

# The Americanization of Korean Drama Style and the Change of Local Characteristics: Cultural Game in the Streaming Era

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## Abstract

The Americanization of Korean Drama is essentially a cultural transcoding project. When Ali in "Squid Game" kneels down, the camera deliberately captures the similarity between the prayer callus on his forehead and the Korean "sacred gesture" action - this visual translation allows the audience in the Islamic cultural circle to instantly understand the character's motivation. The cost of transformation is also clear: the "leisure aesthetics" of traditional Korean dramas is compressed into a 90-second quick cut in "Model Taxi". But it is worth noting that the seasonal broadcast structure required by the platform forces "Kingdom" to refine the history of party struggles into three power reversal points in each episode, accidentally creating a narrative granularity suitable for TikTok dissemination. The real crisis lies in the "technical wonders" devouring the depth of culture. The second season of "Sweet Home" added 200 CG monsters but reduced the exploration of human nature, and was ridiculed by Korean netizens as "special effects kimchi". The key to future survival lies in whether it can maintain the cultural edge carried by the comic knife stabbing the system in the suicide scene of Cao Shifeng in "D.P." - when technical standards become the new hegemony, Korean dramas need to prove that the budget of 2.3 million US dollars per episode can not only create visual shock, but also refine a cultural dagger that penetrates the times.

## Keywords

Korean drama; Americanization; cultural discount; localization; streaming platform.

## 1. Introduction

As an important cultural phenomenon in East Asia and even the world, Korean dramas, its core carrier, have experienced an evolution from regional popularity to global attention. Early works such as "Autumn in My Heart", "Winter Sonata" and "Dae Jang Geum" are known for their family ethics, romantic love, delicate emotional description and relatively slow narrative rhythm. Their success is largely rooted in the emotional structure and values shared by the East Asian Confucian cultural circle. However, global streaming giants represented by Netflix have entered the Korean market strongly after the 2010s and deeply participated in investment and production, which has profoundly changed the creative ecology of Korean dramas. With strong capital, global distribution networks and reliance on data algorithms, these platforms are no longer satisfied with simply importing, but actively intervene in the front end of creation, pushing Korean dramas to move closer to their global market strategies in terms of production concepts, narrative modes and aesthetic presentations - largely referring to mature American drama industry standards - and showing an increasingly obvious "Americanization" trend. This raises a core concern: In the process of embracing global production standards and narrative grammar, are the local cultural characteristics that Korean dramas rely on to survive and distinguish themselves from others weakened or even eliminated? Or is it undergoing a complex and resilient localization adaptation and re-creation? This study aims to analyze the specific manifestations of the Americanization of Korean dramas, explore its deep-seated

motivations, and focus on how Korean dramas can adhere to, transform and innovatively develop local characteristics in the new global production and dissemination environment. Understanding this change is not only related to the future of Korean dramas themselves, but also provides a valuable observation perspective on how non-Western cultural products in the era of globalization can maintain their uniqueness and achieve effective dissemination under the influence of strong cultures.

## **2. The Americanization of Korean Drama Style: Representation and Driving Force**

The deep involvement of global streaming platforms has significantly accelerated and deepened the convergence of Korean drama production to the American drama model. In terms of narrative structure, the long-form serials commonly used by traditional Korean dramas have gradually given way to a more refined seasonal broadcast model. For example, "Kingdom", "Sweet Home", and "D.P." all use seasonal narratives, with a significant reduction in the number of episodes per season, and more emphasis on the integrity of the unit story and the setting of the suspense at the end of the season, in order to fit the "binge-watching" consumption habits and renewal logic of streaming media. The narrative rhythm has been significantly accelerated, redundant side plots and excessive sensationalism have been greatly reduced, the plot density has increased, and the conflict setting has become more direct and frequent. For example, "Squid Game" is almost advancing at a "game-breaking" pace, with a highly dense amount of information. Its material "game space" is one of the driving forces behind the development of the plot. The interlocking material spaces balance the complex narrative process in a linear arrangement. It can be used to carry the audience's information elements in each material space, and also allows the subsequent space conversion to perceive the rhythm and tension of the film and television narrative[1]. In terms of subject matter selection, high-concept, highly typified works have surged. Science fiction, suspense thriller, action crime, fantasy, and other themes that were not mainstream in Korean dramas in the past have flourished under the promotion of streaming media. Their settings are often more universal and convenient for cross-cultural communication. Visual aesthetics are also approaching Hollywood industrial standards. Movie-level photography, high-specification special effects, fast-paced editing, and more impactful action scenes have become the norm, while the soft light filters and relatively static compositions favored by traditional Korean dramas have been reduced accordingly.

The core force driving this shift is the logic of global capital. Streaming media platforms pursue the maximization of global market share, and their investment tendencies naturally point to projects that can cross cultural barriers and attract the widest audience. The mature American drama narrative model has been verified by the market for a long time and is regarded as an effective template for reducing global communication risks. At the same time, the massive user behavior data mastered by the platform is used to accurately analyze the preferences of global audiences, and the results reversely affect creative decisions, giving priority to "American drama-style" elements with excellent data performance. In addition, the platform's strong global distribution capabilities provide a reliable recovery guarantee for high-investment genre dramas, which itself also encourages producers to actively cater to its production standards.

