean dramas coincides with this historic turning point, from the global phenomenon-level communication caused by *Squid Game* to the cross-cultural resonance of revenge aesthetics in *The Glory*. These cases show that the Korean film and television industry has established a mature emotional symbol translation system. *When Life Gives You Tangerines* is a typical example. The play takes the sea girl culture of Jeju Island in South Korea as the narrative fulcrum, interweaves traditional fishing techniques with contemporary family ethics, and accurately reaches audiences in 190 countries around the world through Netflix’s algorithm recommendation system, which confirms the key role of cultural symbol translation in breaking through geographical restrictions. However, under the current situation that most transnational film and television works have declined overseas acceptance due to cultural specificity, Korean dramas have transformed East Asian cultural genes such as Confucian ethics and family concepts into global commensurable emotional capital through the “delocalization” reconstruction of emotional symbols. This symbolic operation strategy is worthy of in-depth analysis [1].

There are still some deficiencies in the current academic research on the cross-cultural communication of Korean dramas. A large number of empirical studies based on the phenomenon of “Korean Wave” have been accumulated in the field of communication, but most of them stay at the level of phenomenon description. Although cultural research focuses on the construction of cultural identity, the research methods are also limited by timeliness, and the comparative perspective is also scarce. Therefore, this study introduces functional equivalence theory and cultural discount theory, and constructs a new analytical framework by setting the drama *The Impossible Heir* (2024) as a negative control group, combining the symbol

labeling method for translatable and untranslatable layers and IMDb weighted scoring algorithm.

The reason for the comparative analysis of *When Life Gives You Tangerines* and *The Impossible Heir* is based on the fact that they are similar in time and spread through the Netflix platform, which makes the two dramas comparable in the context of the global spread of streaming media, and can reflect the strategic differences of Korean dramas in cross-cultural communication in the same period. At the same time, the two dramas are both drama TV series, but there are significant differences in narrative style and theme. *When Life Gives You Tangerines* takes the struggle and awakening of three generations of women as the core, through delicate emotional narrative and family ethics discussion, shows the gender issues and cultural conflicts in East Asian society, while *The Impossible Heir* focuses on political struggle and power game, which belongs to the theme of action crime. This kind of theme difference provides a comparative sample for the study of the relationship between “universal emotion” and “cultural discount”. From the audience score, it can be seen that the score of *When Life Gives You Tangerines* is higher, showing its success in emotional resonance and cultural translation, while the score of *The Impossible Heir* and audience feedback did not reach a similar level, which is directly related to the “elimination of cultural discounts by universal emotions” mentioned in the study. This comparison can reveal the influence of different narrative strategies on the effect of cross-cultural communication [2].

2. Research Content and Methods

2.1 Translatable Layer and Untranslatable Layer

To deeply analyze the translation mechanism of emotional symbols in Korean dramas in cross-cultural communication and their impact on audience acceptance, this study is based on the functional equivalence theory of American linguist Eugene A Nida (hereinafter referred to as “Nida”).

2.1.1 Overview of Functional Equivalence Theory

Nida proposed the theory of “functional equivalence”, which holds that the core goal of translation is to seek the closest and most natural equivalent expression of the target language in translation, so that the response of the translation recipient to the translation can be consistent with the response of the original recipient to the original text [3]. At the same time, Nida further elaborated on the theory of functional equivalence, proposing two concepts: “highest level equivalence” and “lowest level equivalence”. The former requires that the reactions of the target

language readers and listeners in understanding and appreciating the translated work be basically consistent with the reactions of the source language readers and listeners in understanding and appreciating the source language work. The latter is to enable the target language readers and listeners to respect and understand the understanding and appreciation of the source language works by the source language readers and listeners [4].

Although Nida mainly focuses on language translation, his core idea of pursuing equivalent understanding and experience for the target audience can be extended to analyze the cultural connotations and universal values behind emotional symbols in film and television works. These symbols also have the function of inspiring specific emotions and conveying specific connotations in the source culture, and it is necessary to find “equivalent” images or translations that can stimulate the “most appropriate” emotional response in the target culture.

