

Cross-Cultural Cinematic Analysis: Investigating Cultural Discounts in Chinese Audiences' Reception of Korean Science Fiction Film the Host

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Abstract: Cultural discount denotes the diminished worth of foreign films in the context of cross-cultural communication, stemming from incongruities in the cognitive frameworks, values, and ideologies of local audiences. This phenomenon is significant for prolific film-producing nations like Korea. Over the last three decades, Korea has established itself as a cinematic powerhouse, offering a diverse range of film genres, including science fiction. Despite achieving domestic recognition and international acclaim, the Korean science fiction film *The Host* (2006) encountered cultural discount in China. A qualitative survey of 36 Chinese viewers was conducted to explore the cultural discount imposed by *The Host*. The study covered various content elements, revealing that while some aspects had limited impact on the cultural discount perceived by Chinese audiences, the most significant lack of understanding was observed in the areas of plot, theme, and ending. This paper suggests that Chinese viewers' cultural discount experience stems from two key dimensions: unfamiliarity with the authentic Korean society, especially regarding society's anti-Americanism and government mistrust, and the film's fundamental role as a political satire, a genre rarely found in China. This scarcity hinders their ability to comprehend the film's satirical elements, resulting in cultural discount.

Keywords: Cultural discount, Film, Audiences' reception, Science fiction film, Political satire film

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, with the abolition of film censorship, the film industry in Korea (the Republic of Korea) entered a vibrant and fruitful era, achieving remarkable revitalization within a short period (Jin, 2019; Klein, 2008; Moon, 2006). The rapid development of the Korean film industry garnered significant success and global recognition (Gee, 2017; Jin, 2019). The robustness of Korean cinema is such that it can withstand the formidable impact of Hollywood films in its domestic market—an impressive achievement, especially for countries with open film markets (Yecies & Shim, 2011; Yecies & Shim, 2015). Therefore, Klein asserts that Korea has become a leading force in the global film industry's development (Klein, 2008). Korean cinema has also cultivated a diverse array of film genres, with science fiction standing out as an area where Korean filmmakers excel (Chattopadhyay, 2023). Contrary to traditional Western science fiction films, Korean science fiction films are renowned for their unique perspectives and narratives. More specifically, these films not only captivate audiences with cutting-edge technological visuals but also explore multifaceted aspects of contemporary society, including challenges related to survival and ethical dilemmas (Chattopadhyay, 2023). Nonetheless, while this approach distinguishes Korean science fiction films, it also engenders certain adverse consequences. In particular, as these films are deeply embedded in the social fabric of Korea, they offer domestic audiences a sense of familiarity. However, they present challenges concerning reception for international viewers who lack a profound understanding of Korean society (Chattopadhyay, 2023). This phenomenon, where a cultural product enjoys significant appeal in its country of origin but fails to garner the same level of interest in another, is a prevalent challenge encountered during the process of cross-cultural communication. It is commonly referred to as a “cultural discount”. The theory of cultural discount posits that ‘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 behavioural patterns of the material in question’ (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988). This illustrates that what captivates an audience in one culture might not necessarily align with the sensibilities and expectations of another, highlighting the significant diversity in audience preferences across cultures. While existing literature has extensively investigated the phenomenon of cultural discount in cross-cultural film transmission, revealing the common occurrence where a nation's films

thrive domestically but depreciate when introduced abroad e.g., (Chen, 2015; Chen et al., 2021; Chen & Liu, 2021; Lee, 2006, 2009), there is a scarcity of research in English-language publications concerning Chinese audiences' reception to Korean cinema (Soh & Yecies, 2017). This insufficiency is particularly evident in the dearth of literature dedicated to probing Chinese audiences' reception of Korean science fiction films. Two primary factors may account for this gap. Firstly, the dominance of Western cinema, particularly Hollywood, in the science fiction genre, has led to an academic disregard for Korean science fiction films from a non-Western perspective (Chattopadhyay, 2023). Secondly, the impact of political dynamics in Northeast Asia on film exchanges between China and Korea has marginalized audience studies on Chinese viewers of Korean films. However, it is of paramount importance to highlight the significance of delving into the Chinese audiences' reception of Korean science fiction films, particularly in terms of the cultural discount they might experience. To begin, with the rise of Korean cinema, Korea actively promoted its films in the international market (Grandison et al., 2023; Yecies & Shim, 2011). Against this backdrop, the reception of Korean science fiction films among overseas audiences is worth exploring. Secondly, with China's vast population of 1.4 billion, it represents an immensely promising market for Korean cinema (Yecies, 2016). Despite potential uncertainties arising from the political dynamics in Northeast Asia, the internet has effectively bridged the gap between Chinese audiences and Korean science fiction films. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic, which constrained in-person cinema attendance, has further solidified the trend of online streaming (Wang et al., 2021). Consequently, many Chinese viewers have turned to the internet as a means of accessing Korean films. Thus, the potential film audience in China retains substantial significance for the Korean film industry. The focus of this study is the 2006 Korean science fiction disaster film *The Host*, directed by Bong Joon-ho, an acclaimed Korean director. Despite its age of more than a decade, its brilliance remains undiminished. Bong Joon-ho stands among Korea's most prominent directors, demonstrating proficiency in the Hollywood film style and using it effectively to convey Korean narratives (Klein, 2008). *The Host* is a successful combination of Hollywood visual style and Korean narratives (Klein, 2008). More specifically, the narrative of *The Host* revolves around an American-led laboratory polluting the Han River in Korea, resulting in the creation of a mutant monster. This monster kidnaps a young girl who is deeply loved by her family. Frustrated by their unsuccessful pleas for government assistance, the family embarks on a rescue mission,

