

HUMAN DARKNESS ON SCREEN: CULTURAL DISCOUNTS IN THE RECEPTION OF CHINESE AUDIENCES THROUGH THE SOUTH KOREAN FILM *CONCRETE UTOPIA* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

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In the realm of intercultural film transmission, cultural discount is a prevalent phenomenon that reflects the devaluation of cultural content among audiences from diverse backgrounds. Despite South Korea's robust film industry and its aggressive global expansion, there is limited research on the cultural discounts experienced by Chinese audiences when consuming South Korean films. This study undertakes a qualitative survey involving 25 Chinese viewers to investigate the cultural discount in their engagement with the South Korean film *Concrete Utopia* (2023), which was a contender at the Academy Awards in 2024. The research findings suggest that various content elements, such as film setting, verbal expression translation, nonverbal expression, visual image, and non-diegetic music, did not significantly contribute to cultural discounts among Chinese audience participants. The primary cultural discount experienced by Chinese audience participants centres on the portrayal of human darkness and is evident in the plot and thematic elements of *Concrete Utopia*. A subset of these participants also noted that the film's tragic ending led to a noticeable cultural discount. This study contends that after South Korea abolished its film censorship system in the late 1990s, the South Korean film market witnessed a surge in productions exploring humanity's dark aspects. South Korean audiences have developed sufficient aesthetic sophistication and viewing experience to effectively interpret such films. In contrast, China's propaganda framework emphasizes societal beauty and brightness, while its censorship regulations restrict filmmakers from depicting darkness of society and human nature. Consequently, Chinese audiences have limited exposure to films addressing these themes. This scarcity has resulted in limited interpretive capacity, leading to cultural discount when viewing works like *Concrete Utopia*.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; cultural discount; South Korean film; Chinese audiences

1. INTRODUCTION

For much of the 20th century, South Korean film-making struggled to develop independently. Historical challenges like foreign rule, wars, and strict government control held back its growth (Min et al., 2003). This situation began to change dramatically when South Korea became more democratic during the 1980s and 1990s. Political leaders introduced reforms that gave filmmakers new freedoms to explore social issues through their work. The abolition of the film censorship system in the late 1990s served as a catalyst for substantial changes within the South Korean film industry, propelling it into a pivotal position characterized by prolific output and considerable influence (Jin, 2019; Matron, 2010; Moon, 2006). This rapid evolution culminated in noteworthy prosperity within a compressed time-frame (Klein, 2008).

Over the past three decades, South Korean cinema has not only flourished but also transformed the dynamics of the domestic film market. Given South Korea's status as a key U.S. ally, its cinematic landscape has been heavily influenced by foreign films, especially Hollywood productions (Min et al., 2003). However, as the South Korean film industry experienced substantial growth, a significant paradigm shift unfolded in the competition for the domestic film market. Emerging as a robust contender, South Korean cinema posed a formidable challenge to the enduring dominance of Hollywood productions in the South Korean market, ultimately reshaping the landscape of the domestic film industry (Yecies & Shim, 2011, 2015). The rarity of such achievements in nations with open film markets has led scholars to commend South Korean cinema as an exemplary model within the film industry (Klein, 2008).

Establishing itself as a powerhouse in the domestic market, South Korean cinema actively engages in the international arena, fostering the cross-cultural dissemination of its films (Gee, 2017; Yecies & Shim, 2011). As a notable non-Western cinematic force, South Korean films have garnered global acclaim and have been regularly featured on screens in major cities worldwide, including New York, Paris, London, and Vancouver (Jin, 2019). Concurrently, the industry also receives consistent praise and respect on the global stage, evident through its numerous prestigious awards at various international film festivals (Moon, 2006). As a compelling example, the South Korean film *Parasite* (2019), which secured four Academy Awards, is the first South Korean film to be recognized by the Academy Awards and the first non-English-language film to win the coveted Best Picture award. This historic milestone not only represents the pinnacle of South Korean cinema but also underscores both its national and international enduring strength and influence.

Despite the notable success of South Korean cinema abroad, the potential obstacle posed by cultural discounts warrants attention in cross-cultural communication. Cultural discount warrants meticulous examination in the realm of cross-cultural film transmission, as underscored by the scholarly work of Cheng and Ma (2014). Specifically, it refers to the phenomenon where "a particular program rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as audiences find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioral patterns of the material in question" (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988, p. 500). This highlights that elements appealing to an audience in one culture may not resonate with those of another, underscoring the diversity in audience preferences across different cultural contexts.

