



**ANALYSIS OF CHINESE ONLINE TV DRAMAS BASED ON FISKE'S TV
CULTURE THEORY**

By

ZHANG YUJIE

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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November 2023

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DEDICATION

This thesis is specially dedicated to

My parents, my family and the person that holds my happiness, in which she does not rest to make me a successful man.

All of you are dearest to my heart.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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By

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November 2023

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Online dramas are a new growth point for China's TV drama industry. Moreover, the flexibility of online dramas in production and broadcasting makes them expected to become the dominant force in China's TV drama exports. In view of the current academic research path of online dramas is unclear and the research methods lack the versatility and sustainability, this study innovatively introduces Fiske's TV culture theory into the research of online dramas. This study applies Fiske's TV Culture Theory and Qualitative Analysis. Fiske's theory of television culture sees television texts as open carriers of meaning—that is, Active Texts. Viewers of TV dramas do not passively extract meaning from text, but instead actively engage in dialogue with the text as social subjects; these viewers are Active Audiences. The interpretation of any text must be linked to other texts; that is Intertextuality. This research uses triangulation to address the multiple data source issues involved in Fiske's theory. Three Chinese TV dramas exported to Malaysia are analyzed as Activated Texts, and Fiske's Three-level Code System is used as a structuralist framework to analyze Chinese cultural elements contained in these online drama texts. Ten Malaysian audiences of Chinese online dramas participated in this research as Active Audiences, their opinions on Chinese online dramas were obtained through semi-structured interview. In short, this study is an inheritance of Fiske's research on television culture and a study of contemporary Chinese online dramas using structuralist narratology.

Keywords: Chinese online dramas, Qualitative analysis, TV culture theory.

SDG: GOAL 4: Quality Education

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

ANALISIS DRAMA TV DALAM TALIAN CINA BERDASARKAN TEORI BUDAYA TV FISKE

Oleh

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Drama dalam talian merupakan titik pertumbuhan baharu industri drama TV China. Fleksibiliti dalam penerbitan dan penyiaran menjadikan drama dalam talian ini sebagai kuasa dominan drama TV China untuk tujuan eksport. Memandangkan ketidakjelasan kajian akademik dan kaedah kajian yang tidak jelas berkait kebolehan dan kemampunan, kajian inovatif ini memperkenalkan teori budaya TV Fiske dalam penyelidikan ini. Kajian ini menggunakan Teori Budaya TV Fiske dan analisis kualitatif. Teori Budaya TV Fiske ini melihat teks televisyen sebagai pembawa makna - Teks Aktif. Penonton drama TV secara tidak pasif mengeluarkan makna daripada teks, malah secara aktif terlibat dalam dialog teks sebagai subjek sosial. penonton ini diketeori sebagai Khlayak Aktif. Tafsiran mana-mana teks mesti dikaitkan dengan teks lain; ia dikenali sebagai Intertekstualiti. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan triangulasi untuk menangani pelbagai isu sumber data yang terlibat dalam teori Fiske. Tiga drama TV China yang dieksport ke Malaysia dianalisis sebagai Teks Diaktifkan, dan Sistem Kod Tiga Peringkat Fiske digunakan sebagai rangka kerja struktur untuk menganalisis unsur budaya Cina yang terkandung dalam teks drama dalam talian ini. Sepuluh penonton Malaysia yang menonton. Drama dalam talian China mengambil bahagian dalam penyelidikan ini sebagai Khlayak Aktif. Pendapat mereka berkait drama tersebut diperoleh melalui temu bual separa berstruktur. Ringkasnya, kajian ini adalah penyelidikan Fiske mengenai budaya televisyen dan kajian drama dalam talian China menggunakan naratologi struktur.

Kata Kunci: Drama dalam talian Cina, Analisis kualitatif, Teori budaya TV.

SDG: GOAL 4: Quality Education

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese TV drama export industry has undergone great changes in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. In general, the export volume has risen steadily, and the trade deficit is still large. At present, China's TV drama production ranks first in the world; however, the ailing development under the capital has resulted in a production surplus—creating too much for the domestic market to digest. Therefore, the overseas market for Chinese TV dramas is the most obvious way to release excess domestic productions that exceed capacity. In recent years, a new force—online TV dramas—has emerged within China's TV drama industry. The creation of these online dramas is influenced by the big data on the TV drama industry and the intertextuality of popular Internet literature. It is a unique new form of TV drama with a high degree of research value.