encountering a range of obstacles posed by the government and society. Tragically, their rescue mission ends in failure, leading to the grandfather's death and the young girl's tragic demise. *The Host* enjoyed remarkable success in Korea as it topped the 2006 Korean box office rankings, with potentially more than a quarter of the country's population attending screenings. This achievement marked a significant milestone in the ascent of the Korean film industry (Lee, 2011). Garnering widespread acclaim domestically, the film even clinched the prestigious Best Film award at the Blue Dragon Film Awards, one of Korea's most renowned film accolades. *The Host* aimed to exhibit the exceptional quality of Korean cinema on a global stage, extending its ambitions beyond the confines of the domestic market (Lee, 2011). This international endeavour lived up to the expectations of the Korean film industry, receiving extensive recognition and praise in the realm of international distribution (Yecies et al., 2011). The film's outstanding performance culminated in it being honoured with the Best Film award at the Asian Film Awards and solidifying its status as one of the most triumphant Korean films in the American market (Lee, 2018). However, *The Host* faced a different fate when it hit Chinese theatres in 2007, failing to achieve significant box office success or garner widespread acclaim. Despite its status as Korea's highest-grossing film of 2006, the film not only missed out on securing a spot in China's top ten box office rankings for 2007 but also failed to break into the top ten rankings for imported films in China during that year (Sina, 2007). Similarly, in contrast to the enthusiastic response from Korean audiences, Chinese viewers did not bestow the same level of praise upon the film. Notably, on Douban Movies, China's largest film review website, nearly 300,000 viewers provided ratings for *The Host*. However, it struggled, finding itself at a modest 162nd position on the global science fiction film rating chart, not to mention its placement in the overall global film rankings. Evidently, the value of *The Host* among Chinese audiences is significantly lower than its value within Korean culture, indicating that the film has encountered a cultural discount in China. While marketing considerations may have influenced this phenomenon, it is imperative to delve into it from the vantage point of cultural discount provoked by the film's content.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study takes a closer look at the cultural discount experienced by

Chinese audiences when viewing the Korean science fiction film *The Host*, focusing on its content elements. Numerous research works have previously delved into the content components of foreign films that could contribute to the cultural discount observed among local audiences. Understanding a film's setting is a fundamental aspect of comprehending foreign films, a point underscored by Ramière (Ramière, 2010). This is relevant because there are instances where local audiences might not be well-acquainted with the settings portrayed in foreign films. Additionally, Xue makes a significant assertion regarding the depth of these settings in foreign films and its pronounced impact on the extent of cultural discount experienced by local audiences (Xue, 2009). In cases where film settings primarily involve surface-level elements like food and clothing, it often results in relatively modest cultural discounts; In contrast, the deeper settings, which encompass facets such as religious beliefs and moral values, tends to lead to substantial cultural discounts (Xue, 2009). Furthermore, as McKee argues, the setting of a film operates as a sort of "law" (McKee, 1997). It both defines the possibilities and constraints within which the narrative unfolds, significantly influencing the why and how of the story's development. Consequently, an audience's comprehension of the setting plays a pivotal role in their assessment of the story's credibility, thus affecting their overall appreciation of the film (McKee, 1997). This contention underscores that when local audiences lack familiarity with the setting of a foreign film, it has the potential to influence their interpretation of the film, ultimately resulting in a cultural discount. Films represent a form of artistic expression encompassing both verbal and non-verbal symbols (Ramière, 2010). Central to this cinematic expression are the characters, who serve as the primary vehicles for conveying both verbal and non-verbal elements. The way these characters express themselves aligns with the aesthetic conventions of their cultural milieu (Baron & Carnicke, 2010). In fact, films produced in different countries manifest expressions deeply rooted in their respective cultural contexts (Qiong Yu, 2014). This implies that the verbal and non-verbal expressions in foreign films may pose challenges for local audiences in comprehending them (Berghahn, 2019). Put simply, the verbal and non-verbal elements within foreign films can potentially induce a cultural discount during cross-cultural communication. In foreign films, it is essential to translate verbal content to facilitate adjustments for the preferences and understanding of local viewers. However, the translation of verbal elements in foreign films may result in a lack of comprehension among local viewers. For instance, despite being based on a Chinese story, the American film *Mulan* (2020)