Based on the profound insight of functional equivalence theory into cultural differences and equivalent transmission, this study proposes a conceptual framework of “translatable layer” and “untranslatable layer” when analyzing the cross-cultural translation of emotional symbols in Korean dramas. The “translatable layer” corresponds to the requirement of “highest level equivalence”, which means that when the source cultural emotional symbols have cognitive commonalities in the target culture, the equivalent transmission of emotional functions can be achieved through image replacement or semantic transcoding, resulting in a highly compatible emotional experience between the target audience and the source language audience. The “untranslatable layer” is closer to the “lowest level of equivalence”. When special cultural symbols lack direct equivalence, compensation strategies such as cultural annotations are needed to enable the target audience to achieve cross-cultural resonance through contextual understanding and value recognition, even though they cannot fully reproduce the source language experience. This hierarchical framework not only maintains the adaptability of functional equivalence theory to cultural specificity but also provides operational ideas for translating untranslatable symbols through dynamic equivalence mechanisms.

2.1.2 Concept description and analysis

This study is based on the theory of functional equivalence. When analyzing the emotional symbols in Korean dramas for cross-cultural translation, it is observed that not all symbols can achieve equivalent transmission, and there are significant differences in their difficulty levels. Therefore, two new concepts, “translatable layer” and “untranslatable layer,” are proposed.

The “translatable layer” refers to symbols with direct information and high cultural universality, which means that emotional symbols expressed in the context of the source culture, whose core connotations, triggering mechanisms, or forms of expression are highly similar, universal, or easily understandable cultural counterparts in the target culture. Generally, it is an image that carries common human emotions and experiences, and has a low dependence on the cultural background knowledge of the source language. For example, in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, there is a scene where a middle-aged couple is interviewed in a field of rape flowers. The husband answers, “These flowers remind me of my first love”. Flowers have romantic meanings that symbolize love in both Eastern and Western cultures, so the target audience can directly associate them with relevant meanings through related scenes and language expressions.

The “untranslatable layer” refers to symbols that convey subtle information and have low cultural universality, which means that symbols with deep cultural connotations, specific social norms, historical backgrounds, or unique symbolic expressions that lack direct counterparts in the target culture, or emotional symbols that require specific cultural knowledge to understand and have significant differences. Generally, it involves highly contextualized social relationships or etiquette norms, or symbols and metaphors with strong source language cultural specificity, whose forms of expression depend on a common understanding of the social reality of the source language. For example, in the Korean drama *The Impossible Heir*, there is a scene where a chrysanthemum bouquet is placed next to an urn of ashes. This scene does not have music, dialogue, or character dialogue to explain its implicit meaning. It represents the protagonist worshipping his deceased. Due to the unique sacrificial customs in Korea, some viewers may not understand the meaning conveyed by this scene and need to add annotations or other means to help understand.

However, there is no absolute dichotomy between the two layers, and some symbols may be in a middle ground, with their translatability being influenced by factors such as specific symbols, translation strategies, and target audience groups.

2.2 Data Analysis

TV dramas are vivid carriers of cultural dissemination, capable of crossing national borders and reaching thousands of households [5]. This study selected South Korean TV dramas, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* and *The Impossible Heir*, as positive and negative control samples. By annotating the translatable and untranslatable layers, the

proportion of translatable layers in the effective frames of the positive and negative groups is obtained. At the same time, the audience ratings of the two groups of Korean dramas are calculated using the IMDb formula to analyze the relationship between the proportion of translatable layers and audience feedback.

2.2.1 Translatable layer, non-translatable layer

Due to its universal emotional core, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* has become a positive group with a high proportion of translatable layers, while *The Impossible Heir* (2024) presents significant differences in translatable layer structure and satisfies the control variable of timeliness, thus being selected as the negative group.

This study adopted the method of systematic sampling in random sampling. Firstly, this article randomly selected a portion of positive and negative TV series, and then labeled the first 6 minutes and last 12 minutes of each selected episode with symbols (excluding the opening and ending songs). The proportion of “translatable layer” and “untranslatable layer” symbols in the sampled parts of the two groups of works was calculated. Among them, the positive group had a total of 16 episodes, and the negative group had a total of 10 episodes. In order to minimize the deviation as much as possible, the positive group selected 6 episodes and the negative group selected 5 episodes, with a total of 198 minutes of content annotated.

2.2.2 Audience data feedback

In the study of cross-cultural communication effects, the scientificity of quantitative evaluation tools directly determines the validity of research conclusions. In order to reduce the impact of cultural discounts and fan culture on the credibility of voting ratings and obtain genuine feedback from the audience, this study adopted the IMDb Bayesian weighting algorithm as the core algorithm. It also refers to the international film website IMDb (Internet Movie Database, Chinese translation of “Internet Movie Database”), which has a certain representative value in cross-cultural film and television communication research [5].

