

Cultural Exchange through Film: Analyzing Chinese Audiences' Reception of Japanese and South Korean Cinema

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Muhammad Yaqoub¹ and Ze Gao²

Abstract

This study empirically examines the cultural soft power effectiveness of Japanese and Korean films in China, focusing on the audience attraction mechanism from the perspective of cultural diplomacy. A mixed-method approach was adopted to conduct a cross-sectional survey of 1,942 Chinese film fans, and thematic analysis was used to deconstruct the underlying cultural dynamics. The core findings of this study mainly include three aspects: Japanese films trigger high emotional resonance with their everyday realist narratives, and their effect on enhancing cultural awareness significantly surpasses that of Korean films; emotional proximity is the core mechanism, establishing non-political connections through micro-narrative life symbols to dispel geopolitical hostility; although Korean films enjoy a proximity to Confucian culture, their credibility is undermined by excessive dramatization, and they are counterattacked by Japan's "hyperrealistic approach" with low cultural proximity. This study verifies the paradox of East Asian cultural acceptance: in the context of historical trauma, high cultural proximity tends to activate political defense, whereas emotional proximity can penetrate this barrier. This study proposes a three-dimensional soft power transformation path, namely, using everyday realism as the emotional foundation, intergenerational tension of values to achieve traditional reinvention, and technological aesthetic immersion to construct sensory conquest.

Keywords

cinema, cultural soft power, Japanese cinema, South Korean cinema, cross-cultural attraction, cultural influence, cinephiles, audience research

Introduction

Conflicts, historical animosity, security concerns, and economic competition have characterized the relationships between China, Japan, and South Korea (BBC, 2019; D. Kim, 2021). These factors have influenced and shaped the dynamics between countries over time. In November 2022, an intriguing array of data emerged from a groundbreaking public opinion survey conducted jointly in Japan and China by Genron NPO and a prominent Chinese research group. The survey, which encompassed 1,528 Chinese participants, revealed that 62.6% of respondents had a negative impression of Japan (Yoshinaga & Shimbun, 2023). At a critical moment, over 70% of Japanese and Chinese individuals, surpassing the figures from the 2021 opinion poll, considered Sino-Japanese relations to be significant (Genron NPO, 2022). South Korea's attempts to participate in U.S.-led initiatives, including the Indo-Pacific Economic

Framework, have faced criticism from Chinese media outlets (Snyder, 2023). China's chief diplomat has called on Japan and South Korea to cultivate strategic autonomy from Western influences and collaborate with Beijing to rejuvenate Asia's economy. This plea comes amid escalating tensions between China and its two American allies (Gan, 2023). However, amid the conflicts, tensions, and complex backdrop, there have also

¹Tongling University, Tongling, China

²The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, SAR China

Corresponding Authors:

Muhammad Yaqoub, School of Literature, Arts and Media at Tongling University, Building 6, Tongfeng Manor, Tongling, Anhui 244061, China.
Emails: muhammadyaqoub@tlu.edu.cn; muhammadyaqoub@yahoo.com

Ze Gao, School of Design at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 999077, SAR China.
Email: zegaoap@hotmail.com



been instances of cooperation and attempts at reconciliation between China and these two countries. Some of the driving forces behind efforts to improve relations among these countries have been strong economic ties, along with other significant factors such as cultural exchange, shared security concerns, people-to-people connections, environmental collaboration, diplomatic dialogue, trade and investment, regional economic integration, soft power diplomacy, science and technology cooperation, and conflict resolution. China has fostered significant co-production ties with both Japan and South Korea, leading to a growing exchange of cinematic talent and cultural influence within the Asian film industry (Aoyama & Ng, 2024; Bloom & Kakihara, 2019; Chung, 2019; Gates & Funnell, 2011; K. H. Kim, 2024). Recognizing the importance of regional stability and the benefits of collaboration, they sought common ground on specific issues, including market access agreements, joint funding initiatives, streamlined co-production treaties, talent visa facilitation, location filming facilitation, collaborative technical training programs, and shared distribution channels. However, complex historical and geopolitical dynamics have significantly shaped these relationships (Calder & Ye, 2010; Okazaki et al., 2008; Smith, 2010; Xinbo, 2000).

Conflicts and tensions have affected the political and economic relations. Despite these challenges, China, Japan, and South Korea have actively participated in cultural exchange, showcasing a mutual celebration of traditional festivals and a shared delight in culinary offerings. Artistry has also been a fruitful avenue for artistic collaboration among nations (Moon, 2014; Thornber, 2020). Japanese animation (anime) and South Korean dramas (K-dramas) are captivating masterpieces that draw audiences from all corners of the globe (Park et al., 2018; Tariq & Willard, 2021; Wenbing, 2011). Specific examples of captivating Japanese anime include *Spirited Away*, *Naruto*, *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End*, and *Attack on Titan*, while notable K-dramas include *Squid Game*, *Winter Sonata*, *The Uncanny Counter*, *Boys Over Flowers*, *Descendants of the Sun*, and *Crash Landing on You*. Their unique storytelling, breathtaking animation, and compelling characters have forged a devoted following that shows no signs of waning, ensuring their unyielding popularity and transcending geopolitical boundaries in the foreseeable future. The realms of art and cinema have witnessed an increase in cross-border collaborations, as evidenced by the growing popularity of international film festivals and the progressive recognition and admiration of each other's cinematic endeavors in recent years. The resonance of this cultural exchange extends beyond mere entertainment, reflecting a growing appreciation and understanding of the nations.

In 2022, the film industry of China, Japan, and South Korea collectively witnessed ticket sales of 997 million, with China contributing the highest number of tickets sold at 709 million, followed by Japan at 153 million, and South Korea at 135 million (Statista Research Department, 2023a). An intriguing avenue for exploration lies in the burgeoning community of Chinese cinephiles, who are passionately devoted to the art of cinema. This phenomenon presents an intellectually stimulating domain of inquiry for scholars interested in the dynamics of cultural exchange and intercultural communication, fueled by their passionate devotion to cinema. By delving into the tastes and influences of Chinese film enthusiasts, one can glean valuable insights into the profound impact of cultural interchange, which has the potential to bridge divides and nurture mutual understanding (Keane, 2007, p. 116).