experienced instances where the translation of verbal expressions felt unnatural to Chinese audiences, diminishing their affinity for the film (Chen et al., 2021). Jones highlights that films originating from the European Union often face a cultural discount in the UK market due to language disparities, whereas American films that utilize English tend to be more popular in the UK (Jones, 2017). This phenomenon essentially represents a cultural discount induced by the translation of verbal expressions across distinct languages. In terms of nonverbal expression in foreign films, it can be directly conveyed to local audiences without the need for translation. However, it is important to recognize that this direct presentation can still result in a cultural discount. Chen and Liu's (2021) research further illustrates that non-verbal expressions by Chinese film characters frequently convey unintended meanings to Western audiences (Chen & Liu, 2021). Visual images in certain foreign films can also contribute to the phenomenon of cultural discounts. Berghahn's research illustrates that some nuanced visual images in Chinese films can effectively convey messages to Chinese audiences (Berghahn, 2019). However, Western audiences often struggle to interpret these messages solely through visual image. Regarding non-diegetic music, while several studies have explored how film music can influence audience comprehension and attitudes toward films (e.g., (Boltz, 2001; Hoeckner et al., 2011), there is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to addressing whether non-diegetic music plays a role in creating cultural discounts for local audiences. It presents an intriguing avenue for further research. The plot stands out as one of the most captivating aspects of a film, as noted by Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2021). It is essential to recognize that local audiences' comprehension of the plots in foreign films is significantly influenced by their respective cultural backgrounds, as emphasized by Lee (Lee, 2009). For instance, consider Disney's adaptation of the traditional Chinese story of *Mulan*, which, while based on classic Chinese narratives, undergoes adaptations in alignment with American values. As a result, certain plots in the film *Mulan* (1998) may deviate from Chinese cultural norms (Tang, 2008). However, cultural discounts are not unidirectional, and they can also perplex Western audiences when it comes to the plots of Chinese films. Plots of Chinese films, such as the use of corporal punishment on children, the preference for sons over daughters, and the high regard for the ethical hierarchy within families, may prove puzzling to Western viewers (Chen & Liu, 2021). The bidirectional impact of culture on plot comprehension underscores the frequent occurrence of cultural discounts in intercultural communication involving films. Themes also contribute to cultural

discounts (Chen & Liu, 2021). These authors have highlighted that the original theme of the Mulan story, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, focused on the themes of love for the country and filial piety for the elderly. However, Disney shifted the emphasis to the theme of self-growth, a more common Western theme, diminishing the appeal of the film to Chinese audiences (Chen & Liu, 2021; Patel, 2024). Similarly, Chen has pointed out that themes related to marriage and traditional morality in Chinese comedy films can lead to cultural discounts among foreign audiences (Chen, 2015). In summary, existing literature has explored the phenomenon of cultural discount in cross-cultural communication by examining various content elements, including the film setting, the translation of verbal expression, nonverbal expressions of characters, visual images, non-diegetic music, plots, and theme. This paper extends this analysis to investigate the cultural discounts experienced by Chinese audiences when viewing the Korean science fiction film *The Host* through the lens of these content elements.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative survey approach was employed, incorporating open-ended questions. Qualitative surveys are well-suited for delving into individuals' perspectives, thoughts, and comprehension regarding a particular phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2019; Terry & Braun, 2017). This paper will qualitatively investigate the cultural discount that the Korean science fiction film *The Host* imposes on Chinese audiences, or in other words, this study will delve into the shortcomings in Chinese audiences' comprehension and cognition of this film. Therefore, the qualitative survey is suitable for this research. The research team of this study issued recruitment notices on Douban Movies, a prominent Chinese film review website. Purposeful sampling was the chosen method, and the recruitment notices clearly outlined two key conditions for potential participants: a) Participants needed to be of Chinese nationality and have been raised in China to ensure a strong Chinese cultural background; b) Participants were required to be at least 18 years old to prevent potential harm to minors from the film's content. Ethical approval was secured from the Universiti Malaya to ensure the protection of participants' privacy, anonymity, and data confidentiality throughout the qualitative survey. Participants were asked to watch *The Host* and respond to open-ended questions afterward. In the context of a

qualitative survey, it was expected that participants would provide responses to open-ended questions using their own words (Terry & Braun, 2017). The survey questions in this study were centred on investigating the cultural discounts stemming from *The Host*. Specifically, building upon the existing literature, these questions explored the cultural discounts caused by various content elements, including the film setting, the translation of verbal expression, characters' nonverbal communication, visual image, non-diegetic music, plots, and theme. Towards the end of the survey, a deliberate question was included to enable participants to identify any additional content elements that might contribute to cultural discounts, aside from those previously discussed. In the context of a qualitative survey, the selection of an appropriate sample size should consider the richness of information yielded by the participants (Kuzel, 1999; Staller, 2021). Qualitative research often relies on the principle of saturation to gauge the richness of information within the samples. Saturation denotes the point in qualitative data collection where no novel issues or insights arise, and the collected data begin to replicate previously obtained information (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). It signifies that further data collection would be superfluous and redundant, affirming that the richness of information has reached its saturation and that the sample size is adequate (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The researchers in this study conducted data collection and data analysis concurrently. The themes and codes generated from the responses of the 30th participant were entirely repetitive compared to previous participants. To ensure that the data had indeed reached saturation in terms of information richness, the researchers continued to collect data and analysed the responses of an additional 6 participants (20% of the previous number). The results did not yield new codes or themes, confirming that the collected data had reached saturation. Therefore, a total of 36 Chinese participants responded to the qualitative survey regarding the cultural discount brought to them by *The Host*. Qualitative research data can be effectively analysed through thematic analysis, a methodology recommended by scholars such as Braun and Clarke as well as Terry and Braun (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis serves as a valuable approach for condensing qualitative data into a theoretical and conceptual framework. It involves identifying and exploring the latent themes that underlie participants' responses, thereby transcending mere descriptive accounts (Terry & Braun, 2017). In this study, the researchers enhanced the study's validity through the employment of strategies like reflexivity, investigator triangulation, and

participant feedback.