Malaysia is a traditional import country of Chinese TV dramas. The high cultural proximity, along with its large proportion of Chinese nationals, makes it advantageous to study the export of China's TV dramas in it. In an increasingly complex media environment, what kind of competitiveness does China's export TV series have? How do Malaysian audiences view China's TV dramas? This research aims to discover a static research orientation in the dynamic vision of globalization through setting a clear historical background (B&R).

The export of China's online TV dramas is regarded as a phenomenon of cultural exchange. This research examines the export of Chinese TV dramas from the perspective of Fiske's TV culture theory. At the same time, it combines the observations in Malaysia in order to find ways to guide the transition of China's online TV dramas through economic exchanges to cultural exchanges—and then expand the overseas market to achieve the practice of digesting domestic stocks.

1.1 Research Background

1.1.1 Chinese TV Drama Industry

Bin (2006) has stated that TV drama is contemporary China's most influential popular literary style and cultural industry form. Zhang Bin sorted out a “transformation to market, single to integration” Chinese TV drama industry transformation and upgrade route. It has clarified the critical position of Chinese TV dramas in the whole cultural industry within China. The latest Chinese TV drama creation forms should involve “product thinking, industrial chain thinking, industrial ecological thinking” (Dong, 2019). Chinese-foreign joint production institutions are in the air, and the Internet helps to promote international

communication. (Yao, 2019). The mode of foreign trade for Chinese TV dramas is only “self-issued, commissioned, and participated in domestic and international TV festivals” (Hu, 2018).

China provides a less traversed format trade route, which is a somewhat atypical response to globalization (Keane & Moran, 2003). Indeed, the “Atypical” that is seen by Western scholars is the reality of the “falling cliff” on the road of the Chinese drama industry. The Chinese TV drama export industry peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s with support from the Chinese government. It has emerged due to the the natural weakening of government power over the TV drama industry and the deepening of the marketization of TV drama exports. A peculiar landscape that “falls off” and then gradually rises.

Even though a film or TV company may be founded to serve particular national cultures or local markets, it must gradually redeploy its creative resources and reshape its terrain of operations to survive against competition and enhance profitability (Curtin, 2007). To energize China’s undercapitalized and poorly managed TV stations, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT)—along with the Department of Commerce—announced in November 2004 that foreign companies could form joint ventures with Chinese stations, especially in the area of producing films and TV dramas (Shi, 2008).

Investment and operation of news media, broadcast networks, and other essential communication venues are off-limits to foreign money (Shi, 2008). This demonstrates that politics remain the driving factor behind the development of China’s television industry—that the liberalization of the industry remains limited.

Mobile TV is listed as China’s national priority for developing the triple play system. The rapidly growing China Mobile Multimedia Broadcasting services (CMMB) leads China’s mobile TV industry and forms the largest network globally (Lin, 2012). After joining the WTO, China not only accelerated its growth, but also pursued and eventually surpassed the world’s advanced level. The emergence of digital TV, streaming media, film, and television (as well as other forms of China’s enormous self-media content production base) have formed a joint force that has propelled the Chinese TV drama industry to its zenith; however, this ascension has also brought the industry into the unknown.

1.1.2 Chinese TV Culture

He (2012) constructs a Chinese TV drama based on genre: “themes of ancient costumes, modern subjects, contemporary themes, martial arts.” Chinese TV dramas are carriers of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics studies in the four aspects of “experiential, emotional resonance, aesthetics, and modernity.” They will be presented in Chinese TV dramas. The spirit of aesthetics is divided into four levels: “Respect for the people, self-improvement, ritual and music, beauty

and goodness, endless life, change and innovation” (Cheng, 2015). Traditional Chinese culture is a resource pool for developing Chinese television, a national pillar and an inevitable choice for constructing an “imaginary community” (Zhao, 2016). The most significant features of Chinese culture are its emphasis on a harmonious society, and the appropriate arrangement of interpersonal relationships (Hwang, 1987). Although Chinese cultures share specific relative values, beliefs, and behaviours, they also diverge in profound ways (e.g., language and historical experience) that Chinese film and television producers that are hoping to export their wares tend to ignore (Fore, 2008).