Japanese and South Korean cinemas have made substantial contributions to the global film landscape, captivating audiences with their distinctive styles, themes of social commentary, complex character development, historical exploration, and innovative narratives (Denison, 2014; Teo, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Moreover, an essential aspect is to scrutinize how these cinematic traditions are perceived by audiences in neighboring nations, particularly China, which is home to the world's largest film market.

Previous analyses have relied heavily on macro indicators, such as box office revenue and export volume (Carollo, 2024). They have not delved into the psychological mechanisms of audiences to explain why Korean films, which are more culturally accessible, have lower soft power effectiveness in China than Japanese films. This study fills this theoretical and empirical gap.

This study explicitly focuses on the dimension of film as a tool for cultural diplomacy, conducting an empirical analysis of three core cultural elements present in Japanese and Korean films: (1) daily life practices (e.g., family interactions and workplace ecology); (2) shared ethical values (e.g., filial piety and collective responsibility); and (3) social critical narratives (e.g., class differentiation and institutional reflection). It also examines the acceptance of cultural elements in Japanese and Korean films by Chinese audiences, including family ethics, depiction of social issues, and aesthetic expression, and explores how these elements contribute to cross-cultural understanding and the construction of national soft power in China.

This study examines the popularity and level of acceptance of Japanese and South Korean films among Chinese cinephiles. Additionally, it delves into the interactions and connections between Chinese film enthusiasts and the film industries of Japan and South Korea. Utilizing a survey based on questionnaires, this study

aims to shed light on the various factors that shape the choices of Chinese audiences regarding the consumption of Japanese and South Korean films. Based on the theoretical framework of cultural diplomacy, we focus on three core objectives: (1) identifying the key cultural attraction elements that drive Chinese audiences' preferences; (2) comparing the differences in soft power projection mechanisms between Japanese and Korean films; and (3) providing empirical evidence for formulating cross-cultural policies. It also explores the specific film genres, stars, and directors that resonate most strongly with Chinese cinephiles. Moreover, it aims to assess the potential for soft power, cultural exchange, and diplomacy between China and Japan/South Korea, facilitated through the medium of film.

Additionally, this study examines the influence of emerging media and technology on the dissemination of information about Japanese and South Korean films to Chinese audiences. In an era marked by the rapid proliferation of social media and OTT platforms and the prevalence of film festivals, Chinese cinephiles are now enjoying unprecedented opportunities to access and explore cinematic works from Japan and South Korea (Yaqoub, Jingwu, & Ambekar, 2024). In light of the expanding Chinese film industry and the government's proactive initiatives aimed at bolstering cultural self-assurance, it is imperative to scrutinize how the exchange of ideas, techniques, and themes between Chinese and Japanese/South Korean filmmakers can actively contribute to the evolution of Chinese cinema.

This study investigates several key inquiries within contemporary film industries. China, Japan, and South Korea were selected. First, it seeks to ascertain the primary sources of information relied upon by audiences when it comes to newly released movies. Second, it aims to uncover the underlying motivations that shape individual preferences between Japanese and South Korean cinema. Third, it endeavors to extract educational insights from the realms of South Korea and Japan, respectively. Fourth, it aims to assess the degree of interest individuals have in the cultures of Japan and the South, as portrayed in their respective film industries. Fifth, it examines the soft power of Japanese and South Korean cinemas. Finally, it aims to identify the actors and directors who enjoy the highest levels of popularity among Chinese cinephiles. This study focuses on how cultural elements such as the authenticity of daily life, family ethics, and social criticism in Japanese and Korean films influence Chinese audiences through the mechanism of soft power. By exploring these questions, this study contributes to a more profound understanding of contemporary film industries and the factors influencing audience preferences and perceptions.

Existing research lacks a systematic empirical analysis of the cultural motivations behind the Chinese audience's acceptance of Japanese and Korean films. This study fills this gap using a mixed-method approach, revealing the dynamic relationship between cultural affinity and geopolitical tension. The outcomes of this investigation are anticipated to contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of the intricate and dynamic relationship between Chinese film enthusiasts and Japanese and South Korean cinemas. Furthermore, this understanding may have implications for the film industry and the practice of soft power and cultural diplomacy in the East Asian context.

Japanese and South Korean films

The Japanese film industry, characterized by its extensive history and substantial legacy, has significantly benefited from post-World War II influence and support from the United States. This historical advantage facilitated the establishment of a robust foundation and rich cinematic tradition. In contrast, K-culture, also known as Hallyu or the Korean Wave (KW), emerged as a relatively recent phenomenon in the late 1990s. Despite its later inception, the South Korean film industry has swiftly gained international acclaim and influence. The Japanese and South Korean film industries have achieved a similar or competitive level of global pop culture influence, as evidenced by their respective fourth and fifth positions in worldwide box office revenue in 2023 (The Numbers, 2023). Contextualizing these historical disparities enables a deeper understanding of how both film industries have achieved a comparable level of global cultural influence, despite their distinct developmental trajectories. Such contextualization enriches the analysis and offers a comprehensive perspective on the unique paths each industry has taken to achieve its current prominence in global pop culture (Miyao, 2014; Robinson, 2005; Sharp, 2011; Shin, 2023; Shin & Stringer, 2005; Standish, 2005; Yecies & Shim, 2015).