4. RESULTS

This study delves into the cultural discount experienced by Chinese audiences when watching the Korean science fiction film *The Host*. Various aspects, including the film setting, translation of verbal expression, characters' nonverbal communication, visual image, non-diegetic music, plots, and theme, are examined in this context. In terms of the film's setting, Chinese participants expressed their understanding of *The Host* as it is set in contemporary society, finding it straightforward to grasp. They indicated that the verbal expressions in the film were clearly translated and did not create any comprehension difficulties for them. Additionally, despite the film's disaster science fiction genre, the visual elements in the film did not lead to significant discomfort, disapproval, or confusion among the participants. These findings strongly indicate that the modern societal context of *The Host*, the effectiveness of translating Korean verbal expressions into Chinese, and the various visual components were all within the participants' knowledge and did not result in a cultural discount. In terms of the cultural discount related to characters' nonverbal communication, the responses from some Chinese participants can be generalized to one theme: the nonverbal communication was excessively dramatized. They pointed out that specific supporting characters' nonverbal expressions, especially their physical movements, were exaggerated and did not align with normal human behaviours, resulting in an artificial quality. To illustrate this point, they provided several instances. For instance, during the family's escape from the hospital, the portrayal of the doctors and police officers pursuing them appeared awkward and overly exaggerated. In another scene, the girl's father held a doctor at syringe in the operating room, causing many other doctors to cower and lie on the floor in fear. In the perception of Chinese participants, the portrayal of a single syringe's intimidating impact on doctors' nonverbal communication was found to be exaggerated and excessive, leading to a cultural discount. Certain non-diegetic music in the film *The Host* posed a puzzle for some of the Chinese participants. This can be categorized under a recurring theme: the non-diegetic music was out of sync with the intense atmosphere. This discrepancy became notably apparent in specific chase sequences. Several participants noted that while the family was making their escape from the

hospital, trying to rescue the young girl, and being pursued by a substantial group of doctors and police officers, the film's non-diegetic music took on a decidedly cheerful and laid-back tone. This musical choice left some Chinese participants baffled, as they felt it did not correspond with the high-stress situation at hand, leading to their sense of confusion. The content elements that led to cultural discounts among Chinese audience participants primarily revolved around the plots of *The Host*. From the Chinese participants' perspective, the cultural discount stemming from the plots can be categorized into two primary themes: the plots of government indifference toward the people, and the plots of Koreans valuing and obeying Americans. With respect to the theme of government indifference toward the people, the Chinese participants observed that numerous plots in the film portrayed government neglect and a lack of concern for the citizens. These portrayals emphasized a profound apathy, a deficiency of responsibility, and unprofessional conduct and attitudes within the government, creating a sense that these plots were disconnected from reality and potentially painted the government in a negative light. Chinese participants cited various plots to illustrate this, such as the memorial service for the victims of the monster attacks, where grieving family members were scolded by government workers for obstructing the road with their parked cars. Inside the memorial hall, the family of the girl, believing she was deceased, openly mourned on the floor. However, when government officials arrived for the memorial, staff swiftly moved the family aside to accommodate the officials. When the girl's father received a distress call from his daughter, the police refused to believe it and declined to trace the girl's phone signal, citing it as too challenging, despite later evidence indicating it was easily achievable. At checkpoints, an official easily permitted the family into a restricted area after accepting a modest bribe. The government released poisonous gas in an area that had not been fully evacuated, resulting in severe injuries among the citizens, while the monster remained alive. The narratives depicting government irresponsibility and ethical shortcomings in *The Host*, as perceived by Chinese participants, were interpreted as an exaggeration that deviated from the actual representation of the Korean government. This portrayal raised doubts about the film's credibility among Chinese viewers, diminishing their connection to the storyline and contributing to a cultural discount. In a similar vein, some Chinese participants found the plots of Koreans valuing and showing obedience to Americans in the film rather perplexing. They highlighted specific plots where Koreans appeared to highly respect and follow the lead of

Americans. For instance, the origin of the monster's mutation was attributed to a Korean assistant who was forced to carry out the order of an American, recklessly pouring a substantial quantity of toxic chemicals into the Han River. The girl's father and a U.S. soldier stationed in Korea worked together to rescue people attacked by the monster, but the Korean media only praised the valour of the U.S. soldier, completely ignoring the girl's father. Additionally, the determination of Korea's social security situation seemed to be influenced more by the United States rather than being a solely Korean prerogative. The behaviour of Korean doctors further emphasized this theme as they were seen discussing the girl's father in a laboratory but immediately silenced themselves and respectfully moved aside when an American doctor entered. Furthermore, these Korean doctors unhesitatingly followed the American's instruction to operate on the girl's father, even in the absence of any evidence of infection. These portrayals of Korean society's admiration for and obedience to Americans left Chinese viewers bewildered, resulting in a cultural discount. Concerning the film's theme, Chinese participants experienced a cultural discount primarily due to a lack of comprehension regarding the film's theme. Several Chinese viewers found the film's themes rather indistinct, and they struggled to grasp the film's underlying themes. In their interpretation, they expected the film to revolve around a family's valiant rescue mission to save the girl from a menacing monster, akin to the themes present in the *Jurassic Park* film series. However, the film's storyline significantly diverged from their expectations, resulting in uncertainty about the film's intended message. The perceived ambiguity surrounding the film's theme had a direct impact on how Chinese participants understood the film, diminishing its overall value and leading to a cultural discount.