Cheng (2018) and other scholars used the method of intercultural research to discuss the public opinion and the relationship between the national image and the media.

From the perspective of his analysis, the media plays a vital role in public opinion and decision-making by foreign policymakers. Therefore, it can be said that as mass media, TV drama is not only a part of China’s export trade—but also one of the driving forces of the One Belt and One Road policy. The enhancement of China’s material strength cannot naturally improve China’s soft power” (Qiu, 2009). The types of Chinese TV dramas are relatively single, and it is challenging to construct a Chinese image indeed” (Cai, 2014). The image of the country is not always ‘present’ in these dramas, but whether it is a narrative theme, a narrative background, or even a narrative driving force to promote the film’s plot, the ‘image of the country’ will always find a way to appear during the narrative process of the film. (Jia, 2008).

1.1.3 Malaysia – an Important Role to Import Chinese TV Dramas

The recognition of Chinese culture in Malaysia as a subculture (dialect) foundation to a Han culture foundation and then a transnational foundation. (Carstens, 2005). Because Cantonese is the principal dialect for most popular Hong Kong video products, it has inadvertently reinforced the Cantonese identity in Malaysia and—to a greater extent—Southeast Asia (Carstens, 2005). National and local institutions and traditions are incredibly relevant. Because of this, film and television communication agencies must spend a large amount of time and money figuring out what kinds of things people want and resonate with in different geographic and cultural locales (Fore, 2008).

The Chinese population in Malaysia immigrated in batches. This includes Chinese immigrants from before the Second World War, new generations of overseas Chinese who favoured the British Empire, and new generations of overseas Chinese who favoured the Communist Party of Malaya (Zhao, 2005). Chen (2002) clarified the relationship between the concepts of “Ethnic composition, ethnic identity, ethnic group, the ethnic category” based on research regarding the Malaysian Chinese and Sarawak indigenous peoples. (Cheng & Luo, 2002). The three elements of the Malay identity consciousness conclusively point out that “ethnic nationalism” is the basis for understanding

Malaysian society (Shamsul, 1996).

The Malaysian state broadcaster is Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). It owns TV1, TV2, TV OKEY, TV SUKAN, BES, 1 NEWS, and two parliament channels: DEWAN RAKYAT and DEWAN NEGARA. According to a survey conducted by Nielsen Holdings in the first half of 2019, TV1 and TV2 have a total audience rating of 8.2%—which is inferior to the private sector- (Media Prima Berhad and Astro) owned TV channel (Prima, 2019).

Email, surfing, and information gathering are familiar traits among Malaysians. However, the more popular activities among netizens are online TV/music/games (47%) and message/chat/blogging (45%)—while reading newspapers/magazines (35%) shows the least (Ahmad et al., 2012). The acquisition of film and television entertainment content is the primary reason of Malaysians using the Internet. Media tools that can be found in most of the respondents' homes are TV, mobile phone, and computer/laptops" (Baboo et al., 2013). Combined with the above data, Malaysia's future growth in the area of mobile Internet content holds great potential (see Figure 1.1).

TOOL	YES (%)	NO (%)	TOTAL (%)
Computer/ Laptop	87.4	12.6	100
Netbook	11.4	88.6	100
PSP	22.0	78.0	100
Mobile Phone	90.8	9.2	100
I Pod	19.2	80.8	100
TV	96.2	3.8	100
Console	32.9	67.1	100
MP3/ MP4	46.9	53.1	100
Radio	79.4	20.6	100
Internet Connection	75.2	24.8	100
Others	3.8	96.2	100

(n=1200)

Figure 1.1 : Media Tools in the Home
(Source : RTM, 2019)

There are two reasons why Chinese TV dramas can occupy a place in Malaysia: the economic advantages of Chinese Malaysians and the infiltration of popular culture from both Hong Kong and Taiwan into Malaysian society. From the perspective of historical and social development trends, these two so-called advantages will only last for a while. (Lai & Li, 2015).