Research has shown that the majority of investigations put more emphasis on the cultural discounts Western films present to Eastern audiences and Eastern films to Western audiences (Chen, 2015; Chen & Liu, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Cheng & Ma, 2014; Lee, 2006, 2009). However, a noticeable gap in the literature concerns the specific exploration of cultural discounts originating from Eastern films and how they are received by Eastern audiences. In particular, the intricate cultural interactions between South Korean cinema and Chinese audiences remain understudied (Soh & Yecies, 2017).

The existing literature focuses on studying the cultural discounts resulting from the interaction between Eastern and Western cultures, possibly primarily due to the cultural disparities between the East and the West. Consequently, the cultural discounts imparted through films in this intercultural dynamic become more conspicuously evident. While considering the cultural proximity between China and South Korea, the cultural discounts introduced by South Korean films to Chinese audiences may not manifest with the same perceptibility observed in East-West cultural interactions, potentially contributing to their marginalized status.

The investigation of cultural discounts in South Korean cinema, particularly in its reception by Chinese audiences, is of considerable academic importance. In its pursuit of enhancing national soft power, South Korea has consistently worked to promote its films on the global stage (Yecies & Shim, 2011). As such, understanding how international audiences perceive South Korean films has become a critical area of research, particularly within China's vast market, which boasts a population of over one point five billion (Yecies, 2016). In this context, the complex relationship between South Korean cinema and Chinese audiences has emerged as a focal point for scholarly inquiry. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that while South Korea and China share geographical proximity, their developmental paths over the past half-century have diverged significantly. This

divergence spans political, economic, and social dimensions, creating a substantial socio-cultural gap between the two nations.

This study analyzes how Chinese audiences experience cultural discount through South Korean film *Concrete Utopia* (2023). The film follows Min-seong and Myeong-hwa as they struggle to survive in a lone-standing apartment building after an earthquake. Led by Yeong-tak, the residents in the building violently reject outsiders and create strict rules to maintain order. However, as tensions grew among the residents, the so-called “Concrete Utopia” began to fall apart. Outsiders eventually broke in, and both Min-seong and Yeong-tak lost their lives in the chaos. The film did well at the box office in South Korea. It won over ten awards, including Best Picture at major ceremonies like the Blue Dragon Film Awards, Buil Film Awards, and Grand Bell Awards. Its critical success led to selection as South Korea's official submission for Best International Feature Film at the 96th Academy Awards.

Concrete Utopia is considered one of South Korea's most successful films in 2023. However, Chinese audiences on Douban gave it different feedback. By December 2023, the film's Douban score stood at 6.3/10—much lower than its critical acclaim in Korea. This difference between countries' responses shows how cultural discount works in international cinema. Given the scarcity of research on cultural discounts faced by Chinese audiences when viewing South Korean films, this study aims to bridge a notable gap by examining the case of *Concrete Utopia*. The primary objective is to identify specific content elements within this film that may contribute to a cultural discount effect among Chinese viewers. Thus, the research poses a central question: Which content elements in the South Korean film *Concrete Utopia* contribute to the cultural discount observed among Chinese audiences? By investigating the relationship between the film's content and the reception by Chinese viewers, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of cross-cultural film reception, particularly in the context of South Korean cinema among Chinese viewers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research examines the phenomenon of cultural discount discerned by Chinese audiences when engaging with the South Korean cinematic production *Concrete Utopia*, with a specific focus on its content elements. A substantial body of existing literature has thoroughly explored the content dimensions of international films, identifying factors that potentially underpin the cultural discount perceived within domestic audience contexts.

As emphasized by Ramière (2010), understanding a film's setting is crucial to the interpretation of foreign cinematic works, particularly when local audiences may be unfamiliar with the depicted settings. Films showing surface-level settings like food and clothing styles usually create smaller cultural discounts. However, when foreign films explore deeper issues such as religious practices or ethical systems, local audiences experience larger cultural discounts (Xue, 2009).