The Japanese film industry has a vibrant history dating back to the 20th century. It has significantly contributed to global cinema by producing renowned filmmakers, iconic films, and influential cinematic movements. In 1909, the first Japanese film studio was built by the Yoshizawa Shōten Company in Tokyo. During the 1920s and 1930s, the silent film era in Japan gave rise to prominent filmmakers such as Yasujiro Ozu (December 12, 1903 – December 12, 1963) and Kenji Mizoguchi (May 16, 1898–August 24, 1956), who shaped social realism and traditional culture, laying the foundation for artistic and narrative techniques that would shape Japanese cinema (Standish, 2005). Japanese cinema encompasses

both modern (Eastern aesthetics) and traditional aesthetics, as well as various narrative styles, which have gained global recognition, attracted an international audience, and contributed to the soft power of Japan's film industry (Syversen, 2022). Iwabuchi argues that Japanese cultural soft power has attracted the attention of policy-makers in Asia since the 1980s, following the anti-Japan perceptions of the 1945 period (Iwabuchi, 2015). Technological advancements and globalization have also significantly influenced Japan's national branding and cultural diplomacy through the popularity of J-pop music. Contemporary Japanese films reveal the modern crisis of identity; they cover a variety of issues from the family, gender, everyday life, and horror in films through genres of comedy, drama, family drama, animation, fiction, science, and horror, reflecting Japanese culture through the lens of cultural modernity (Iles, 2008). This challenge emerged after post-industrialization in East Asia. Beyond its cultural significance, Japan's film industry has made substantial economic contributions. The industry generates revenue through box office film exports and merchandising, with anime's popularity leading to increased international collaborations and licensing deals. According to the report of Japan and International MPA, the Japanese film and television industries contributed \$126 billion (13.7 trillion yen) to the country's economy in 2018 (Blair, 2019; Statista Research Department, 2022).

South Korean cinema is characterized by bold and compelling storytelling techniques, often exploring complex social issues, psychological depth, and genre-bending narratives. Social issues, political commentary, and human emotions are themes in South Korean films that capture depth and realism. The narratives are known for their unpredictability, blending multiple genres and subverting audience expectations. Yim (2010) argues that the key characteristic of South Korean films is their emphasis on character development, which delves into the complexities of human nature and crafts multidimensional characters that resonate with the audience. This has contributed to the emotional depth and authenticity of South Korean films. Lale (2020) notes that the government significantly supports Hallyu for political, economic, cultural, and national interests. In the late 1990s, when the KW was beginning to gain popularity in China, President Dae-Jung Kim, who referred to himself as the "president of culture," established a \$148.5 million fund to promote the cultural industry (Choe, 1999; Shim, 2002). In 1998, the artistic sector became a significant aspect of South Korea's new-century economy. The popularity and significant influence of South Korean movies, TV dramas, web series, and K-pop (Korean pop music) make China an ideal partner for South Korea in the film industry. The Chinese box office achieves high revenues for cinema,

which triggers co-production with other industries outside their national industry to expand reach and influence in East Asia, despite the difficulties South Korean directors face in working with language and cultural barriers (Soh, 2025). The South Korean film industry generated approximately 1.69 trillion Korean won (\$1.5 billion) in box office revenue in 2019, reflecting the significance of South Korean films (Korean Film Council, 2020; Roper, 2020; Statista Research Department, 2023b).

Comparative Market Share and Revenue of Japanese and South Korean films in China

Japanese and South Korean films have historically held significant positions in the Chinese film market, although their trajectories have diverged in recent years. In 2023, the total value of the Asia-Pacific market (excluding China) was estimated at \$5.5 billion, with Japan and South Korea contributing \$1.5 and \$ 0.97 billion, respectively (Carollo, 2024). Japanese anime films have been remarkably successful, often outperforming their domestic box office revenues in China. For instance, *Suzume* earned \$117 million in China, compared to \$104 million in Japan, and *The Boy and the Heron* garnered \$109 million in China, against \$57 million in Japan (Frater, 2024). This trend highlights the strong cultural affinity and nostalgic value of Japanese animation for Chinese audiences, who grew up watching series such as *Slam Dunk* and *Doraemon*.

In contrast, South Korean films experienced a severe setback due to geopolitical tensions following the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in 2016. This led to a de facto ban on South Korean cultural content in China, drastically reducing the market share and revenue of South Korean films. Despite the partial lifting of this ban in recent years, which has allowed films like *Hotel by the River* and *Oh! My Gran* to be shown on the OTT platform, Tencent Video. South Korean films have not yet reclaimed their pre-ban dominance in the Chinese market (Linbin, 2023; Noh, 2022).

Market Dynamics and Historical Context

Historically, before the THAAD controversy, South Korean films and dramas were immensely popular in China, with series such as *My Love from the Star* generating substantial revenue and viewership. For example, the exclusive streaming rights for *Descendants of the Sun* were sold to the Chinese OTT platform iQIYI for \$1.5 million per episode, and the series accumulated over 2.6 billion cumulative views in China. However, the ban led to a significant decline, with China accounting for only 3.1% of

the total revenue from exported South Korean movies in 2019, compared to being the largest market in 2015 (Na, 2022).

Japanese films have faced intermittent regulatory challenges but have maintained a consistent presence in the Chinese market. The success of Japanese anime films can be attributed to their established cultural footprint and the generational familiarity of Chinese audiences with Japanese animated TV series. Additionally, the shared cultural values and similar societal structures between China and Japan contribute to the sustained popularity of Japanese films in China.

Chinese Cinephiles and Japanese and South Korean Films

China, the world's largest film enthusiast market, has diverse tastes and interests in the cinema. However, Japanese and South Korean films have had a significant influence on Chinese cinema and Chinese cinephiles, who are passionate about exploring and appreciating films from their neighboring countries (Jin & Su, 2019; Soh, 2025). Pugsley (2013) argues that the Beijing Film Academy in Beijing had a significant impact on the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers and that locally produced films largely follow the party line of cinema (p. 72). In contrast, neighboring countries such as Japan and South Korea are more closely aligned with Chinese culture than with Western culture. The popularity and acceptance of Japanese and South Korean films in China are more significant than those of other cinemas (Huang & Noh, 2009). Cultural and economic arrangements also contribute to cinephiles' access to cinema. S. Lee (2019) argues that the South Korea-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) ensures the reach of South Korean cinema in the Chinese film market.

Chinese cinephiles often attend film festivals and screenings of Japanese and South Korean films. Ma (2017) argues that over the years, International Film Festivals in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and other cities and regions have showcased a wide range of international cinema, including films from Japan and South Korea. However, a large audience of international films viewed a variety of films, and these festivals developed multiple trends and norms of film selection among Chinese cinephiles. However, the exchange of culture through cinema is not unilateral. Films by Chinese directors such as Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke have been showcased at international film festivals and garnered attention from cinephiles in Japan and South Korea. Despite this, creative and cultural industries are regulated in China (Keane, 2004).