The parameter settings of this study follow the official technical standards of IMDb: threshold $m=25000$, global mean $C=7$. Calculate the globally applicable weighted rating formula for film and television works.

(1)

(Weighted Rating) refers to the weighted rating. (Rating) refers to the average score of a film or television work. (Votes) refers to the number of people who vote and score. (minimum votes required) refers to the minimum number of votes required (25000 votes, 2025.6). refers to the average score of all film and television works (7 points,

2025.6 IMDb). Considering the purpose of measuring the localized dissemination effect of selected Korean dramas in China, this study used the traditional and mainstream recommendation system for Chinese film and television dramas, and the Chinese website Douban as the data source [6, 7]. As of June 30, 2025, the original rating data of the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* on the Douban platform was 9.5, and the voting volume was 272319. The original rating data of the Korean drama *The Impossible Heir* (2024) on the Douban platform is 4.9, and the voting volume is 2225. The original rating data and voting volume were both collected from the Douban platform (Douban, 2025.5).

3. Research Results

3.1 Preference Types

Research has shown that Chinese audiences have a clear preference for emotional symbols with a significant proportion of translatable layers in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. This type of symbol is rooted in universal emotions or has cross-cultural universality, and can achieve equivalent emotional transmission without deep dependence on the source cultural context, thereby significantly enhancing the cross-cultural acceptance and emotional immersion experience of the work. The following are typical examples of “translatable layer” emotional symbols:

3.1.1 Music symbols

Music symbols refer to symbols that convey emotional meaning through non-verbal auditory elements such as melody, rhythm, and sound effects. Their meaning relies on the common acoustic psychological mechanisms of humans and cross-cultural shared emotional synesthesia encoding [8]. It is a carrier that can stimulate emotional resonance without language decoding, such as background music and theme songs in the drama, and its universal emotional layer is defined as the “translatable layer”. For example, in the drama, when Wu Aichun depicts the ocean with blue crayons in a nursing home, the background music plays the climax verse of *Yesterday* by The Beatles: “Why she had to go I don’t know, she wouldn’t say.” The melancholic melody of the song conforms to the emotional prototype of cross-cultural expression of “sadness”. The lyrics contain the changes in the world, and the core semantics of bringing up the past with only regrets constitute a common human experience of life. This audiovisual symbol intertextuality further weakens cultural dependence, and Chinese audiences have expressed emotional resonance with this song, proving its success in crossing

cultural barriers and achieving the closest natural equivalent emotional transmission effect defined by the theory in the target context.

3.1.2 Nonverbal symbols

Nonverbal symbols refer to symbols that construct emotional meaning through nonverbal media such as physical practice, object use, and spatial behavior. Their basic emotional core relies on human shared biological instincts and social relationship prototypes, specifically manifested as embodied emotional carriers such as clothing choices, gift giving, and ritualized actions of characters in the play [9]. Their universal motivational layer is defined as the “translatable layer”. For example, in the drama, Jeon Gwang-Rye intentionally changed into a formal blue suit and wore a borrowed pearl necklace to protect his daughter Oh Ae-sun, who was not elected as class monitor, and gave gifts to the teachers. This emotional core of mothers upholding the dignity of their children corresponds to the shared family ethics of the Confucian cultural circle, emphasizing the family as a vertical chain of responsibility and requiring parents to provide material security and dignity maintenance for their children. The carefully prepared gift of nylon socks, cash, and other items to the teacher is considered a “luxury accessory” in the time setting of this drama, in exchange for the care and concern from the teacher for her daughter Oh Ae-sun, and to maintain her dignity and needs. This resource exchange conforms to the Confucian principle of “etiquette requires reciprocity and mutual benefit” in interpersonal relationships. Chinese viewers deeply experienced the love and sacrifice from their mothers while watching this scene, which generated strong emotional resonance.

This study confirms through semiotic analysis of *When Life Gives You Tangerines* that Chinese audiences have a systematic preference for highly translatable emotional symbols, which are essentially cross-cultural emotional equivalent transmission triggered by cultural universality. Research has also shown that the cross-cultural communication effectiveness of film and television works depends on their ability to anchor common human emotions, such as acoustic synesthesia and ethical prototypes, providing a core translation path and practical paradigm for the international dissemination of East Asian film and television.