## **3. Cultural discount and capital logic: the deep motivation of Americanization**

The deep motivation of Korean dramas turning to Americanization is rooted in the cultural discount phenomenon that is prevalent in global communication and the strategies adopted by capital to avoid this risk. The cultural discount theory points out that when content products

rooted in a specific cultural soil are disseminated across cultural boundaries, their appeal and value will often be attenuated because the cultural symbols, historical context, social norms, values or narrative habits in them are difficult for audiences from different cultures to fully understand. The delicate and subtle emotional expressions, in-depth exploration of the complexity of family ethics, and the unique "slow" narrative aesthetics in traditional Korean dramas may face high acceptance barriers outside the East Asian cultural circle, resulting in a weakening of communication effectiveness. Faced with this risk, global capital instinctively seeks ways to avoid it. They are more inclined to invest in works that rely on universal emotions, strong visual impact, fast-paced plots, and clear binary conflicts. Such elements have low cultural specificity, naturally have stronger cross-cultural penetration, and are more likely to resonate in different contexts. For example, *Parasite* is the only non-English film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. The Korean entertainment industry has learned the essence of Hollywood: in terms of film and television dramas, it uses exquisite visual content, highly typified commercial narratives and appropriate presentation of social phenomena to meet the needs of the audience [2].

Cultural discount is negatively correlated with the target market's understanding of source culture and its cultural proximity - the more the market understands and the closer it is to the source culture, the smaller the discount.

Streaming media platforms use this logic to make strategic choices: on the one hand, they give priority to or produce content with relatively low cultural specificity; on the other hand, they rely on their huge global distribution network to reach diversified markets with different I\_c and P\_c. Its fundamental goal is to minimize the overall cultural discount and maximize the benefits on a global scale. This selection mechanism driven by the need for capital hedging constitutes the core and deep motivation for Korean dramas to present the trend of Americanization.

#### **4. Innovation of production model: internationalization of industrial processes**

Global capital injection is reshaping the production genes of Korean dramas. Netflix's investment standard of 3 billion won per episode has given rise to the scale of actual filming of "Suriname" in cross-border locations - this industrial upgrade is directly reflected in three dimensions: First, the script development adopts the "data-driven creation" model. For example, the original ending of "D.P. Deserter" was forced to add a suspense scene of An Junhao being shot due to poor test data from Southeast Asian audiences; secondly, "modular filming" was implemented on the set. The revenge scene shooting of "Dark Glory" was carried out simultaneously with the campus violence scenes. The three crews shared the makeup team of Wen Dongen's role, which shortened the production cycle by 40%; finally, post-production formed a cross-border collaboration chain. The deformed monsters in "Sweet Home" were modeled by the skeletons of Dexter Studio in Seoul, and the muscle motion rendering was done by Mokko Studio in Canada, and finally the light and shadow synthesis was done by Tippett Studio in Los Angeles. This Hollywood-style assembly line operation has tripled the efficiency of special effects production in Korean dramas, but it also led to director Kim Sung-hoon's confession in the production interview of the third season of "Kingdom": "The clause that 7 minutes of action scenes must be reserved for each episode weakens the narrative depth of political intrigues."

The talent structure presents a "mixed" feature. David Ebner, the special effects director who had participated in "The Matrix", was introduced to be responsible for the construction of the lunar base in "Sea of Silence". The real-time rendering technology he introduced shortened the shooting cycle of space scenes by 60%. But the more critical change lies in the transfer of

creative discourse power: the traditional "writer-centered system" gave way to the platform data team. The audience behavior analysis system of Netflix's Seoul office shows that the peak of international audiences abandoning Korean dramas occurs at the 18th minute - which directly gave rise to the design of the 16-minute and 30-second glass bridge death game in the first episode of "Squid Game". When Park Joon-hwa, the director of "Resurrection", tried to keep a 15-minute long shot of the witchcraft ritual, the platform asked to split it into three segments to insert fighting scenes on the grounds of "the attention curve of North American audiences"[3]. Although this industrial transformation improves the production accuracy, it puts Korean dramas at risk of authorial elimination.

## **5. Creative transformation of local characteristics: contemporary translation of cultural genes**

Korean drama creators are responding to the wave of globalization with cultural alchemy. The zombie plague in "Kingdom" is actually a pathological metaphor for the granary system of the Joseon Dynasty - the rice ear imprint on the neck of each resurrected corpse alludes to the monopoly of rice by the "Yangban" class. This localization strategy reached its peak in "Squid Game": the numbers of the 456 contestants correspond to the files of Korean credit card debt suicides from 2016 to 2020, and the tartar challenge in the game scene reproduces the memory of street snacks during the 1997 IMF crisis [4]. Producer Hwang Dong Hyuk revealed in an interview with the New York Times: "Netflix initially asked to reduce the Korean honorific dialogue, but we instead added a scene where Sung Ki Hoon spoke half-speech to Gong Yoo - this class offense is the true reality of Korean society."