Materials and Methods

Audience Research Survey

Survey data were collected from Chinese citizens to assess the impact of Japan and South Korea's cinematic successes on China's soft power. The survey instrument was constructed based on the study's research objectives and a comprehensive literature review (Aukia, 2023; Dennison & Dwyer, 2021; Huang, 2022; G. Lee, 2009; S. J. Lee, 2011; Ling, 2017; Lovric, 2018; Moita, 2021; Otmazgin, 2012; Paksiutov, 2023; Shimizu, 2014; Thussu, 2013; Vlassis, 2016; Voci & Hui, 2017; Wu, 2021; Yaqoub, Jingwu, & Haizhou, 2024). This study was designed to minimize risks to participants by ensuring anonymity, avoiding sensitive personal questions, and employing non-invasive procedures. The societal benefits of advancing knowledge in the audience research area outweigh potential risks, as no foreseeable harm was posed to participants. Informed consent was obtained electronically, with participants acknowledging their voluntary participation and understanding that all responses would remain anonymous and unlinked to personal identifiers.

A cross-sectional study was conducted using a professional online questionnaire-based survey platform, Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn) (Yaqoub, Jingwu, et al., 2022; Yaqoub, Khan, & Tanveer, 2022), from 1 January to February 15, 2022. This study exported data from WJX.cn and saved it in a .sav file format for SPSS. Subsequently, statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The present study employed a questionnaire-based self-reported survey methodology (Yaqoub, Al-Kassimi, et al., 2024; Yaqoub, Jingwu, & Ambekar, 2024; Yaqoub, Jingwu, & Matusitz, 2023; Yaqoub, Matusitz, & Jingwu, 2023). The survey consisted of closed- and open-ended questions designed to elicit information about the participants' viewing habits, sources of information about these films, and the factors influencing their interest. The sampling frame for this study consisted of Chinese citizens who were film enthusiasts, specifically those interested in South Korean and Japanese films. This study targeted a diverse group of respondents to provide a broad representation of the Chinese cinephile population. The survey was administered across China using purposive and convenience sampling techniques (Yaqoub, Jingwu, & Matusitz, 2023). Purposive and convenience sampling techniques are helpful for accessing a particular audience. This purposive sampling approach aimed to reach individuals who were familiar with and had an interest in South Korean and Japanese films, ensuring that the survey results would reflect the attitudes and preferences of Chinese cinephiles toward these cinemas. A total of 1,942

respondents were included in the final analysis of this study. The data collected in this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

Survey Administration and Demographics

This study adopts a basic approach to qualitative data processing and mixed methods integration. Its operating mechanism is as follows:

- (1) Qualitative data processing flow. We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. For example, the original label "details of instant noodles in convenience stores" was extracted and then coded and classified under the sub-theme of "sense of real life." Subsequently, three core themes were selected and condensed through coding, and inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.81$) and member checking were reported (20 respondents confirmed the validity of the interpretation).
- (2) Logic of mixed-methods integration. Quantitative methods reveal macro trends, whereas qualitative methods explain micro mechanisms. Triangulation verification occurs when quantitative methods show results and qualitative methods discover the reasons, thereby revealing deeper psychological and social motivations for the same.

Method triangulation (questionnaire and text analysis) and data triangulation (comparison of Japanese and Korean films) were used to control for interpretation bias and ensure the rigor of the "emotional proximity" theoretical construction.

The surveys were administered between January 1 and February 15, 2022, targeting Japanese and South Korean film viewers to analyze the soft power exerted by the cinemas of these countries on the Chinese audience. The distribution of respondents by region/province is as follows: Fujian (40.01%), Guangxi (7.62%), Chongqing (4.48%), Henan (4.48%), Jiangxi (4.38%), Guangdong (3.81%), Shandong (3.45%), Anhui (2.73%), Zhejiang (2.52%), Guizhou (2.37%), Sichuan (2.37%), Shanxi (2.32%), Hebei (2.16%), Hunan (1.85%), Hubei (1.6%), Gansu (1.54%), Jiangsu (1.39%), Beijing (1.24%), Yunnan (1.18%), Xinjiang (1.03%), Shanghai (0.98%), Inner Mongolia (0.82%), Heilongjiang (0.67%), Hong Kong (0.67%), Taiwan (0.62%), Shaanxi (0.57%), Qinghai (0.51%), Liaoning (0.46%), Tibet (0.46%), Hainan (0.41%), overseas (0.36%), Jilin (0.26%), Ningxia (0.26%), Macao (0.21%), and Tianjin (0.21%). The total number of valid responses was 1,942. The survey consisted of questions specifically designed for those who watched Japanese and South Korean films to assess the soft power influence of these films.

Table 1. Participants' Demographics.

Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	942 (48.51)
Female	1,000 (51.49)
Area of study	
Literature and history	742 (38.21)
Science and engineering	555 (28.58)
Arts comprehensive	474 (24.41)
Other	171 (8.81)
Academic qualification	
PhD.	104 (5.36)
Master	409 (21.06)
Bachelor or below	1,429 (73.59)
Age	
<20	515 (26.52)
20–30 years	1,304 (67.15)
>30	123 (6.33)
Average monthly personal consumption	
<1,000 CNY	169 (8.70)
1,000–2,000 CNY	1,153 (59.37)
2,000–3,000 CNY	387 (19.93)
>3,000 CNY	233 (12)
Paid OTT platform users	912 (46.96)
Preferred method of watching foreign movies	
With Chinese subtitle	1,457 (75.03)
With Chinese dubbing	44 (2.27)
Chinese subtitles and Chinese dubbing	300 (15.45)
It does not matter	111 (5.72)
Others	30 (1.54)

Note. During the survey: CNY/USD exchange rate: 7 CNY \approx 1 USD. The minimum age for all respondents is 18 years old.

