

# Korean Drama's Practice Path of External Cultural Output and Cultural Identity and Its Enlightenment to China

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## **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on the outstanding performance of Korean dramas in global cultural communication. Based on the theories of cross-cultural communication and cultural industry, it deeply explores the internal logic of Korean dramas' external cultural output and the construction of cultural identity. By analyzing several representative Korean dramas such as *When the Camellia Blooms* and *Reply 1988*, and combining comparative studies of television drama industries in different countries, the unique advantages of Korean dramas in script creation, production models, and communication strategies are revealed. The study finds that Korean dramas effectively reduce cultural discount and achieve the leap from cultural communication to cultural identity by virtue of meticulously crafted emotional narratives that trigger resonance, innovative transformation of cultural symbols, and collaborative operation of the entire industry chain. This provides valuable references and insights for the television drama industry to enhance international communication efficiency and strengthen cultural soft power. Based on this, this paper argues that China's film and television industry can learn from excellent production models, construct a more universal value cultural transmission model, and promote industrial development.

**Keywords:** Korean drama; cultural output; cultural identity; cross-cultural communication; television drama industry

## **1. Introduction**

In the context of accelerating globalization, the cultural industry has become a key field in the competition for national soft power. As the core carrier

of South Korea's cultural output, Korean dramas have emerged since the 1990s, evolving from a regional cultural phenomenon into a globally influential benchmark of the cultural industry. In recent years, Korean dramas such as *My Love from the*

Star and Descendants of the Sun have achieved massive popularity worldwide, attracting countless fans and enabling Korean culture to become an important component of world popular culture, demonstrating the unique charm of South Korea's cultural soft power on the international stage.

The success of Korean dramas has not only brought significant economic benefits to South Korea but also reshaped the international community's perception of Korean culture. According to data from the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the export value related to the Korean Wave increased from \$4.8 billion to \$7.58 billion between 2017 and 2019, fully highlighting the huge commercial value and cultural influence of Korean dramas and related cultural products. However, the academic community's systematic research on the cultural output of Korean dramas and the construction of cultural identity still needs to be deepened, especially in the streaming media era, where new characteristics have emerged following the deep integration of Korean dramas with international capital and require further exploration. This paper selects representative Korean dramas such as *When the Camellia Blooms* and *Reply 1988*, using theoretical approaches such as narratology and cultural semiotics to deeply analyze the narrative structure, character characterization, application of cultural symbols, and emotional expression in the series, exploring the internal mechanisms through which Korean dramas achieve cross-cultural communication and cultural identity. Additionally, by collecting data from authoritative platforms such as Netflix's financial reports and Douban Movies, and using professional statistical tools to conduct quantitative analyses of Korean dramas' broadcast data, audience feedback, and market influence, this study reveals the effects of Korean dramas' cultural output. The aim is to uncover the core mechanisms of Korean dramas' cultural output through typical case analyses and industrial comparative studies, providing enlightenment for the international development of China's television drama industry.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Research on Cultural Output of Korean Dramas

In the field of cross-cultural communication, numerous scholars have conducted in-depth interpretations of the global popularity of Korean dramas. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, some scholars have pointed out that Korean dramas effectively reduce cultural discount by weakening culture-specific elements and strengthening universal emotional expression, thus promoting the spread

of dramas across different cultural contexts [1]. Domestic scholars have found through text analysis that themes such as family ethics, love, and friendship appear significantly more frequently in Korean dramas than in other types of TV series. These universal emotional themes have become important bonds for Korean dramas to bridge cultural differences and attract global audiences [2].

From the perspective of the cultural industry, the success of Korean dramas is inseparable from the strong support of the South Korean government and the meticulous operation of the industry. Since the 1990s, the South Korean government has regarded the cultural industry as a key field for national economic transformation and enhancing international influence, providing solid guarantees for the spread of Hallyu culture through measures such as establishing special cultural funds and formulating preferential policies [3]. Meanwhile, Korean dramas pursue high standards in scriptwriting, directorial control, actor selection, and post-production to ensure the overall quality of works. They continuously explore innovative themes and narrative methods, such as time-travel dramas combining history and modernity, and realistic dramas exploring social issues, to meet the needs of different audience groups. Additionally, Korean dramas excel in depicting delicate human emotions and social realities, enabling audiences to generate strong emotional resonance. They also effectively promote Korean culture by showcasing traditional Korean culture and modern lifestyles in the dramas.