Films often rely on both verbal and non-verbal symbols to express characters' thoughts (Ramière, 2010). The way characters speak and behave on screen usually reflects their culture (Baron & Carnicke, 2010). As a result, audiences from other cultural backgrounds may find it difficult to fully grasp the meaning behind certain actions or lines of dialogue (Berghahn, 2019). When foreign films show culture-specific ways of speaking or acting, these differences can make the story feel less relatable to local audiences. This is one of the ways cultural discount can take place. Translating foreign films into local languages plays an important role in helping viewers follow the story. However, some studies suggest that poor or unnatural translations can reduce the audience's interest and enjoyment, which may lead to cultural discount (Chen et al., 2021). In research on the United Kingdom film market, Jones (2017) noticed that films from European Union countries often face more challenges due to language gaps, while English-language films from the United States usually perform better. Even when there is no language barrier, nonverbal elements in films can still be misunderstood. Chen and Liu (2021) pointed out that Western viewers sometimes miss the deeper meaning behind gestures or expressions commonly used in Chinese films. These cases show that cultural discount may result not only from language issues, but also from unfamiliar ways of expressing ideas through nonverbal expressions.

Some foreign films face cultural discount because of the visual images. Berghahn (2019) finds that while Chinese audiences are often able to follow subtle visual hints in local films, Western viewers may find it difficult to hard to understand the same images, suggesting that visual styles that work well in one culture do not always make the same impact in another. When it comes to non-diegetic music, many studies have looked at how music in films influences what viewers think and feel (Boltz, 2001; Hoeckner et al., 2011). There is still little research on whether non-diegetic music can lead to cultural discount among local audiences. This could be a useful area for future studies to explore.

The plot is often seen as one of the most important parts of a film (Chen et al., 2021). As Lee (2009) points out, how local audiences understand a foreign film's storyline is strongly shaped by their own cultural

background. Tang's (2008) study indicates that specific plots in American films may lead to a cultural discount for Chinese audiences, given their divergence from Chinese cultural traditions. However, cultural discounts are not unidirectional; Western audiences may also encounter bewilderment when confronted with Chinese film plots depicting corporal punishment on children, a preference for sons over daughters, and profound respect for ethical hierarchies within families (Chen & Liu, 2021).

Themes play a crucial role in the manifestation of cultural discounts (Chen et al., 2021). The scholars underscore the significance of thematic elements in the context of cultural interpretation. For instance, the story of Mulan, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, originally accentuated notions of patriotism and filial piety. Disney changed the story's main theme to focus on personal development. This approach matched Western cultural values better but made the film less relatable to Chinese viewers, as shown in Chen et al.'s (2021) research. Earlier studies found similar patterns. Chen's (2015) analysis of comedy films demonstrates that when these films center on marriage customs or traditional ethics, international audiences often struggle to connect with these themes. This disconnect creates measurable cultural discount effects.

Research shows that cultural discount in cross-border film communication involves seven key aspects: the film setting, translation of verbal expression, nonverbal expressions of characters, visual images, non-diegetic music, plots, and themes. Building on this existing research framework, the current study investigates how Chinese viewers experienced cultural discounts while watching the South Korean film *Concrete Utopia*.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative survey with open-ended questions, a method validated by Terry and Braun (2017) for its effectiveness in analyzing how individuals perceive and interpret sociocultural content. Focusing on *Concrete Utopia*, the research investigates cultural discount manifestations among Chinese audiences. The methodology's strength lies in its ability to systematically document viewers' spontaneous descriptions of cultural barriers encountered during film viewing, thereby aligning precisely with the goal of mapping cross-cultural interpretation patterns.

Participants were recruited through posts on Douban Movies, a major Chinese platform for film discussions. The selection followed two main conditions. First, participants needed to be Chinese citizens who grew up in China, to make sure they were familiar with Chinese cultural context. Second, all participants had to be at least 18 years old, in order to avoid exposing minors to possibly disturbing content in the film.

The qualitative survey invited participants to respond to open-ended questions in their own words. The questions were developed based on existing literature and focused on seven aspects of *Concrete Utopia* that could lead to cultural discount. These included the film setting, verbal expression translation, characters' nonverbal expression, visual image, non-diegetic music, plots, and themes. At the end of the survey, participants were advised to mention any other factors they felt might lead to cultural discount when watching the film.