Data Validation and Analysis

To ensure data accuracy, the researchers eliminated respondents who failed to allocate adequate time or demonstrated carelessness in their responses, retaining only valid data for the final analysis. The exclusion of invalid or irresponsible responses profoundly impacted the study's outcome, emphasizing the necessity of accurate data. The researchers analyzed the information after the verification process to extract the pertinent findings.

Participants' Demographics

The study participants were demographically characterized based on gender, area of study, academic qualification, age, average monthly personal consumption, use of paid OTT platforms, and preferred method of watching foreign films. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1. Regarding gender, the study found that 51.49% of the participants were female, and 48.51% were male. Regarding the study area, 38.21% of the participants were from the Literature and History field, 28.58% were from Science and Engineering, and 24.41% were from Arts and Comprehensive fields.

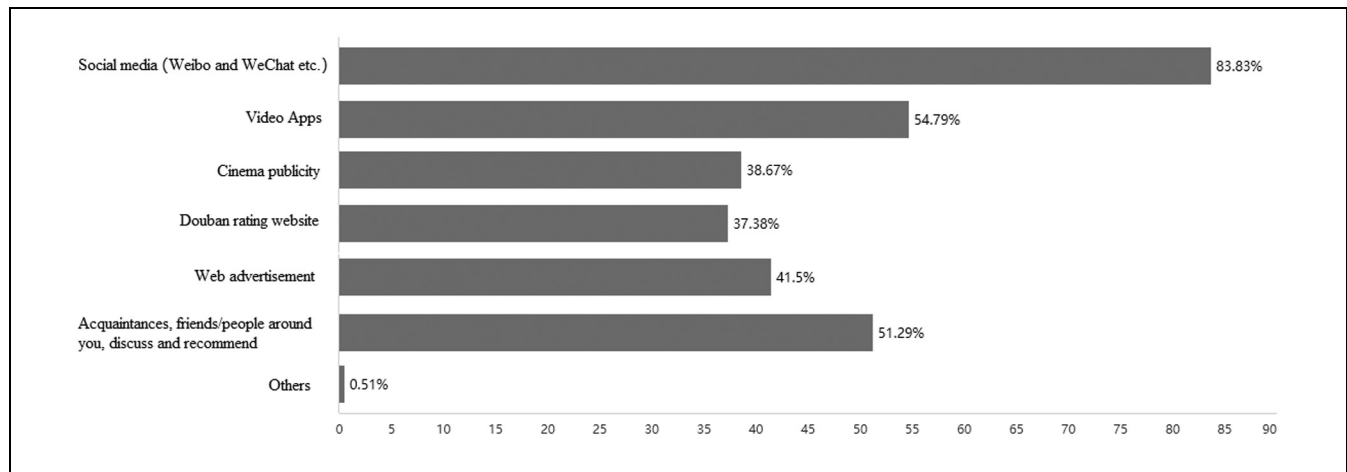


Figure 1. Sources of information on newly released movies.

Concerning academic qualifications, 73.59% of the participants held a bachelor's degree or below, 21.06% had a master's degree, and only 5.36% held a PhD. The majority of participants, 67.15%, are between 20 and 30 years of age, while 26.52% are under 20 years of age, and 6.33% are over 30 years of age.

Regarding personal consumption, 59.37% of the participants spent between 1,000 and 2,000 CNY per month, 19.93% between 2,000 and 3,000 CNY per month, and 12% spent more than 3,000 CNY per month. Only 8.70% of the participants spent less than 1,000 CNY per month.

Moreover, 46.96% of the participants were paid users of over-the-top (OTT) platforms. Regarding the preferred method of watching foreign movies, the study found that 75.03% of the participants preferred to watch foreign films with Chinese subtitles, while only 2.27% preferred Chinese dubbing. Additionally, 15.45% of the participants chose to watch with both Chinese subtitles and Chinese dubbing, and 5.72% had no specific preference. Only 1.54% of the participants had other diverse priorities.

Results

Key trends show that social media has overwhelmingly become the primary information channel (see Figure 1), with a penetration rate over 30% higher than other channels, highlighting the community-based information acquisition model of Chinese film fans.

This reflects the mechanism of differentiated appeals. The consumption motives of Chinese audiences for Japanese and South Korean films show systematic differences (Figure 2). Japanese films draw their core appeal from technical quality (mention rate of cinematography/sound effects + 7.16%) and narratives centered on ordinary characters. South Korean films, on the other hand,

are more likely to capture the market with star power (mention rate of actors + 5.51%) and visual impact than Japanese films. This divergence echoes the traditional strengths of the film industries in the two countries: Japan is renowned for its craftsmanship, while South Korea is known for its star-centered system.

Figure 2 presents the primary motivations for the Chinese audience to watch Japanese and South Korean Films. The Pearson chi-square test revealed a significant difference between the two countries regarding the reasons for watching particular movies. The results show that Chinese audiences pay more attention to production techniques when watching Japanese films, while they are more concerned about the novelty of themes when choosing Korean films. This explains the differences in their cultural appeal. For Japanese films, 15.81% of respondents reported having no special reason for watching, while 21.06% indicated that they did not watch these films, and 2.16% provided other reasons. In the case of Korean films, 10.50% of respondents cited no special reason, 23.27% indicated that they did not watch these films, and 3.25% provided other responses.

Figure 3 displays the data concerning the aspects of Japanese and South Korean movies that participants considered valuable for learning purposes. These aspects included the subject matter and content structure, movie soundtrack, shooting technique, role interpretation, and special effects technology. The findings revealed that Korean films excel in content structure (49% vs. 32%), while Japanese films stand out for their soundtracks (28% vs. 12%). Overall, the theme and content structure are particularly important learning elements. However, Chinese films show significant differences in the choice of learning elements compared to Japanese and Korean films.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the satisfaction levels. This study used the chi-square test to compare the