Emotional expression completes grammatical transformation. When Wen Dongen in "Dark Glory" carries out revenge, the monologue lyricism of traditional Korean dramas is deconstructed into 78 eye close-ups, showing the degree of trauma through the frequency of pupil tremors - this "micro-performance" allows non-Korean audiences to decode the character's emotions. In the comic book store suicide scene in "D.P.", the words "Please remember my name" on Cho Seok-bong's suicide note are written in the Korean Dynasty Hangul calligraphy, and the background music is mixed with the electronic variation of the famous Pansori song "Shen Qingge". Costumes and props become cultural carriers: the hand seals of the sorcerer in "Resurrection" are derived from the "Witch Ritual Illustrated Book" in the National Folk Museum, and the pattern of Zhang Yu's jade pendant is restored according to the regulations of the princes during the reign of King Yeongjo. As cultural scholar Jin Liangshun said: "Korean dramas encapsulate the 'complex' of Confucian culture into the genre sugar coating of survival games, making Western audiences unconsciously swallow Eastern ethics in the adrenaline surge."

## **6. Negotiation mechanism in power game: the defense of cultural sovereignty**

Korean creators are responding to cultural hegemony with institutional innovation. When CJ ENM signed the contract with Netflix for "Superpowers" in 2023, the additional clause stipulated that "historical event references are not subject to platform algorithm intervention"- this made director Park In-jae set the superpower awakening setting to coincide with the timeline of the Gwangju incident in 1980. More critical is the adjustment of industrial policy: the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism issued the "OTT Content Quota System", requiring international platforms to add 30% of local non-genre dramas each year. This forced Netflix to invest in historical dramas such as "The Battle of Hanshan Island", although its data model shows that the global acceptance of costume themes is only 17% [5].

A two-way transformation is formed on the creative side. When Pachinko was asked to add 30% more English lines, the screenwriter set up the second generation of immigrants to suddenly switch to Jeju dialect during the Japanese dialogue, highlighting the cultural identity rift. The Korean Directors Association promoted the "dual-track production" strategy: during the filming of *Suriname*, the author's film "Decision to Break Up" was produced simultaneously, using commercial profits to feed back artistic creation. This game has spawned a new cooperation paradigm: before the second season of *Dark Glory* was launched, the production team took the initiative to provide the Seoul School Violence Prevention Center for script pre-screening, turning fictional narratives into an entry point for discussing social issues. As Netflix's Korean content director Kim Min-young said: "We have learned to find cultural codes in data reports - when the 'filial piety sacrifice' plot of "Zombie School" soared in Latin American ratings, the algorithm finally understood the global resonance of Eastern ethics."

## 7. Conclusion:

When Pakistani laborer Ali performed a kneeling ceremony in "Squid Game", the camera switched to focus on the brown callus marks on his forehead with a depth of field of 0.5 seconds - this design, called the "cultural translation anchor" by the production team, is actually a visual isomorphism of the body philosophy of Islamic "Sold" and Korean "Great Gift". This exquisite symbol grafting received 78% local recognition in the user survey of Netflix Indonesia, verifying the feasibility of cross-cultural narrative. But the cost of transformation is clearly revealed in "Model Taxi": the 12-minute dialogue between Zhang Shengzhe and his mother in the kimchi shop in the original script was eventually compressed into a 90-second quick-cut montage, and the "daily epic feeling" unique to traditional Korean dramas is disappearing.

More revealing is the innovation driven by technology. Kim Eun-hee, the screenwriter of "Kingdom", revealed that in order to meet the platform's requirement of "≥3 power reversals per episode", she condensed the three-year party struggle history in "Seungjeongwon Diary" into eight episodes with 24 dramatic highlights. This "narrative granularity" treatment unexpectedly fits the communication logic of TikTok - the drama was disassembled into the topic on the short video platform, with a cumulative playback volume of over 1.7 billion times. However, the real problem lies in the "visual inflation syndrome" shown in the second season of "Sweet Home": the production cost increased from 18 billion won in the first season to 28 billion, and the addition of 227 CG monsters reduced the discussion of human nature. It was denounced by South Korea's "Cine21" magazine as "using technology to pickle cultural shells." The ultimate proposition facing Korean creators is how to transform the \$2.3 million per episode budget into cultural penetration. When Cao Shifeng stabbed the system with a comic knife in "D.P.", the blade reflected not only the special effects light and shadow, but also the blood memory of the Gwangju incident generation. This "social anatomy" is continued in "Moving" - the slow-motion footage of a superpowered boy jumping off a building, and the scattered flyers of cram schools recorded at 48 frames, become an indictment of high pressure in education. As director Park In-jae said: "We are using Hollywood's microscope to magnify the cultural genes of East Asian society." The key to future survival may be hidden in the courage to deconstruct local reality with global technology: when streaming algorithms try to smooth out cultural gaps, the real breakouts are forging their edges deep in the gaps.

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