3.2 In-Depth Analysis of the Results

3.2.1 Results and analysis of the proportion of translatable layers

According to the data obtained through random sampling, the proportion of translatable layers in the effective frames per minute of the positive group is about 0.935, and the

proportion of translatable layers in the negative group is about 0.774. After comprehensive consideration of the IMDb rating results mentioned above, the conclusion is that there is a certain proportional relationship between the proportion of translatable layers in movies and TV shows and audience acceptance. Therefore, in the process of exporting cultural products such as TV dramas, increasing the proportion of “translatable layers” in effective frames is also an important way to reduce cultural discounts. By reducing the frequency of “untranslatable layers” in TV dramas, TV dramas and other cultural products can be more popular overseas.

3.2.2 Analysis of the relationship between the proportion of translatable layers and audience ratings

Through the IMDb weighted rating algorithm, a quantitative analysis of audience acceptance was conducted, and it was found that the weighted score of the positive group (Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*) was 9.29, significantly higher than the negative group’s 6.83. This result means that *When Life Gives You Tangerines* can better meet the needs of Chinese audiences in terms of providing emotional resonance, plot setting, and character shaping; In terms of plot depth, thematic diversity, and exploration of social issues, it can better stimulate the audience’s thinking and resonance, thereby enhancing their sense of satisfaction.

4. Research Implications

4.1 Constructing the Translation System of “Emotional Symbol + Universal Value”

From *Squid Game* to *The Glory* to *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, these works show the emotional symbol upgrade path of Korean film and television from violent narrative to natural metaphor. The traditional cultural discount theory holds that regional symbols lead to value impairment, but *When Life Gives You Tangerines* deconstructs the culture of sea women into women’s tenacity, bitter sweet, etc., instead of traditional ritual symbols, with family, love, women’s growth as the core, combined with the natural landscape of Jeju Island and culture of sea women, forming a emotional+regional universal narrative mode, showing that Korean drama is undergoing a paradigm shift from cultural specificity to emotional universality. Chinese film and television can take this as a reference, increase the proportion of translatable layers of cultural symbols, transform local cultural symbols into universal emotional themes, focus on modern issues such as family ethics, personal struggle, and technological development, and avoid direct transplantation of Chinese

traditional cultural symbols. At the same time, it can also learn from the female perspective, explore local female stories, and trigger global resonance through themes such as female tenacity and self-selection [10].

4.2 Optimization of Platform and Communication Strategy

With the help of the globalization strategy of streaming media platforms, Korean drama reshapes the communication path of cultural symbols. The success of *When Life Gives You Tangerines* benefits from Netflix's global platform and systematic translation. Through the mode of local creation + global communication, it combines the high-industrial production system of Korean drama with precise data-driven strategies. In addition, the decentralized nature of the streaming media platform also encourages Korean dramas to attract audiences of different cultural backgrounds through the diversity of emotional symbols. Chinese film and television can carry out multilingual subtitles, dubbing, and cross-cultural promotion through cooperation with international platforms. At the same time, develop cultural tourism-related content to help overseas audiences understand local cultural symbols.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the cultural globalization strategy of Korean dramas with the translation of emotional symbols as the core by comparing and analyzing the cross-cultural communication practice of *When Life Gives You Tangerines* and *The Impossible Heir*. By refining the universal emotional core in East Asian cultural genes, such as Confucian ethics and family values, combined with the algorithm distribution advantages of the streaming media platform, the culturally specific symbols are successfully transformed into global commensurable emotional capital. According to the data, when the proportion of translatable layers in positive cases reaches 93.5%, the IMDb weighted score reaches 9.29, far exceeding the 77.4% and 6.83 of negative cases, which confirms the effectiveness of the translation path of "emotional universality + cultural locality". The research enlightens that Chinese film and television creation needs to construct a translation system of "emotional symbol + universal value". By deconstructing traditional cultural symbols into modern emotional propositions, and with the help of an accurate distribution

and cross-cultural annotation system of streaming media platforms, the paradigm upgrade from cultural output to emotional resonance can be realized. In the future, AI technology can be further combined to optimize the symbol labeling algorithm, explore the dynamic cultural compensation mechanism, and continuously improve the empathy threshold and acceptance efficiency of the global audience while maintaining the cultural uniqueness.

Authors Contribution

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

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