The final question in the qualitative survey prompted participants to identify additional film content elements, apart from those mentioned earlier, that contributed to their cultural discount. Overall, participants' responses could be categorized under a single theme: the cultural discount triggered by the film's tragic ending. Chinese participants believed that the young girl taken by the monster was not only innocent but also courageous and compassionate, continuously aiding a young boy similarly captured by the monster in a perilous situation. In spite of the family's unceasing rescue efforts, including the grandfather's sacrificial act, the young girl's unfortunate demise was perceived as an excessively cruel conclusion by Chinese participants. This ending, which is difficult to accept, resulted in a substantial cultural discount. While some participants

did mention other aspects contributing to their cultural discount, these responses were scattered and infrequent, insufficient to form a distinct theme.

5. DISCUSSION

This study employed qualitative research to investigate the cultural discount experienced by Chinese participants when engaging with the Korean science fiction film *The Host*. It examined various content elements such as film setting, translation of verbal expression, characters' nonverbal communication, visual image, non-diegetic music, plots, theme, and ending. An analysis of responses from Chinese participants revealed that characters' nonverbal communication, non-diegetic music, especially the plots, theme, and ending were primary contributors to a substantial level of misunderstanding and non-acceptance among the Chinese participants. These content elements not only reduced their affinity for the film but also induced a cultural discount during their viewing experience. Delving into the underlying causes of these cultural discount triggers can offer valuable insights into the disparities between the representation in Korean science fiction films and the perceptions of Chinese viewers.

5.1 The setting of *The Host*: Korean Political and Social Context Unfamiliar to Chinese Audiences

Chinese participants asserted that the film's setting portrayed a modern society, which did not result in a cultural discount for them. Various elements in the film, including skyscrapers, attire, vehicles, cuisine, and scenes set in convenience stores, offices, hospitals, riverside living, all portrayed the typical aspects of urban modern life. These scenarios are commonplace in Chinese society, fostering a sense of familiarity among the Chinese participants. Consequently, this setting did not seem to give rise to any comprehension challenges. However, it is worth noting that the setting of *The Host* is considerably more intricate than it may initially appear to Chinese viewers. The underlying setting of *The Host* can be seen from two distinct dimensions. The first dimension involves the relationship between the United States and the Republic of Korea, making Chinese participants aware of the cultural discount. The second dimension delves into the lack of trust in the government among the Korean populace. While the majority of Chinese participants did not grasp this dimension, it holds the potential to significantly impact their comprehension. These intricately connected

settings not only tap into the collective memory of Korean citizens but also serve as a profound reflection of societal reality. However, this deeply ingrained societal context might present challenges for Chinese audiences in understanding the film, thereby increasing the risk of a cultural discount.

5.2 Anti-Americanism in Korean Society

Following World War II, a profound alliance developed between the Republic of Korea and the United States. The support from the United States played a pivotal role in propelling the Korean economy forward. However, this partnership also meant that Korea would be subject to U.S. influence across a spectrum of areas, encompassing political, economic, military, diplomatic, and cultural domains. On occasion, the United States leveraged its influence to assert control over Korea, prioritizing American interests over Korean interests. This approach inevitably triggered discontent within Korean society (Klein, 2008). The experiences of the Korean film industry during the 1980s offer valuable insights into the extent of American influence and control over Korea. In the 1980s, the United States sought to increase the profitability of its films in Korea by urging the Korean government to relax its policies on foreign films. This move had profound consequences for the Korean film market, particularly in the face of intense competition from overseas films, especially those from the United States. Consequently, it sparked resistance among Korean filmmakers (Min et al., 2003). Dissatisfaction among Koreans towards the United States had another notable origin, stemming from the perceived inaction of the United States during the early 1980s in response to Korea's pro-democracy movement (Klein, 2008; Ryan, 2012). The disillusionment and sense of betrayal experienced by Koreans towards Americans played a pivotal role in the widespread emergence of anti-American sentiment within Korean society (Gweon, 2004). Additionally, various unlawful actions by the U.S. military stationed in Korea have fuelled discontent within Korean society towards the United States (Ryan, 2012). In 2000, the discharge of toxic substances into the Han River by the U.S. military triggered widespread anger in Korean society. The opening scenes of *The Host* vividly depict this incident (Ryan, 2012). The activities of the United States in Korea, as mentioned earlier, contributed to the emergence of anti-Americanism in Korean society during the late 20th century. Korean filmmakers employed cinema as a means to chronicle and express this prevailing sentiment. From the 1990s onwards, Korean filmmakers have crafted a multitude of films that either portray anti-American themes or scrutinize United States conduct in Korea. This cinematic trend also