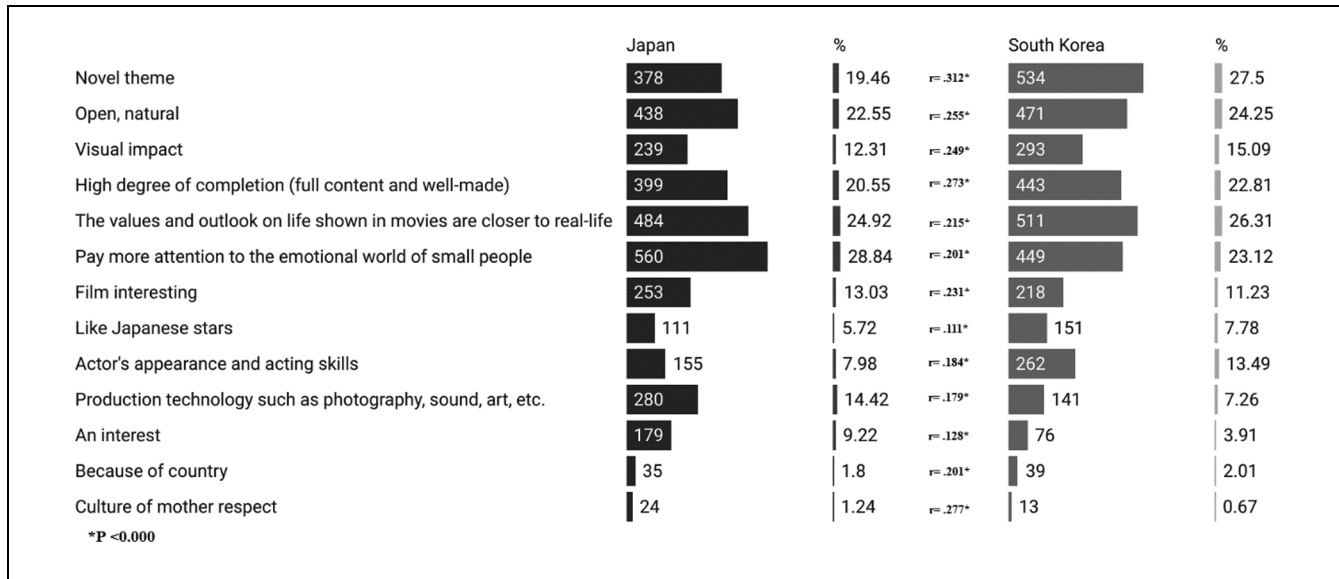


Figure 2. Motivations behind the selection of specific movies from Japanese and South Korean cinemas.

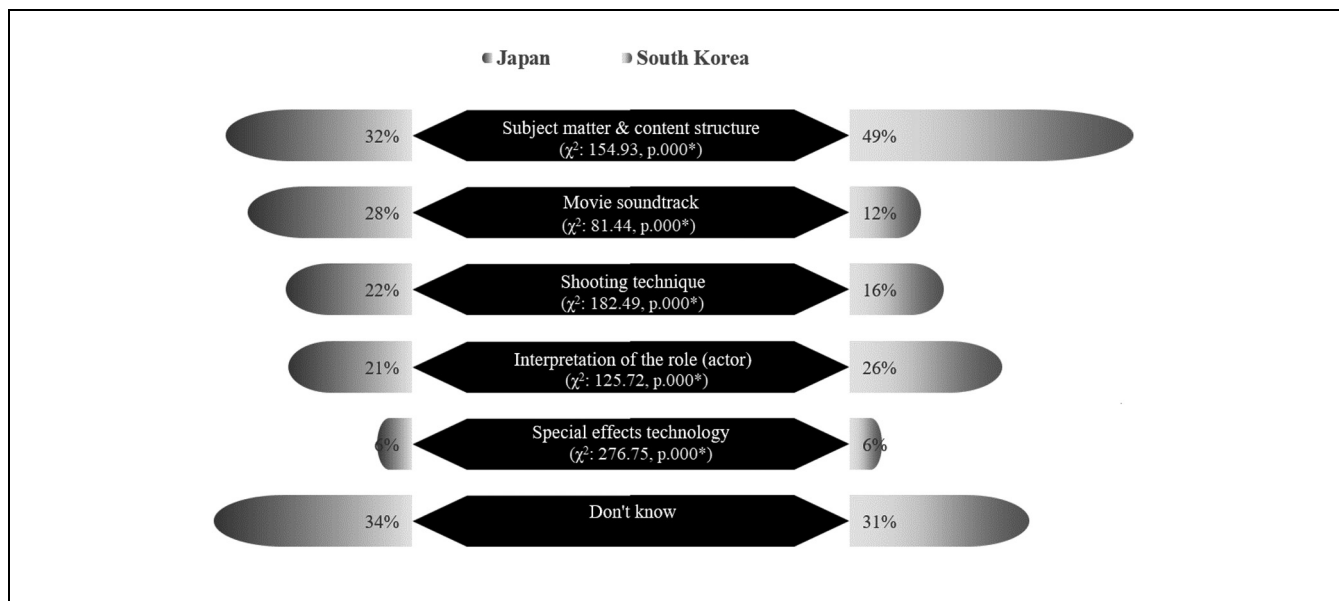


Figure 3. Key learning aspects in Japanese and South Korean films for Chinese film industry.

satisfaction of Chinese audiences with Japanese and South Korean films. The results indicated no significant difference ($\chi^2 = 2.81, df = 5, p = 0.73$), suggesting that the Chinese audience has similar levels of satisfaction with Japanese and South Korean films.

Figure 5 shows that after watching Japanese and South Korean films, Chinese audiences' interest in culture indicates that Japan triggers a higher rate of deep concern (26.57% vs. 22.97%, $p < .05$), which suggests that the proportion of audiences interested in culture

after watching Japanese films is higher than that after watching South Korean films.