Guo Yuanyuan pointed out that Korean dramas vigorously promote national cultural elements and present them in a real, vivid, and daily life state, integrating thematic content into story construction with emotions, characters, and events, which is an important reason for their acceptance by audiences.

### 2.2 Research Controversies and Theoretical Gaps

Despite the huge global success of Korean dramas, they have also triggered some controversies. The recent decline in Korean drama data has led to increasing discussions about the "Americanization" of Korean dramas. For example, "Obtaining more overseas investment is a good thing for Korean dramas, but does it also cause them to lose originality and charm? Korean dramas tailored for global audiences often prioritize meeting the needs of Western viewers [4]." Some scholars believe that the extensive spread of Korean dramas may lead to the marginalization of local cultures in some countries, posing a risk of cultural homogenization [5]. However, other scholars argue that under the background of globalization, cultural exchange and integration are inevitable trends, with the

key lying in how to maintain the subjectivity of local culture while absorbing foreign cultures [6].

Furthermore, existing research lacks a systematic analysis of the new characteristics of Korean dramas after their deep integration with international capital in the streaming media era, such as changes in creative logic, communication models, and audience feedback mechanisms, which urgently require new theoretical interpretations and research perspectives.

### 3. Core Mechanism Analysis of Korean Drama's Cultural Output

#### 3.1 Textual Construction: Emotional Resonance and Innovative Expression of Cultural Symbols

##### 3.1.1 Deep exploration of universal emotions

The delicate portrayal of universal emotions such as family ethics, love, and friendship in Korean dramas is the key to bridging cultural differences and triggering audience resonance. Take Reply 1988 as an example: through the mutual help among neighbors and the implicit yet profound emotions within family members, the drama presents a warm atmosphere of daily life, allowing audiences from different cultural backgrounds to find emotional points of resonance. The recently popular *When the Camellia Blooms* further takes "bitterness" as its keynote, telling the 70-year life history of the heroine Wu Aichun's family, full of setbacks and resilience. In the drama, Aichun and her family's attitude of supporting each other and facing life optimistically in the face of hardships, as well as the firm love between her and her husband Kuanzhi, have triggered strong emotional resonance among global audiences. The drama has been marked as watched by over 100,000 users on Douban, with a rating as high as 9.5/10. Nowadays, the art of "emotional appeal" has become the "formula for viral success" in the industry.

##### 3.1.2 Innovative translation of cultural symbols

Korean dramas excel in the modern reconstruction and innovative expression of local cultural symbols. In *When the Camellia Blooms*, the profession of Jeju Island haenyeo (female divers) becomes a crucial cultural symbol, not only showcasing South Korea's unique regional culture and traditional labor practices but also endowing the cultural symbol with new connotations through the tenacious spirit of haenyeo. The heroine Aichun's mother, Quan Guangli, as a haenyeo, teaches her daughter with her life experience: "Never settle for less; live the most fulfilling life." This approach of integrating cultural symbols with character growth and value transmission allows audiences

to deeply feel the charm of Korean culture while enjoying the plot.

##### 3.1.3 Cultural presentation from a feminist perspective

The portrayal of characters in Korean dramas is of great significance for cultural communication. Different from the traditional "star effect," presenting characters in a multi-faceted and three-dimensional manner is more appealing to audiences. For example, *When the Camellia Blooms* breaks the male-centered suffering narrative in traditional melodramas, showcasing the invisible position of women in history and their progressive imagination amid hardships. From the grandmother Quan Guangli, a haenyeo, to the mother Aichun who shuttles between family and the fishing village, and then to the daughter Kim Myung who gets admitted to Seoul National University, the story completely presents the mutual support among three generations of women [7]. Through plots depicting Aichun's unfair treatment in the family--such as being forced to work in a factory to repay debts for her eldest grandson and holding a low status during meals in her husband's family--the drama reveals the long-standing gender structure and injustice in society. Meanwhile, Aichun and her family's pursuit of gender equality--such as her husband Kuanzhi supporting Aichun and respecting their daughter's choices--embodies a new interpretation of masculinity for contemporary people and conveys positive gender concepts to the audience.