constitutes one of the underlying settings of *The Host* (Ryan, 2012). *The Host* strategically portrays American influence and control over Korea in the context of the prevailing anti-American sentiment in Korean society. In one pivotal scene, an American coerces a Korean assistant into dumping a substantial quantity of toxic chemicals into the Han River, demonstrating a complete disregard for the potential harm this could cause to Korean civilians. This plot serves as the trigger for the monster's emergence and closely mirrors a real-life event did by U.S. military. Simultaneously, the Korean media's portrayal of the rescue mission predominantly highlights the participation of U.S. soldiers, while neglecting the girl's father, who was also involved in the rescue operation. This contrast underscores the distinction between the social status of U.S. soldiers and Korean citizens within Korean society, accentuating the elevated position of U.S. soldiers. Furthermore, news reports underscore the role of United States in determining Korea's security situation, highlighting American control has led Korea to cede a significant degree of its autonomy, resulting in foreign powers shaping its domestic circumstances. Additionally, Korean doctors demonstrate profound reverence for their American counterpart. Despite their awareness that there is no genuine virus, these Korean doctors are obligated to perform an entirely unnecessary surgical procedure on the girl's father, complying with the absurd order provided by the American doctor. These interconnected events are all based on the backdrop of American control over Korea, interwoven with satirical elements. Korean viewers, with their understanding of the United States' impact on Korean society, can more readily appreciate the nuances in these content elements and connect with them on an emotional level. In contrast, many Chinese viewers are less familiar with the intricate relationship between the United States and Korea, often perceiving these two countries as independent entities with equal footing and minimal interference in each other's affairs. Consequently, they find it challenging to comprehend why the American characters in the film wield such a strong influence within Korean society, resulting in a cultural discount.

5.3 Government Distrust in Korean Society

Korean citizens harbor widespread distrust toward social and political institutions, exhibiting a prevalent cynicism (Lee, 2003). According to the report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the trust of the Korean citizens in their government was as low as 24% in 2007 ("Yonhap News Agency, Survey: South Korean Public Ranks Seventh in Government Trust within the

OECD," 2022). Consequently, *The Host*, released in 2006, also drew on the fact that the majority of the public did not have full trust in the government, which became a significant setting for the film. Against the backdrop of a society where the public lacked sufficient trust in the government, *The Host* incorporated plots that reflected political and social issues to illustrate the government's indifference to the interests of the people. For example, in one plot, inside a funeral hall, the family of a young girl, mistakenly thinking she was dead, lay on the ground crying in mourning. Following this, government officials arrived at the funeral hall to offer their condolences, resulting in the immediate expulsion of the grieving family. This highlights the way an unfair social hierarchy prioritizes the political gestures of officials over the suffering of those at the lower rungs of society. Furthermore, when the girl's father received an urgent call from her, the police refused to trace the phone signal, deeming it too troublesome. This plot underscores the government's bureaucratic inefficiency and its apathy towards citizens' pleas. Additionally, at a security checkpoint, staff allowed the family to enter a tightly restricted zone after accepting a small bribe, shedding light on the pervasive issue of corruption in society. In a plot where the crowd had not been completely evacuated, the government released toxic gas. Instead of eliminating the monster, this action harmed numerous protesting citizens. This plot lays bare the government's disregard for the demands of its citizens and its irresponsibility concerning their welfare. These plots are firmly rooted in the context of Korean citizens' lack of trust in the government. They offer a perspective from the vantage point of ordinary individuals, serving as a critique of the government's negligence, inefficacy, and apathy towards the people's interests. Korean audiences can readily identify with these depictions and empathize with the underlying themes. Chinese audiences, however, lack an understanding of this setting, and these plots differ significantly from their perception of the government-public relationship. A survey conducted by Harvard University (Cunningham et al., 2020) revealed a high level of satisfaction among Chinese citizens with their central government, reaching 93.1%, in stark contrast to the situation in Korea. Consequently, this collective trust in the government hinders Chinese viewers from empathizing with the film plots. Chinese audiences tend to evaluate these plots based on the principles of the political system in China, leading them to view these plots as somewhat farfetched and disconnected from reality. As one Chinese participant pointed out, in China, a police officer who refused assistance, leading to casualties, would be imprisoned for dereliction of duty. Hence, the participant concluded that the plot in the

film where the police easily dismiss the father's plea for help is unlikely to happen in real life. Many real-life cases in China have contributed to shaping the perceptions of Chinese participants in this manner. However, these strict requirements and severe punishments may only be applicable to police officers under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party and may not necessarily apply to Korean police. In short, due to a lack of understanding of government distrust in Korea, Chinese audiences experience a cultural discount when watching *The Host*.