In qualitative research, the decision about sample size usually depends on how much meaningful information participants are expected to provide (Staller, 2021; Kuzel, 1999). Researchers often use the concept of data saturation, where new interviews stop revealing fresh ideas or patterns (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This happens when later interviews repeat what earlier participants already shared, showing that more data collection would not improve understanding. In this study, the team analyzed responses while collecting data. After interviewing 25 Chinese participants, the main themes in their answers matched those from earlier interviews. No new patterns emerged beyond this point, confirming that 25 participants provided sufficient data depth. This study used thematic analysis to examine survey data, following standard qualitative research methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Braun, 2017). To ensure accurate results, three verification methods were applied, including reflexivity, investigator triangulation, and participant feedback. These steps maintained strict quality control throughout data collection and interpretation.

4. RESULTS

This study investigates cultural discount experiences among 25 Chinese viewers of the South Korean film *Concrete Utopia*, with demographic characteristics as follows: gender distribution (female 64%, $n = 14$; male 36%, $n = 11$), age stratification (18–30 years 68%, $n = 17$; 30–40 years 24%, $n = 6$; 40–50 years 8%, $n = 2$), and occupational composition (students 48%, $n = 12$; unemployed 8%, $n = 2$; professionals 44%, $n = 11$ in law enforcement, public administration, education, and transportation sectors).

This research systematically examines multiple facets, including the film setting, translation of verbal expression, characters' nonverbal expression, visual image, non-diegetic music, plots, and themes. From a

broad perspective, the content elements of *Concrete Utopia*, encompassing the film setting, translation of verbal expression, characters' nonverbal expression, visual image, and non-diegetic music, did not notably contribute to a noticeable cultural discount for Chinese viewers. Despite some expressions of incomprehension or disagreement from Chinese audiences regarding these content elements, the resulting codes were sparse and scattered, preventing the formation of any substantial themes.

Insights derived from the responses of Chinese audience participants underscored that the plots showing human darkness served as a primary catalyst for cultural discount. Within the framework of thematic analysis, the responses coalesced into one dominant theme: the plots exaggerated the inherent darkness within humanity.

Specifically, one plot depicted residents of an apartment building derogatorily labelling incoming refugees as "cockroaches," fully aware that these refugees faced a grim fate if evicted into the cold. Despite this awareness, most apartment residents forcefully evicted these refugees, including vulnerable women and children. In plots where compassionate residents secretly harboured refugees, they were reported by other residents. Thus, the kind-hearted residents are punished, and the "cockroach" women and children are callously expelled, regardless of their safety. One plot depicts a person who, steadfast in his refusal to compromise with the dark aspects of human nature, ultimately takes his own life. Instead of eliciting sympathy, their fellow residents accused him of being a troublesome traitor. The film plot also hinted at the possibility of cannibalism outside the confines of the apartment building. Chinese audience participants commonly asserted that, in many plots, there existed the potential to address survival challenges through humanitarian means. Paradoxically, individuals in the film often resort to violent and even homicidal measures to protect their interests. Consequently, these cinematic plots, perceived as exaggerations of the inherent darkness within human nature, were misaligned with the participants' foundational understanding of humanity, thereby eliciting a discernible cultural discount.

Gleaned from the responses of Chinese audience participants, their insights underscored the cultural discount related to the theme of *Concrete Utopia*. Participants asserted that the plots of *Concrete Utopia* fundamentally revolved around the overarching theme of human darkness, a perspective that led many Chinese audience participants to feel a divergence from their usual understanding, introducing an element of unfamiliarity. The responses associated with this matter can be further classified into two perspectives.

While acknowledging that extreme and adverse environments might trigger or amplify the dark facets of human nature, Chinese audience members maintained their belief in the predominance of positivity within humanity. They argued that benevolent individuals constitute the majority, with those harboured inner darkness seen as a minority rather than a pervasive characteristic. However, *Concrete Utopia's* thematic focus lies heavily on the collective and universal portrayal of the dark side of human nature, significantly overshadowing the inherent goodness and beauty within humanity. Consequently, the film's portrayal of human nature conflicted with the participants' understanding, giving rise to a cultural discount.