#### 3.2 Production and Broadcasting Model: Collaboration of Screenwriter-Centered System and Flexible Production Mechanism

Korean dramas implement a unique screenwriter-centered system, where screenwriters hold significant decision-making power in the production team, overseeing the entire process from script creation to production. Under the "flying script" model of simultaneous filming and broadcasting, neither renowned directors nor A-list actors have the authority to arbitrarily modify the script. The greatest advantage of this model lies in its ability to adjust the plot in real-time based on audience feedback, making the drama more aligned with viewer preferences [8]. Screenwriters not only determine the fate of characters but also hold decision-making power in actor selection, drama title determination, and project promotion. For example, in some Korean dramas, screenwriters will temporarily add or adjust relevant plots according to the audience's affection for characters, enhancing audience participation and stickiness [8].

Furthermore, Korean drama producers spare no effort in investing substantial human, material, financial, and

time costs to ensure production quality. To achieve better filming effects, they will redo scenes that do not conform to the scene logic, and this ultimate pursuit of quality is also a key reason why Korean dramas can stand out in the global market.

### 3.3 Industrial Chain Layout: A Diverse and Collaborative Cultural Ecosystem

South Korea has established a complete “content-platform-derivatives” full industrial chain closed loop. Korean entertainment companies attract the attention of non-Korean speaking markets and enhance fan loyalty and interactive experiences by inviting foreign celebrities to join production teams, participate in variety show recordings, and organize various online and offline activities. Meanwhile, they attach great importance to social media marketing, actively operating official accounts, releasing the latest updates promptly, and responding to fan messages to build a large and active supporter base.

In terms of derivative product development, Korean dramas lay out plans from the planning stage, covering multiple fields such as apparel, tourism, publishing, audio-visual products, and gaming. Hit Korean dramas often drive tourism booms in filming locations. For example, after the broadcast of *When the Camellia Blooms*, Zhangjiajie Culture and Tourism invited the drama’s director, screenwriter, and lead actors, bringing the work to the attention of more audiences outside the traditional Korean drama fanbase. Additionally, the drama’s music and peripheral products are also sought after by fans, further expanding the commercial value and cultural influence of Korean dramas.

### 3.4 Strategies for Mitigating Cultural Discount

Korean dramas reduce cultural discount through a “cultural translation” strategy, naturally integrating Korean local cultural elements into the plot with daily and life-oriented presentations. The traditional Korean etiquette, food culture, and folk activities displayed in the dramas are not forcefully imparted, but naturally revealed through characters’ life scenes and emotional exchanges, allowing audiences to imperceptibly understand and accept Korean culture while enjoying the story [7]. For example, in *When the Camellia Blooms*, Jeju Island’s haenyeo culture, traditional costumes, and local customs are closely integrated with the plot development, enabling audiences to appreciate Korea’s unique cultural charm while experiencing the characters’ fates.

### 3.5 Hierarchical Construction of Audience

## Identity

The construction of cultural identity in Korean dramas presents a progressive hierarchy of “emotional resonance - cultural cognition - value identification”. Firstly, through delicate emotional narratives and authentic life scenes, it triggers the audience emotional resonance and establishes an emotional connection. Then, by leveraging rich cultural symbols and plot settings in the drama, it deepens the audience’s cognition and understanding of Korean culture. Finally, through discussions on social issues and values--such as the advocacy of resilience, kindness, and gender equality in *When the Camellia Blooms*--it achieves audience identification at the value level. This hierarchical identity construction makes Korean dramas not only entertainment products but also important carriers for spreading Korean culture and values.