5.4 Hidden Cultural Discount

It should be noted that some other plots in *The Host* are actually based on Korea's political and social background. However, Chinese participants have not explicitly stated that these plots result in a cultural discount for them. Nevertheless, given that Chinese audiences are not familiar with the film's profound political and social setting, they may have difficulty identifying the plots that originate from this background, which could diminish their overall understanding of the film. This, in turn, might affect their level of appreciation, resulting in an actual cultural discount, even if they remain unaware of it. Several plots revolving around the girl's uncle exemplify this situation. To Chinese viewers, this character comes across as a university graduate who, despite his education, grapples with joblessness and emanates a noticeable alcoholic scent. His involvement in the girl's rescue operation is mostly limited to using a friend's assistance in tracing her location through cellphone signals. Furthermore, during the pivotal battle with the monster, he commits a significant error. From the Chinese perspective, he seems dispensable, a viewpoint that evidently underestimates the film's deliberate character design. The character of the girl's uncle is deeply rooted in Korea's political and social context, serving as a symbol of an era and a specific group of individuals who hold a collective memory in the hearts of Korean audiences. He embodies the Korean university students who actively participated in democratic movements during the 1980s and 1990s, taking to the streets in passionate pursuit of democracy and engaging in intense clashes with the government. Consequently, the film features plots where he adeptly crafts Molotov cocktails in a taxi and hurls them at the monster. His attire, with a backpack and a baseball cap, symbolizes the iconic image of university students during the democratic movement (Klein, 2008). These sequences swiftly rekindle shared memories among Korean viewers, transporting them back to the days of democratic resistance and eliciting powerful emotional responses. These plots also serve to highlight that, despite the onset of the

democratic era, it is these brave individuals from the past who continue to battle when society faces grave threats. Paradoxically, in this democratic era, these individuals have been overlooked by society, struggling to secure employment. Consequently, the film includes plots where he laments how he sacrificed his entire youth for the democracy in the country, only to remain jobless. This desperation leads him to seek solace in alcohol, culminating in the plot where he stumbles into the funeral hall, thoroughly intoxicated. These plots vividly depict a marginalized group that dedicated themselves to the nation but were ultimately forsaken by society, striking a profound chord with Korean audiences. While the plots concerning the girl's uncle have not triggered obvious cultural discounts among Chinese audiences, their lack of understanding of the aforementioned political and social backgrounds in Korea prevents them from perceiving the deeper historical and societal connotations he represents, as well as the emotional resonance tied to collective memories. Instead, they view him as merely a stereotypical drunkard and unemployed individual. This shallow interpretation evidently diminishes the film's value and depth. Consequently, it can be considered a form of cultural discount, more specifically, a hidden cultural discount. The term "hidden cultural discount" refers to a scenario in which audiences, while viewing cross-cultural films or works, may not overtly sense a lack of comprehension or confusion, but, in fact, struggle to fully grasp the deeper cultural, historical, or societal meanings woven into the narrative. This cultural discount, resulting from the audience's limited familiarity with implicit cultural elements, symbols, plotlines, or characters within the work, is primarily due to their lack of pertinent cultural or background knowledge, even in the absence of overt misinterpretations.

5.5 Political Satire Films: A Rare Theme in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

An analysis of the responses collected in this study regarding cultural discount reveals that the majority of Chinese participants perceive *The Host* as a science fiction film with a central focus on the monster, akin to classic film series like *Jurassic Park*. The film masterfully integrates elements of Hollywood-style science fiction, common monster themes found in Japanese cinema, and the harsh realities of modern Korean society (Yecies et al., 2011). However, at its core, the film serves as a reflection of contemporary Korean society. As noted by Jeong, the film leverages the film technology of the 2000s against the backdrop of the 1980s political movement to portray the lives of underprivileged individuals in the 1990s (Jeong, 2016). In essence, *The Host* is a politically satirical film filled with

political metaphors, addressing the socio-political realities of Korea (Chattopadhyay, 2023; Jeong, 2016; Klein, 2008; Lee, 2011). This discrepancy between the reception of Chinese participants and the real expression of the film significantly influences how Chinese audiences interpret various aspects of the content, including theme, plots, non-diegetic music, and nonverbal communication. In 1990s, Korea dismantled its film censorship system, granting filmmakers the liberty to candidly depict societal issues and voice their dissatisfaction with the government. This newfound creative freedom transformed cinema into a platform for addressing public concerns (Min et al., 2003). However, the landscape of film censorship in China presents a stark contrast. In China, films are regarded as a crucial means of propaganda with the potential to influence the audience significantly (Cai, 2016; Huang, 2015, 2018; Mattingly & Yao, 2022). The Chinese government, acknowledging the cultural influence of the film, deems it necessary to implement film censorship mechanisms, which are often veiled in opacity (Grimm, 2015). Under the strict regulatory framework of China's film censorship system, political satirical films targeting China's specific political landscape are exceptionally rare in the current Chinese film market. This rarity, in turn, contributes to the unfamiliarity of Chinese audiences with this genre, leaving them ill-equipped to interpret such films adequately. The deficiency in their ability to decipher political satirical films leads Chinese audiences to perceive the theme, plot, ending, non-diegetic music, and nonverbal communication in a manner that deviates from the actual intended expression of the film. This misinterpretation generates a sense of perplexity among Chinese audiences, giving rise to a cultural discount. In terms of the film theme, the Chinese participants in this study express that the theme of *The Host* appears somewhat unclear to them. They anticipate the film to be similar to the *Jurassic Park* series, where a family bravely battles a monster and ultimately successfully rescues the young girl, emphasizing the theme of the strength of family bonds. However, the central theme of *The Host* is focused on portraying societal realities through the portrayal of the monster. The film intentionally avoids excessive emphasis on the monster's destructive capabilities and the family's battle with the monster. Instead, it places the core of the discussion on why the government and society create hindrances when a family faces danger rather than offering sufficient assistance (Klein, 2008). In other words, the theme of *The Host* revolves around expressing that the harm inflicted on the people by an irresponsible government is far more significant than the harm caused by the monster. The monster is merely a surface element of the film, while the actual