1.1.4 Establish an Intercultural Perspective on China's Exported Online TV Dramas

Intercultural communication originated in the United States after World War II, Edward Hall's "Silent Language" (Hall & Hall, 1959). First, qualitative research should be used for research; and second, it is necessary to conduct more research on the natural interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds in order to focus on the misinformation from research. Turn to research how to manage cooperation and construct meaning. Finally, more theories should be created about fundamental intercultural interactions (Chang, 2003). Intercultural research should not only focus on the objective process, but also the subjective process and cross. The theory of cultural communication has made a clear conceptual framework (Gudykunst, 2005). The subjective process of intercultural research should be nominalism, anti-positive, and only ideology, and methodology should focus on ideology" (Gudykunst, 2005). Jiang and Huang (2009) (among others) have summarized and explained the three vocabularies related to intercultural, as shown below (see Figure 1.2).

Name	Cross-Cultural Communication	Intercultural Communication	Intercultural Communication
Action Focus	Across Physical border	In-Physical border	Trans-Philosophy of Human Being
Breakthrough	Stereo type	Deep structure of culture	Cultural archetype
Relation Performance	I/other Daily life	I/other Cultural communication	All-under-heaven Communication Philosophy
Direction Doctrine	Mono-directional Comparison	Two-dimensional Intervention	Hyper-directional Transcendence

Figure 1.2 : Vocabulary Related to Intercultural

Note : Quoted and translated from 'Internet Communication'
(Source : Guan Shijie, 2004)

The setting of cultural boundaries in the 7w propagation model Guan (1995) proposed is a favourable complement to the 5w propagation model. In the 7w model, Professor Guan proposed three ways. The first is the leading way for Party B to have a cultural confrontation between the two parties; the second is the leading way for Party A and the two sides to recognize each other's culture; finally, the third is the way for the cultural core of both sides to effectively communicate with each other (see Figure 1.3).

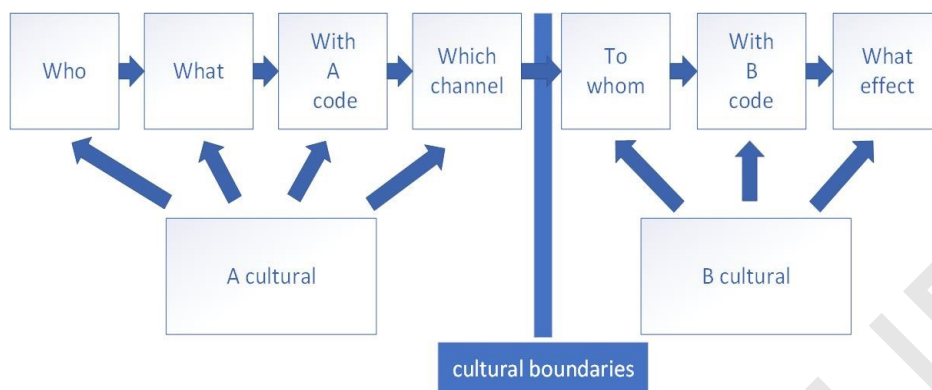


Figure 1.3 : The 7w Propagation Model
(Source : Richard Braddock, 1958)

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

China's online TV dramas are a new and burgeoning section within China's TV industry. However, while facing the new media environment represented by the Internet, how Chinese TV dramas can survive in this new medium has become the next unavoidable problem (Zhang & Peng, 2012). There is an urgent need for establishing a feasible academic research system. How do China's TV dramas reflect Chinese culture in this new era of media? How do overseas audiences of China's TV dramas interact with TV drama texts? These are questions that the academic community needs to answer.

The Chinese government hopes to enhance the country's image by exporting cultural products. In this context, the Chinese government has proposed domestic policies to "go global." However, the strategies for the culture to "go global"—including the selection of international target markets, program content, communication methods and investment methods, among others—need to be continuously explored (Qi & Jiang, 2010).

The research problem emerged as a consequence of the fact that many scholars have noticed the non-negligible position of Chinese online dramas in the future. Furthermore, they noticed that the Chinese government had specified the policy orientation that Chinese TV dramas must strengthen exports. However, research on Chinese exporting of online dramas has not yet been conducted.

The production of Chinese online TV dramas differs from traditional TV dramas (Wen, Zhang et al., 2020). The distribution channels of online dramas are different from traditional TV dramas in that they are mainly released via online platforms (Kang, 2017). Therefore, academic research on online TV dramas must be more targeted on the research on traditional TV dramas.

Media products travelling across different cultures would be received in locally specific ways (Lee, 2006). Chinese academic circles lack localized research on the export of domestic online dramas, so there is an urgent need to find a suitable research framework. Fiske's TV culture theory is suitable for analyzing China's export online dramas; this is because it not only has a clear structure and strong level of operability, but it also emphasizes the text's interactivity and audience's initiative.