## 4. Enlightenment from the Adjustment of the South Korean Television Drama Industry

### 4.1 Learning from Excellent Production Models

Take China’s television drama industry as an example: the weight of directors, actors, and project planning is relatively concentrated, while screenwriters have limited participation in creative decision-making. In some projects, the inadequate integration and coordination of multiple creative opinions have affected the coherence and logic of the script. In contrast, the screenwriter-centered system in Korean dramas ensures the creative dominance of screenwriters through institutionalization, laying a solid foundation for the output of high-quality scripts [8]. China can further improve the screenwriter talent training system, optimize the allocation mechanism of creative resources, and enhance the professional discourse power of screenwriters, so as to promote the overall improvement of script creation quality.

### 4.2 Using Universal Culture to Break through Differences

Korean dramas enjoy high global popularity. In essence, cultures share many similarities in content, and shifting focus from cultural differences to cultural similarities has become a priority in contemporary multicultural societies [9]. Korean dramas precisely grasp this key point by deeply exploring universal emotional themes such as family, love, and friendship, and naturally integrating unique elements like Korean traditional etiquette and food culture into plots full of life atmosphere.

For instance, China's television drama industry can learn from this experience by excavating the value of traditional culture and sorting out the universal concepts contained in China's excellent traditional culture, such as the benevolence thought in the *Analects* and the self-improvement spirit advocated in the *I Ching*. On this basis, combined with the emotional needs of contemporary society, these cultural values can be transformed into story cores close to real life. Through delicate character portrayals and authentic life scenes, abstract concepts such as family-country feelings and traditional virtues can be naturally integrated into the characters' growth processes and emotional conflicts, allowing audiences to imperceptibly feel the charm of Chinese culture while watching dramas, and achieving the leap from cultural display to value identification.

#### 4.3 Improving Industrial Chain Layout and International Communication

The success of Korean dramas lies not only in high-quality content but also in their construction of a complete cultural industry ecosystem. Take *Reply 1988* as an example: the drama triggered a global craze after being broadcast on Netflix. Although JIH PARK, KA KIM, and Y LEE stated in their 2022 study on Netflix that since the company has acquired all intellectual property rights to its South Korean original works and the global streaming rights to numerous Korean dramas, neither production companies nor South Korean TV stations can obtain profits commensurate with the global popularity of Korean dramas [10]. Netflix's strategic utilization of the Korean Wave and its active acquisition of streaming rights to Korean dramas may ultimately consolidate "platform imperialism" [10]. However, it is undeniable that the Netflix platform has accelerated the globalization of Korean dramas. Scenes from Korean dramas have become popular tourist attractions in South Korea, OST music has continued to gain popularity on international streaming platforms, and derived books and peripheral products are also widely loved. This full-chain extension from content creation to cultural tourism development, and from audio-visual experiences to cultural and creative consumption, has formed a powerful cultural communication synergy, transforming single dramas into cultural IPs with sustainable vitality.

In comparison, China's television drama industry still has significant room for improvement in industrial chain extension. It should strengthen the concept of full-life-cycle IP operation and, from the early stage of script creation, build an IP derivative development system with systematic thinking. By extracting extendable cultural symbols and emotional elements from the story core, and integrating diversified derivative directions such as cultural tourism

experiences, cultural and creative products, and digital content into the overall plan, a collaborative development pattern of content creation and value extension can be formed. This approach reserves sufficient space for subsequent industrial chain expansion, promotes the upgrading of Chinese television dramas from single content output to complete cultural ecosystem output, and enhances their comprehensive competitiveness in the international market.

## 5. Conclusion

The international success of Korean dramas indicates that constructing an efficient cross-cultural communication system is the key to achieving a win-win situation for cultural and commercial values. By excavating universal human emotions, innovating cultural expression forms, optimizing production and communication models, and improving the industrial ecosystem, Korean dramas have successfully shaped a broad international cultural identity. China's television drama industry can learn from the practice of Korean dramas, further optimize the allocation mechanism of creative resources, innovate production and broadcasting models, strengthen the collaborative effect of the industrial chain, enhance international communication efficiency, and help the global spread of excellent Chinese culture.

Future research can focus on the transformative impact of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse on television drama creation and communication, explore innovative paths for cultural communication and cultural identity construction in the new media environment, and provide more strategic theoretical support and practical guidance for the international development of the television drama industry.

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