Analysis on the Spread of American TV Series in China From the Perspective of High and Low Context Culture and the Enlightenment to Chinese Domestic Dramas

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American TV series are popular among young people in China due to their rich content and sophisticated production. On the other hand, some domestic TV series are often criticized by audiences in terms of plot and logic, and their broadcast effect is not ideal in overseas markets. How to improve the quality and reputation of domestic dramas and promote domestic dramas to go out has become a heat topic worth discussing. From the theory of high and low context culture, this paper analyzes the phenomenon and causes of intercultural communication of American TV series in China, aiming to provide suggestions for Chinese TV series to go global.

Keywords: American TV series, high and low context culture, domestic drama

Introduction

In recent years, a large number of American TV series have entered the Chinese market and won praise from audiences. “Friends”, “The Big Bang Theory”, “2 Broke Girls”, and many other U.S. TV shows have gained a large amount of fans in China. However, in the domestic market, although a large number of domestic dramas are screened every year, they are not satisfactory in terms of audience comments, and are often ridiculed for their “stereotypical plots” and “chaotic editing”. The broadcast of domestic dramas in overseas markets also presents two states: Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Thailand have introduced many popular dramas in recent years, such as The Story of Yanxi Palace and Thirty Only, which have not only high ratings but also been remade. In English countries such as Britain and the United States, the result could not meet the anticipation. How to improve the quality of domestic dramas, promote the spread of domestic dramas in English-speaking countries, and advance the spread of Chinese culture has become a hot topic in recent years. There are numerous articles analyzing the spread of American TV series in China from a cross-cultural perspective and these studies provide some new ideas for the production of domestic TV series. However, few people start from the theories of high-context culture and low-context culture. Based on the high-low context culture theory proposed by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, this paper analyzes the spread phenomenon of American TV series in China, discusses why American TV series are favored by young audiences, and analyzes the reasons why domestic TV series have a less satisfactory reputation the markets. It...
is hoped to provide useful suggestions for domestic drama production to cater to the audience’s taste, so as to promote the spread of domestic drama in English-speaking countries and to further promote Chinese culture to go abroad.

**Analysis of Chinese Researches of the Spread of American TV Series**

When the “Cross-cultural American TV series” is entered on CNKI, there are 110 results, including 64 academic journals, of which six are core journals. Searching for “American TV series in high and low context”, there are five results in the total database, and the number of core periodicals is zero.

In these journals, researchers mainly start from a specific cross-cultural theory and take specific American TV series as an example to explore its spread in China, the reasons for its popularity and enlightenment. However, there are only a few articles that analyze the cross-cultural communication of American TV series on the theoretical basis of high and low context culture. Even if there is, there is no in-depth discussion of this phenomenon for domestic drama to go out of the enlightenment. In addition, such articles tend to make the mistake of generalizing when analyzing the overseas spread of domestic dramas, believing that the ratings of domestic dramas in overseas markets are not good enough. However, the reality is that there are two kinds of domestic dramas broadcast abroad: Some southeast Asian countries have introduced a large number of hit dramas in recent years, such as *The Story of Yanxi Palace* and *Thirty Only*, with high ratings and a large number of remakes. In English countries such as the UK and the US, domestic dramas have received lackluster reviews. So why the difference? This paper will analyze this issue from the perspective of high and low context culture.

**High and Low Context Culture Theory**

Edward Hall put forward that culture is contextual and can be divided into “high context” and “low context”. Features of high-context things: Prearranged information, only a small part of the arranged information is transmitted, and most of the information is in the hands of the recipient and in the background, requiring the recipient to process and analyze. On the contrary, for low-context things, most of the information must be in the message to complement the context. In Hall’s opinion, China is a high-context country, and Chinese culture is a kind of high-context communication. When people communicate with each other, they directly convey little information, and most of the information needs to be inferred by the listener according to the cultural tradition or background knowledge. The United States is a low-context country. Speakers in low-context countries convey information clearly and directly through vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation and other content, without the listener making too much speculation (Ye, 2013, pp. 167-168).

Many Asian countries, such as Vietnam and Thailand, belong to high-context countries. They are located adjacent to China and share many similarities in culture. Therefore, domestic hot dramas are well received in these countries. The 2012 hit drama *Legend of Zhen Huan* has been praised by audiences in South Korea, Thailand, and Japan, especially in South Korea and Japan, according to Sohu.com news. However, *Legend of Zhen Huan* was not well received in the US, a low-context country. This reflects the conflict between high context culture and low context culture and their impact on cultural transmission.