1.3 Research Objective

General Objectives:

This study explores the cultural characteristics of China's exported TV dramas.

Specific Objectives:

1. To explore the cultural elements contained in the content of exported Chinese online dramas.
2. To explore the ways of how the intertextuality of exported Chinese online dramas reflects in the process of its dissemination.
3. To explore how the aspects of Chinese culture help spread China's online TV dramas abroad.
4. To investigate the cultural barriers that prevent China's online dramas from becoming global.

1.4 Research Question

RQ1: How is Chinese culture expressed through Chinese online dramas?

The answer to this question comes from the content analysis of Chinese online dramas. Based on Fiske's TV culture theory, TV dramas are treated as active texts by using a three-level coding mode analysis: Realistic elements, Performance elements, and Ideological elements.

RQ2: How does the intertextuality of Chinese online dramas reflect?

The answer to this question comes from two sources:

1. Analysis of the Primary Text Communication Channels of Chinese online dramas.
2. Analysis of the Secondary Text and Tertiary Text Communication Channels of Chinese online Dramas (semi-structured Interview).

RQ3: Why some of Chinese online dramas are successful in overseas markets, especially in Malaysia? (semi-structured interview)

RQ4: Why some of Chinese online dramas are not successful in overseas markets, especially in Malaysia? (semi-structured interview)

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.5.1 Theoretical Significance

This TV drama study is set in the context of the national economic and trade exchange policy; the issue of the cultural production industry is viewed from the perspective of structural functionalism. It establishes a detailed history (B&R) and policy background for TV culture research on China's TV drama exports. Moreover, the setting of this background can better reflect the subjective characteristics of the researcher. The choice of Malaysia is aimed at breaking through the micro-level flaws that are inherent in the binary opposition between China and the West. This study is based on a multi-dimensional perspective and provides a theoretical perspective for sustainable development. The idea of returning to China from domestic to overseas avoids weakening the value of research between intersubjectivity. Moreover, Malaysia's cultural complexity makes it more suitable for investigating intercultural communication.

The empirical expression of first-hand knowledge avoids the whirlpool of data black holes. From the perspective of the American empirical school research model (whether it is quantitative analysis, stimulus-response mode, or use-satisfaction mode), the audience is regarded as a passive person; furthermore, the information transmission process is a linear communication mode. The development of modern mass communication technology adds layers of complexity to the media environment, requiring researchers to broaden their vision. The tradition of cultural studies is inherited from studying the popular form of TV drama. Fiske's research is introduced, which expands the theoretical vision of "television culture," and extends the theoretical category of intercultural communication.

1.5.2 Practical Significance

Through the semiotic analysis of selected Chinese online dramas, the first objective is to understand how Chinese TV dramas carry Chinese cultural elements fully. At the same time, Fiske's three-level code system is introduced in the analysis process to verify its applicability in the analysis of China's online export dramas.

Second, through interviews with Malaysian audiences of China's export online dramas, a researcher can understand the audience's actual views on China's export online dramas, and thus verify Fiske's active audience and intertextuality theory.

1.6 Research Limitations

Since this research relies on the first-hand experience of the researcher himself, it is inevitably subjective. Moreover, because the unique "extension" developed by intercultural research in Chinese academic circles is different from traditional intercultural research, the vocabulary and concepts used are inevitably biased in nature. In general, the research limitations stem from two aspects: the empirical errors inherent in qualitative research, and the ambiguity caused by the "Western doctrine" in the "Orientalizing" process.

1.7 Definition of the Terms

Semiotic analysis

Semiotics is the study of symbols, signs, and signification. In the field of mass communication, semiotics is the study of how signs and symbols are used. However, semiotic analysis is crucial for the message process in how it assists the message receiver in effectively interpreting content (Naldi & Nugroho, 2021). Besides, semiotic analysis can be labeled as an "International Encyclopedia." Based on Fiske's (1988) perspective, semiotics is concerned with the sign itself; in this situation, there are three primary concerns: 1) Rise of signs. This is to understand how signs arise and how the movement relates to a sign; in this circumstance, a character is to assist people in understanding the meaning of signs. 2) Code. An understanding of the process by which code is generated to fulfil a society's or culture's requirements by using the many communication channels available to send the code. 3) Culture. According to this point of view, both a legend and a sign can do their jobs; however, their continued existence and particular shape are contingent on applying a code.