Figure 6 shows the differences between the Chinese audience's perceptions of South Korean and Japanese film stars and directors. The data were disaggregated by gender and analyzed using chi-square tests. Male viewers have a significantly stronger preference for Japanese directors. This reveals a gender-mediated effect on the results. Male viewers' preference for Japanese directors is significantly stronger than that of females ($\chi^2 (1,$

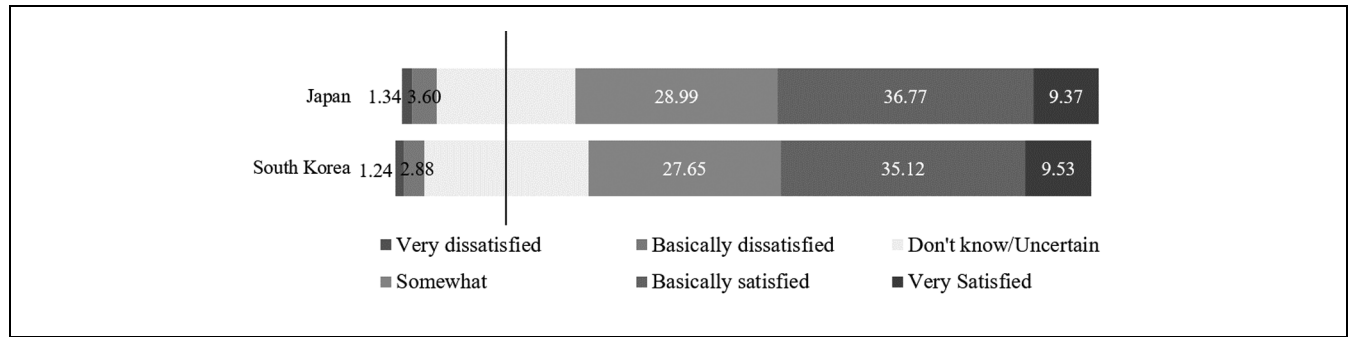


Figure 4. Comparison of Chinese viewers' satisfaction levels with Japanese and South Korean films.

Note. Data is evaluated in (%).

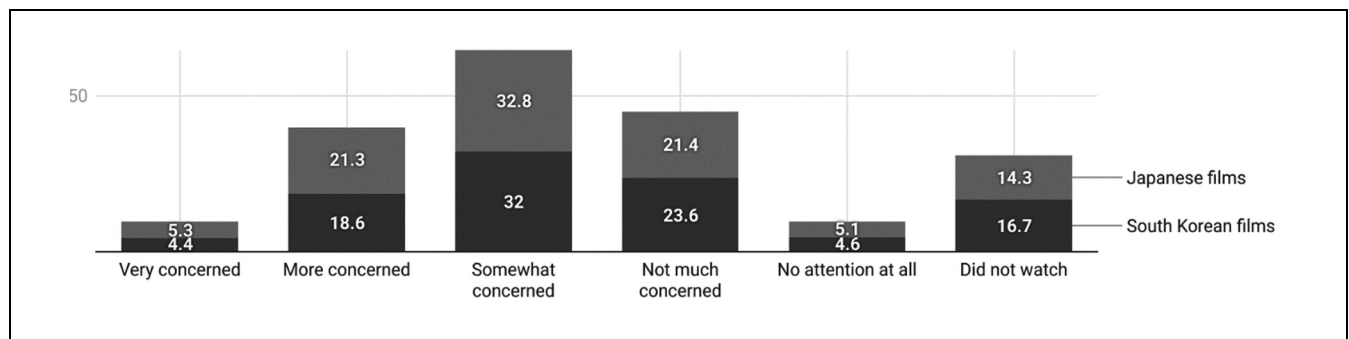


Figure 5. Cultural interest after watching Japanese and Korean films.

Note. Data is evaluated in (%).

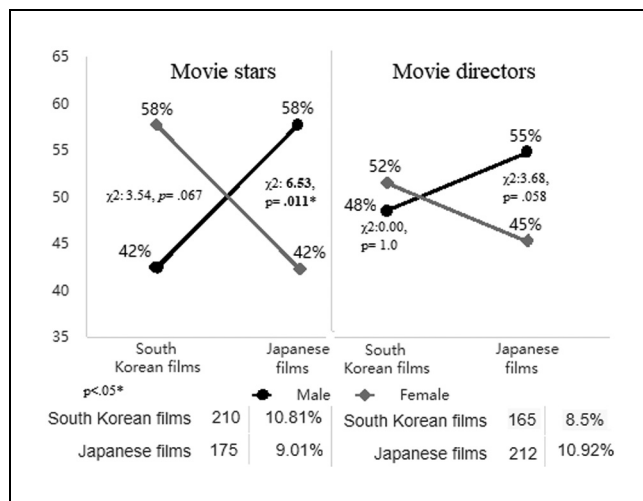


Figure 6. Gender-mediated preference: Japanese directors favored by males, Korean stars by females.

Note. χ^2 : The variance of male and female data for movie stars and directors was not uniform; therefore, the chi-square test was adopted.

$N = 175$) = 6.53, $p = .011$), as they identify more with the technical authority narrative in Japanese films (such as Hayao Miyazaki's craftsmanship spirit). In contrast,

females, due to the emotional compensation mechanism of Korean dramas, are more inclined towards Korean stars. This confirms that gender differences mediate regional preference for cultural products by regulating the weight of directors/stars (Japan vs. Korea).

Despite the cooling of Tokyo-Beijing relations due to tensions over Taiwan and the U.S.-China confrontation, Japanese animated films have achieved significant success in China. According to a report, Japanese anime director Makoto Niitsu's movie *Suzume* logged box-office revenue of over 800 million yuan (Chinese currency), or approximately ¥15.7 billion (Japanese yen), becoming China's highest-grossing Japanese anime film. The previous record was held by Shinkai's *Your Name*, which earned approximately 576 million yuan, or around ¥11.2 billion. Meanwhile, *The First Slam Dunk*, a movie based on a popular Japanese basketball manga, grossed over 600 million yuan, or approximately ¥11.8 billion, in its first 2 weeks of release (Yoshinaga & Shimbun, 2023).