**Analysis on the Phenomenon and Causes of American TV Series Spreading in China**

Young people are the main audience of American TV series in China. They are more receptive to new things and more inclusive of diverse cultures. In addition, thanks to the popularization of compulsory education,
they have a certain English foundation. *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, has 28,000 fans, 1.06 billion views, and 8,634 posts on Weibo (a Chinese social media). The “Big Bang Theory Fan Group” on Baidu Tieba has 226,000 posts, which states that the show is very popular and widely discussed. The “American Drama Fan Group” on Baidu Tieba has 13.05 million posts. US TV series are extremely popular among Chinese youth. The writer thinks the popularity of American TV series is mainly due to the following five points.

**The Rhythm of the Plot Is Tight and More Suitable for Young People’s Taste**

American TV series have a tight rhythm, which is more suitable for young people’s taste. *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, has 12 seasons and 279 episodes, each lasting about 21 minutes. Although each episode is short, the story moves smoothly, the narrative pace is tight, and the 20-minute episodes often involve many characters and contain plenty of twists. It is more suitable for the fast-paced lifestyle of young people.

**The Characters Have Distinct Personalities**

American TV series created a large number of classic characters, such as Sheldon, the scientist from *The Big Bang Theory* with high IQ but low EQ; Max, the sharp-tongued character from *2 Broke Girls*; Rachel, the American sweetheart in *Friends*; they all have won a large number of fans for their distinct personalities.

**High and Low Context Cultural Changes in Chinese Society**

China has always been a country of high-context culture. However, in recent years, with the continuous development of society and the deepening of the degree of globalization, western culture has been widely spread in China, and the young generation of China is more open-minded and tends to adopt a direct approach in interpersonal communication. Chinese society is changing from a high-context culture to a low-context culture. As the representative of American high-context culture, American TV series are more popular among young people.

**Subtitle Groups Continue to Grow**

With the improvement of the compulsory education, the English level of the Chinese people has increased as a whole. Many fans of American TV series gather together spontaneously to translate subtitles for free, which promotes the spread of American TV series. These people are called “subtitle group”. Their high translation level plays a key role in the spread of American TV series.

**Focus on Audience Feedback**

In general situation, TV producers will choose taken while seeding, so they could collect the audience feedback in time, and make some adjustments according to the feedback in the subsequent shooting. Sometimes the audience even can lead the plot development.

**Enlightenment to Domestic Dramas**

The popularity of American TV series among Chinese young people certainly has its merits. The author believes that in order to improve the quality of domestic dramas, the following suggestions can be carried out.

**Strictly Control the Process and Reject Assembly Line Products**

In 2012, the total number of TV dramas released in China reached 612 and 170 million episodes, with a huge circulation. However, as a major producer of TV dramas, China is “big but not strong” (Jin & Wang, 2014, p. 20). There are also a lot of poorly made TV dramas, and the overall quality needs to be improved. The
producers should strictly control the production process of TV dramas, improve the level of domestic dramas, and reject assembly line products.

**Rich Domestic Drama Theme**

Domestic dramas are often criticized for their predictable plots. In the first half of 2021, 10 romance-themed dramas will be released. In 2011, “Jade in the Heart of Palace Lock” was broadcast, which quickly set off a wave of time travel dramas in China. Then, a large number of time travel dramas flooded into the market, and many of them were made poorly in content just to catch up with the fad. The theme is too similar and is bound to cause aesthetic fatigue. Producers should enrich the theme, to meet the different needs of the audience.

**Concern the Transformation of High and Low Context Culture in the Process of Subtitle Translation**

When translating the lines of domestic dramas into English, translators should have the awareness of high and low context culture and adopt appropriate means to make the lines more consistent with the language habits of low-context culture countries, so as to promote the spread of domestic dramas in English-speaking countries.

**Conclusion**

In Asia, many countries belong to high-context culture countries, so domestic dramas have a good communication effect in Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam, and other countries, but are not well received in low-context countries such as the United States. Domestic producers should refer to the popular cases of American dramas in China, learn from each other and improve the quality of domestic dramas, so as to promote the better going out of China of domestic dramas and even Chinese culture. The writer analyses the reasons of the success of American TV series and put forward three suggestions: strictly control the process and reject assembly line products; rich domestic drama theme; and concern the transformation of high and low context culture in the process of subtitle translation, hoping to offer some good advance in promoting the spread of Chinese dramas in global market.

**References**