essence of the film delves into societal realities. This fundamental distinction sets *The Host* apart from typical Western science fiction disaster films like *Jurassic Park*. Therefore, it can be argued that *The Host* appears as a science fiction disaster film on the surface but at its core functions as a political satirical film. While the theme of *The Host* is clear and unambiguous for Korean audiences, Chinese audiences lack the interpretative capacity for political satirical films. Consequently, they interpret the film based on the conventional logic of typical science fiction disaster films, resulting in a misinterpretation of the film theme and a cultural discount. In the plots of *The Host*, nearly all characters with a governmental background exhibit conspicuous irresponsibility and a disregard for the interests of the people, triggering a cultural discount among Chinese participants. The source of this cultural discount, in addition to the collective trust of the government by Chinese audiences mentioned earlier, is also due to a lack of awareness of political satirical films. This leads Chinese audiences to scrutinize these plots with a serious mindset. From a perspective rooted in reality, a series of events disregarding the public interest or even causing significant harm to it is indeed a low-probability occurrence for a government in a modern civilized society. However, as a political satirical film, the clustering of plots that highlight government irresponsibility, even at the expense of a certain degree of logic, serves to enhance the film's satirical effectiveness. This is a reasonable and effective strategy for political satirical films. The plots in *The Host*, where Koreans obediently follow Americans, are also rooted in the style of political satire. Although in the real world, Americans and Koreans are not in such unequal positions, Korea remains subservient to the United States in some aspects, such as politics, economics, diplomacy, and military. This situation provides material and motivation for Korean filmmakers to create sharp political satires. The plots of obedience to the United States in *The Host* serve the purpose of political satire. In the ending of *The Host*, despite the family's utmost efforts to rescue her, the young girl still dies, resulting in a tragic ending. Such a heartbreaking ending is almost unheard of in Hollywood films (Klein, 2008). Chinese participant viewers also find this ending unacceptable as they perceive the young girl as kind and loving, deeming her death as excessively cruel. Hence, this ending leads to a cultural discount among them. However, as a political satirical film, *The Host* features an ending that is both justified and clever. The death of the little girl serves to make Korean audiences realize that while the immediate cause of the tragedy is the monster's abduction, the root cause lies in the government's irresponsibility and its fear of the United States. If

the film had opted for a happy ending where the girl is rescued, it might have satisfied the audience and brought happiness. But this would significantly diminish the film's satirical impact, as it would fail to confront the government's inadequacies as effectively. However, Chinese viewers, less accustomed to political satire films, tend to interpret the ending in line with conventional disaster science fiction logic, rendering them unable to fully grasp the profound meaning of the film's conclusion, thereby leading to a cultural discount. Chinese participants' experience of cultural discount with non-diegetic music and nonverbal expression is also linked to their unfamiliarity with political satirical films. The confusion arises when tense scenes are accompanied by soothing or cheerful music, a departure from typical science fiction norms. In *The Host*, this unconventional choice is a deliberate satirical move, aiming to ridicule governmental irresponsibility rather than build tension. For instance, during a chase scene, upbeat music accentuates the absurdity of the government's actions, creating a cultural discount for Chinese audiences unfamiliar with this satirical approach. Similarly, exaggerated nonverbal expressions in the film serve a satirical purpose. For example, when the father holds a doctor hostage, the nonverbal expressions of other doctors, characterized by extreme fear, are perceived as overly dramatic by Chinese audiences. Yet, in the context of the film's satire, it highlights the contrast between those following American orders confidently and their fearful response when facing resistance. This nuanced design may be overlooked by Chinese viewers with limited exposure to political satirical films, contributing to a cultural discount.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explores the cultural discounts experienced by Chinese audiences when engaging with the Korean science fiction film, *The Host*, through qualitative surveys and thematic analysis involving 36 Chinese viewers. The investigation scrutinizes various film elements, such as setting, translation of verbal expression, nonverbal communication, visual image, non-diegetic music, plots, theme, and ending, to identify their contributions to the cultural discounts perceived by Chinese audiences. The findings reveal that aspects like setting, verbal expression translation, and visual image do not significantly contribute to the central cultural discount. However, challenges arise in the understanding of characters' nonverbal expressions and the misalignment of non-diegetic music with

tense scenes. The primary source of misunderstanding lies in plot, theme, and ending elements. Cultural discounts emerge from the depiction of government indifference and Koreans complying with Americans. Participants find a cultural discount in the theme, perceiving a deviation from their expectations of a monster-centric focus. The tragic ending also contributes significantly to the cultural discount. This paper argues that the cultural discount is rooted in two dimensions. Firstly, Chinese viewers perceive *The Host* as reflecting contemporary society but often lack a deeper understanding of its context, including anti-Americanism and public distrust towards the Korean government. Secondly, due to strict film censorship in China, audiences are unfamiliar with politically satirical films, hindering their interpretation of *The Host*'s core message.

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