Secondly, the responses from Chinese audience participants emphasized the unfamiliarity with the theme of human darkness portrayed in the film, influencing their overall reception. They expected the film's theme to align with the conventional narrative of humanity progressing from darkness to light. Contrary to these expectations, *Concrete Utopia* unfolds with a theme depicting a gradual transition of human nature from light to darkness, where initially benevolent individuals transform into active perpetrators of violence. This thematic context was unfamiliar to Chinese audiences, prompting some to argue that the film portrayed human nature in a negative light. The theme of *Concrete Utopia* contradicts the consistent viewing experience of Chinese audience participants, posing a significant barrier to their acceptance of the film.

Furthermore, the ending of *Concrete Utopia* elicited a cultural discount among certain Chinese audience participants. The inclusion of a concluding question in the qualitative survey allowed participants to offer unstructured responses beyond the previously examined content elements, offering insights into additional factors contributing to their experienced cultural discount. Notably, a significant proportion of their responses centred on the difficulties they faced in accepting the film's conclusion.

In the film's ending, amidst the events within the utopian landscape, the intrusion of assailants into the apartment building leads to a harrowing massacre. Despite husband Min-seong and wife Myeong-hwa successfully fleeing the apartment, Min-seong, severely injured, eventually succumbs to his wounds. The responses from Chinese audience participants conveyed that, within the film's pervasive exploration of the dark facets of human nature, the love shared by this couple stood out as a rare portrayal of humanity's warmth and affection. Consequently, they perceived the tragic demise of the husband as disheartening, as it disrupted the film's remaining moments of tenderness and beauty, contributing to a cultural discount. Chinese audience participants explicitly expressed a preference for a more gratifying ending to the love story.

While a few participants noted additional elements linked to cultural discount, the limited number and scattered nature of these responses made it difficult to develop clear themes.

5. DISCUSSION

This study fills an important research gap in cross-cultural cinema research. It identifies key film components that affect how audiences perceive stories and cause cultural discount. These findings improve the understanding of how different cultures interact through media. They provide detailed evidence showing how particular story components shape viewer reactions across national borders.

5.1 Universality and cross-cultural appeal in *Concrete Utopia*

Analysis of participant feedback indicates the following components, film setting, translation of verbal expression, characters' nonverbal expression, visual image, and non-diegetic music showed minimal influence on creating cultural discount. Most viewers reported understanding of these elements without notable cross-cultural confusion.

This study explores why certain elements in *Concrete Utopia* led to minimal cultural discount. The film setting focused on a residential complex damaged by an earthquake. It is familiar to both Chinese and South Korean audiences. This shared context made it easier for Chinese viewers to connect with the story and lowered cultural barriers. The translation of verbal expression preserved the original meaning while adapting the language to fit Chinese local usage, which reduced confusion and improved comprehension. The characters' nonverbal expressions, such as hand gestures and facial reactions, were easily understood across cultures. It helped Chinese viewers engage emotionally with the story, reducing cultural distance. The visual images avoided Korea-specific symbols and instead focused on scenes reflecting universal human experiences. This made the film more accessible to Chinese audiences without requiring cultural background knowledge. Finally, the non-diegetic music relied on globally familiar styles, such as fast-paced suspense scores, to create tension. This approach supported emotional impact without depending on culturally specific cues. Chinese viewers understood these sounds through common human reactions, reducing cultural discount without needing South Korean cultural knowledge.

5.2 Influences shaping Chinese audiences' perceptions of South Korean films

The cultural discount, clearly noticed by Chinese participants, was reflected in the film's strong focus on the dark sides of human nature shown in its story and main theme. A segment of Chinese viewers also expressed dissatisfaction, particularly in response to the film's conclusion, notably the tragic fate of the character Min-seong. This study contends that this reaction is also indicative of the Chinese audience's reluctance to accept portrayals of human darkness. In other words, the cultural discount experienced by Chinese audiences with the South Korean film *Concrete Utopia* primarily centres around the film's depiction of the dark aspects of human nature. Considering cultural discount as a manifestation of cultural exchange between foreign films and local audiences, this discussion will focus on the film's deliberate emphasis on human darkness from the perspectives of South Korean film and Chinese audiences.