Online TV Drama

There are many synonyms for online TV dramas—such as "web drama," "online drama," etc. They are usually called video on demand (VOD) in terms of technical attributes. The term VOD refers to the service in both the current and future television industries. Generally speaking, VOD is an exciting and interactive system for delivering video-based content that allows users to pick content and enjoy it at their convenience. Shahan and Ghufuran (2022) stated that there are nine benefits of VOD; these include convenience, sharing, navigation, content variety, reach, affordable promotions, compatibility, viewership metrics, and interactivity. However, internet-based video streaming is not a requirement for VOD. Because of the increasing popularity of services like Netflix and YouTube, the term VOD has become associated with online

streaming in the current era. The first VOD platform was developed in 1994, known as the Cambridge Digital Interactive TV trial. However, the project ceased in 1999 due to the challenges of collecting information and content (Shahan & Ghufuran, 2022). For example, “Viki.com” is a famous internet TV drama distribution platform that falls under Rakuten. Its content is mainly based on Asian TV series—covering many famous Chinese, Korean, and Japanese TV dramas. Moreover, it has a subtitle translation community, mobile program, paid subscription, comment feedback, and other functions.

Chinese culture in TV drama

Chinese culture is a comprehensive framework of behavioral standards and ideology shared to a variable degree by Chinese individuals (Chan & Leung, 2014). From its inception, China’s television has served as a political instrument. First, China’s television was introduced in 1958. During this period, from Chairman Mao ZeDong’s perspective, mass media (also including televisions) was a weapon for class fights. Because of the cultural revolution, China’s TV at this moment was cut off from the rest of the world’s broadcast (Xu, 2015). After the 1980s, however, China’s TV productions began publishing international content. Due to regulation limitations within China, the quota for foreign content is less than that of local TV programs; however, to increase their viewership, some local television stations would occasionally show illegally imported television series past the legal cutoff (Guo, 2004; Xu, 2015). In the first year of the 21st century, a “going-global” policy was developed to promote the overall export of television programs after officials realized the vitality of doing so. Moreover, in 2009, the deputy of the State Administration of Radio Film and Television announced that China’s TV sales raked in 10.49 million USD—setting a new high-water mark in the country’s television industry (Xinhua, 2009; Xu, 2015). Recently, Chinese TV dramas have become a new trend in the rest of the world. Most of China’s TV stations on the YouTube platform started to upload programs on their channel and included subtitles to attract different countries’ audiences. Most of China’s online video platforms started to export local Chinese programs to the world—such as Tencent, Mango, iQIYi, and YouKu. For the last three years, China’s TV dramas have become popular in Southeast Asia—including countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.

1.8 Conclusion

If intercultural communication is likened to an action, then the subject of this action is the person. Most of the traditional intercultural communication research is based on interpersonal communication. Suppose TV drama communication is taken as an example. In that case, the first thing that can be determined is that the communication object (the audience) is performing this action. The communication subject is also performing this action, while the text does not perform it. Alternatively, the action of static text for intercultural communication is performed by “people.” The problems arising from translating Chinese and English in “communication” have led Chinese scholars to study

the generalization of the use of words in the export of domestic TV dramas (specifically, to confuse communication with interpersonal communication). This inevitably leads to a certain degree of theoretical shift. Faced with this situation, later researchers must realize that those links can be delineated in intercultural communication research during the spread of TV dramas. Schramm mentioned in the preface to Edelstein A. Lex S that the study of one-way flow is "cross-national," and the study of the effects of such flows is "cross-cultural." Schramm pointed out that the study of the impact of this (such as a TV series) one-way flow is intercultural. Therefore, it can be considered that the intercultural research done by a large number of Chinese scholars is actually a transnational communication study. In other words, the scholar himself is regarded as the subject of communication (or an individual who can influence the subject of communication) that is participating in intercultural communication. The premise that this hypothesis (mixed use) is established is that this effect does occur. Otherwise, it will fall into the puzzle of circular definition in qualitative research. In short, although intercultural research was not realized, international communication research was implemented. Therefore, in the process of this research, the author must carefully use various concepts in order to avoid misunderstanding.

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