5.2.1 Expression of human darkness in South Korean films

The portrayal of the darkness within human nature and society has emerged as a distinctive perspective in South Korean cinema since the lifting of film censorship. For a considerable period of history, independent expression in South Korean films was suppressed under Japanese colonial rule and the authoritarian regime in South Korea. South Korean cinema began breaking free from constraints during the democratic movement of the 1980s. This transformation was fully realized in the 1990s after the abolition of film censorship, enabling unrestricted artistic expression (Jin, 2019). Confronting collective national traumas such as colonial rule, the Korean War, and authoritarian rule, South Korean filmmakers, liberated from oppression, believe that South Korean cinema should no longer serve as a tool for the government to conceal social contradictions and divert public attention. Instead, it should function as a medium to reveal the darkness inside society and human nature (Min et al., 2003). South Korean cinema intends to stimulate profound reflection among the South Korean populace by showcasing societal and human darkness, thereby arousing their inherent sense of justice and responsibility, guiding and prompting them to engage in actions that uphold fairness and justice (Choe, 2018). South Korean films can push social change in this way (Min et al., 2003). Take the 2011 film *Silenced* as proof. By exposing institutional abuse through its storyline, the film directly led to new child protection laws in Korea. This case proves South Korean films can drive real policy changes when showing society's dark sides.

Based on the reason above, South Korean films are often willing and skilled at portraying the darker sides of human nature. This is usually done by presenting plots that highlight such behaviour, which in turn helps to shape the overall theme of human darkness. More specifically, the film presents plots in which outsiders freeze to death outside the shelter, while those inside focus on protecting their own space. It also shows scenes where limited supplies are denied to the outside women and children, reflecting a strong drive for self-preservation. When some characters try to help or show kindness to outsiders, they face strict

punishment. This adds depth to the portrayal of moral compromise during times of crisis. Through these plots, the film develops a theme centered on the darker sides of human nature. It shows that, under extreme conditions, people may act in selfish ways to secure their own survival, even if it means harming others. This type of behavior is not presented as unusual, but rather as a widespread response among the group.

The ending of *Concrete Utopia*, especially the death of Min-seong, plays an important role in showing the dark side of human nature. At first, Min-seong is a public worker who tries to help others. But as the story progresses, he slowly changes. He becomes violent and starts hurting people without hesitation. This change shows how his sense of right and wrong gradually fades. His death presents a strong example of the consequences linked to the dark parts of human nature. It encourages the audience to reflect: although the darkness within human nature may satisfy short-term needs, it eventually brings about destruction. By placing Min-seong's death at the end of the story, the film offers a stronger and clearer depiction of the darkness within people. If the story had ended with the couple surviving, the loss of the death element would have weakened the film's sharp focus on the exploration of human nature's dark side.

South Korean audiences, having long been exposed to films that deal with the dark sides of human nature, show a strong familiarity with the way this theme is presented. In *Concrete Utopia*, the portrayal of human darkness connects closely with the lasting experiences of these South Korean viewers. As a result, the film does not seem strange to them, nor does it lower its level of acceptance. In addition, South Korean media often reports freely on social events that reveal the dark parts of society. This openness builds a foundation for audiences to better understand the layered depiction of human darkness in the film.

5.2.2 The impact of China's official propaganda on the perceptions of Chinese audiences

When Chinese audiences watch the film, the way the plot and theme show the darker side of human nature can lead to cultural discount. One important factor is the impact of official propaganda in shaping how Chinese viewers interpret such content. Under this influence, some Chinese audiences did not accept how human darkness was portrayed. As a result, they felt less emotionally connected to the story. This weaker response lowered the film's value in their eyes and contributed to cultural discount. In the specific context of Chinese politics and culture, official propaganda holds no inherently negative connotations. On the contrary, the Chinese Communist Party perceives it as a constructive instrument aimed at enlightening the public and advancing societal progress (Shambaugh, 2017). Chinese official propaganda can be categorized into two primary dimensions, media content censorship and proactive propaganda, each playing a distinct role in shaping the perceptions of Chinese audiences.

Due to China's media content censorship, the dissemination of news that starkly exposes the darkness of human nature is not prevalent within the media landscape. Chinese audiences gradually lose the ability to apprehend the notion that human nature is inherently dark because of the deficient exposure to such news. The objective of media content censorship in China is to regulate information that holds the potential to incite social unrest within the domestic media sphere (Xu & Albert, 2017). This regulation seeks to preemptively address or mitigate the likelihood of unforeseen collective events that could catalyze social disturbances (Creemers, 2017). China's censorship of media content is commonly perceived as having an extensive reach and intricate nature (King et al., 2013). Under such circumstances, news that vividly exposes the darkness of human nature may undergo scrutiny due to its potential to incite collective activities, such as protests or demonstrations, which the Chinese government deems as potential catalysts for social unrest. Consequently, such news is subject to censorship, resulting in its constrained and limited exposure to media platforms in China. This limited exposure implies that Chinese audiences are not consistently and profoundly immersed in news content that portrays human darkness. As a result, their awareness and acknowledgment of the perspective that human nature is intrinsically dark are attenuated.

In the realm of Chinese official propaganda, there is another influential dimension attributive to proactive propaganda, that is, urging media outlets to extensively circulate narratives that illuminate the brightness and beauty of human nature, thereby fortifying this perception among Chinese audiences. Besides, China's proactive propaganda attaches great importance to promoting concepts related to civility and public morality, primarily encapsulated within the notion of "positive energy" (Zhengnengliang in Chinese) (Creemers, 2017). Positive energy encompasses narratives that embody human virtues such as justice, fairness, honesty, kindness, and other positive qualities (Pang & Wang, 2022). It has ascended to the status of a national ideology, guiding the dissemination of media content (Pang & Wang, 2022). Essentially, Chinese media is mandated with the proactive responsibility of championing narratives that emphasize the inherent goodness and brightness of human nature. Consequently, Chinese media platforms are predisposed to spotlight stories featuring individuals engaged in benevolent actions that serve as exemplars of the inherent goodness prevalent in humanity and society. These narratives often revolve around themes such as police officers making sacrifices to protect civilians, doctors voluntarily waiving medical fees for patients, and teachers tenaciously educating

students despite encountering personal challenges. Through the discerning presentation of these examples, Chinese media outlets strategically work towards projecting a positive perspective on human nature. As a result, Chinese audiences, who have been repeatedly exposed to such information over a long period, tend to strengthen their belief in the essential goodness of human nature.

In summary, Chinese official propaganda limits the amount of news that shows the dark sides of human nature. At the same time, it promotes news that emphasizes the positive qualities of humanity. This combined approach shapes a widespread belief among Chinese audiences that human nature is basically good. As a result, the theme of human darkness in *Concrete Utopia*, presented through various plots that highlight negative aspects of human nature, contrasts with the beliefs commonly held by Chinese audiences. This discrepancy prevents the film from achieving widespread acceptance and resonance, resulting in a devaluation of its cultural significance and triggering a cultural discount.

5.2.3 The influence of the Chinese film censorship system on the perceptions of Chinese audiences

The constraints imposed by China's film censorship system contribute to a notable lack of films in the Chinese market that directly address the darkness of human nature. This regulatory framework has the potential to influence Chinese audiences' interpretation of films with such themes, leading to a cultural discount when engaging with works like *Concrete Utopia*. More specifically, diverging from South Korea, China maintains its commitment to content censorship within the film industry. Notably, film functions as a crucial instrument of state propaganda in China (Cai, 2016). Film, as a form of soft propaganda, holds the capacity to amplify persuasive and engaging messages, subtly educating Chinese audiences, and effectively shaping their perceptions (Huang, 2015, 2018; Mattingly & Yao, 2022). Recognizing film's influence as a cultural product, the Chinese government deems film censorship necessary, often implementing these mechanisms in an opaque manner (Grimm, 2015).

The foundation of China's film censorship lies in the "Regulations on the Filing and Administration of Film Scripts", enacted in 2006. This comprehensive regulation delineates explicit criteria for film censorship, stipulating that films should refrain from propagating negative values and should avoid exaggerating the dark facets of human nature. The requirements imposed by the censorship system start from the creation of film scripts and extend throughout the entire cinematic narrative, from the beginning to the closing scenes. Films in China that focus on portraying the dark dimensions of human nature transgress these regulations, leading to an inevitable denial of approval by film censorship authorities. As a result, in the Chinese film market, it is uncommon to find films that focus mainly on themes highlighting the dark sides of human nature.

China's film censorship policies shape film storytelling in specific ways. Current regulations force filmmakers to highlight virtuous human qualities, while steering clear of morally negative portrayals. This creates noticeable contrasts in how Chinese and South Korean films present human nature, even when dealing with identical subject matter. The difference becomes particularly clear when examining two earthquake-themed films: South Korea's *Concrete Utopia* versus China's *The Last Great Wall* (2009). Both films depict cities destroyed by earthquakes and communities in crisis.

The Last Great Wall builds its story around how civilians and the military work together after the earthquake. The film's plot highlights Chinese peoples' acts of kindness and support. For example, a male teacher protects the students from falling debris and loses his life. An older woman returns to a dangerous area to save a baby. A female official keeps organizing relief efforts even after losing her mother. Soldiers take part in rescue operations, donate blood, and handle chemical leaks, even when their own safety is at risk. The theme stays focused on the goodness and strength people can show in hard times.

Chinese and South Korean films often take different approaches when showing disasters. South Korean films tend to focus on the weaknesses in human nature during these events. In contrast, Chinese films usually highlight kindness, courage, and responsibility. One reason for this difference is the film censorship system in China, which places limits on how negative behavior is shown. Viewers from South Korea or Western countries may find the story in Chinese films overly hopeful. However, the focus on values supported by society matches what many Chinese viewers expect to see. This connection makes the film easier for local audiences to relate to, which helps explain why it received higher ratings on Douban than *Concrete Utopia*.

China's film censorship system places limits on how negative aspects of human behavior can be shown. Because of this, Chinese audiences are not often exposed to films that deal with the darker sides of human nature. This lack of exposure may lead to difficulty in understanding such themes. When watching films that include these elements, some viewers might misread the message. For example, certain audiences misunderstood the purpose of *Concrete Utopia*. Without enough experience in thinking about these kinds of topics, they assumed the film was simply presenting a negative view of people. This kind of misunderstanding can lower the perceived artistic value of the film and lead to cultural discount in China.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Many researchers see culture as something shared within a group (Haviland et al., 2014; Hofstede, 2011; Nolan, 1999). This idea suggests that people from the same cultural background often understand foreign films in similar ways. Even though individuals may differ in age or education, they usually view these films through a common cultural lens (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). Based on this collective cultural perception, Chinese audiences, regardless of age, occupation, income, or education, may also hold a similar viewpoint on the cultural discount perceived in South Korean films. Hence, this study treats the Chinese audience as a cultural collective, without delving into how individual attributes such as age, education, and income affect their perception of cultural discount. This qualitative approach aligns with the study's emphasis on constructing shared perceptions rather than individual behavioural influences.

While this perspective has its merits, the absence of an empirical investigation into how personal attributes—age, gender, occupation, income, social status, and class impact the perceived cultural discount can be considered as one of the study's limitations. This gap, however, presents opportunities for future research. Empirical studies could examine the relationship between individual attributes and the cultural discount perceived by Chinese audiences toward South Korean films. For example, exploring the empirical connection between educational background and cultural discount perception would provide fresh insights into cultural discount research.

6. CONCLUSION

This research employed a qualitative survey to explore the cultural discount experienced by 25 Chinese audience participants in their engagement with the South Korean film *Concrete Utopia*. The study found that elements such as film setting, verbal expression translation, characters' nonverbal expressions, visual images, and non-diegetic music did not significantly contribute to cultural discounts among Chinese participants. However, a subset of Chinese participants highlighted that the film's tragic ending disrupted the narrative's limited moments of beauty, resulting in a cultural discount. The predominant cultural discount for Chinese audience participants revolved around the depiction of human darkness in the plot and themes of *Concrete Utopia*, with participants expressing disapproval and a sense of unfamiliarity, hindering a strong resonance with the narrative.

This paper looks at how the portrayal of human darkness in the film contributes to a cultural discount for Chinese audiences. Initially, from the perspective of South Korean cinema, the exposure of human and societal darkness became a focal point in film production following the abolition of the film censorship system in South Korea. *Concrete Utopia* serves as an illustrative example, aligning with the cognitive and experiential expectations of South Korean audiences. However, under the influence of Chinese official propaganda, Chinese audiences do not wholly endorse the film's expression of human darkness in the plot and theme, diminishing their resonance and leading to a cultural discount. Concurrently, China's film censorship system renders films depicting human darkness exceptionally rare in the Chinese market. Consequently, Chinese audiences are unaccustomed to such expressions, lacking adequate appreciation skills, thereby depreciating the film's value, and causing a cultural discount.

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