The results indicated that Japanese film viewers are more likely to engage in post-viewing discussions and comments across all platforms examined (social media, film review websites, and fan discussion groups), with percentages ranging from 48.68% to 65.37%. In

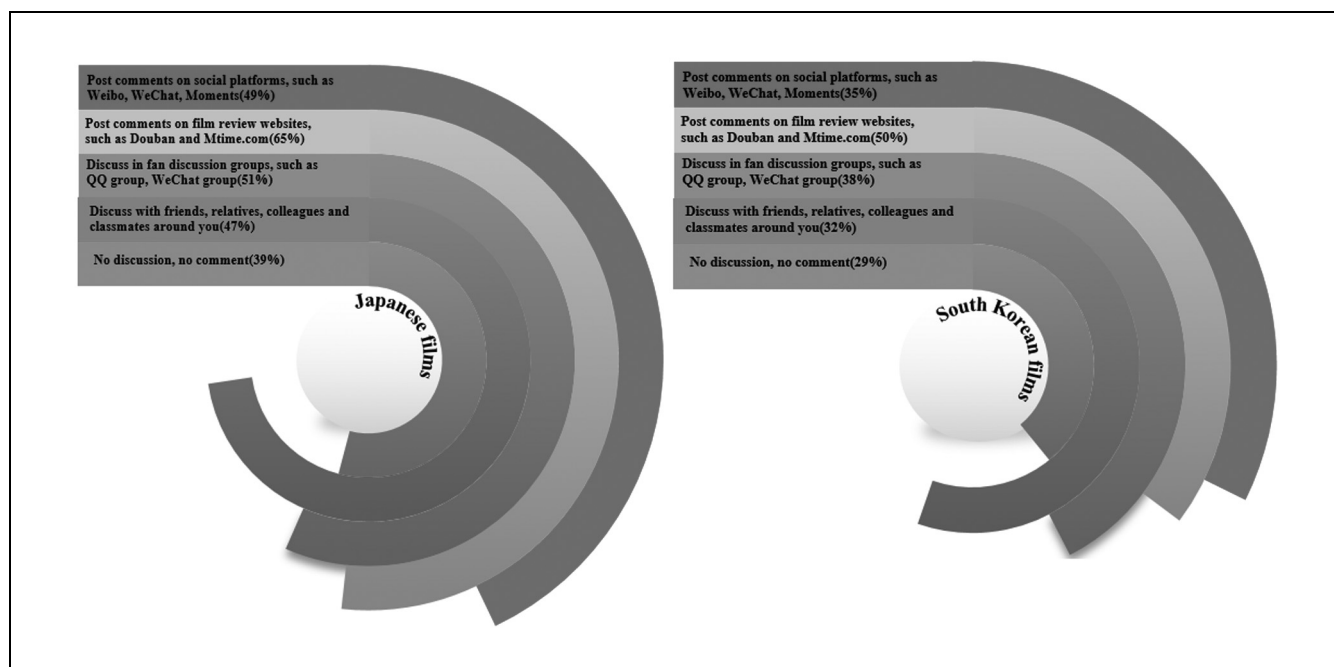


Figure 7. Audience post-viewing engagement for Japanese versus Korean films across platforms.

contrast, South Korean film viewers reported lower levels of engagement on all three types of platforms, with rates ranging from 35.20% to 50.91%. These results suggest that Japanese film moviegoers are more inclined than their South Korean counterparts to actively seek opportunities to express their views and discuss films, regardless of the medium (see Figure 7).

Qualitative Result

This study employed open-ended questions to explore Chinese audiences' perceptions of the cultural impact and soft power of Japanese and South Korean cinema. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and triangulation was performed with open-ended questions and quantitative results. For instance, the quantitative finding that "production quality is the key attraction" (see Figure 2) was complemented by the qualitative feedback that "technical professionalism enhances immersion." Respondents were asked: (1) What cultural aspects of Japanese and South Korean films appeal to you the most? (2) How effectively do Japanese and South Korean films serve as tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power on the global stage? (3) In what ways do you think the high production values of Japanese and South Korean films contribute to their international success?

First, most of the respondents expressed deep admiration for the authentic portrayal of contemporary life and culture in both Japanese and South Korean films.

Participants frequently mentioned the realistic depiction of relationships, family dynamics, and social issues, which resonated with their experiences and offered a glimpse into the everyday lives of people in these countries. Moreover, Japanese and South Korean cinema predominantly focuses on contemporary themes, often reflecting modern pop culture trends and social issues that are widely appreciated. These aspects enrich the cinematic experience and provide valuable insights into the rich cultural heritage of Japan and South Korea.

Respondents overwhelmingly perceived Japanese and South Korean films as practical tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power. The human-centered narratives and relatable characters in these films fostered a sense of empathy and understanding among Chinese audiences. The portrayal of diverse perspectives and social issues also contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of these cultures. Many participants highlighted the role of these films in challenging stereotypes and promoting cross-cultural exchanges.

The high production values of Japanese and South Korean films were crucial to their international success. Respondents emphasized the visual appeal, resonating with audience emotions, original scripts, technical expertise, and attention to detail in these films. These elements contribute to a more immersive cinematic experience, enhancing the overall enjoyment of the film. Furthermore, the respondents noted that high production values helped elevate these countries' status in the global film industry.

and reinforced their reputation for innovation and creativity.

Overall, the thematic analysis distilled three major cultural attraction engines from 1,812 valid texts, revealing the micro-pathways through which soft power takes effect:

1. Daily authenticity (61.2%) is the cornerstone of emotional proximity. Viewers frequently mentioned cross-cultural empathy toward “life symbols” (e.g., Japanese convenience store bento boxes and Korean family instant noodle scenes), which triggered immediate identification of “This is just like my life.” This explains how Japanese films achieve high performance despite low cultural proximity: when the visual overlap of the Shonan coastline in *Slam Dunk* and the seaside of Dalian, China, dissolves the sense of foreignness, geographic aesthetic proximity overcomes historical barriers.
2. Intergenerational tension in values (38.7%) reflects the modern transformation of Confucian ethics. Japanese and Korean films reconfigure traditional elements, such as filial piety and the imperial examination system, into modern dilemmas. For instance, *The Terrace* questions the sacrifice of motherhood, allowing Chinese audiences to resonate with family conflicts. Notably, although South Korea shares more Confucian symbols (with a similarity of 72%), its overdramatization (e.g., the portrayal of chaebol conflicts) undermines its credibility. In contrast, Japan’s cold and incisive analysis of ethical dilemmas (Δ efficiency = -3.6%) was more effective.
3. The 53.4% of technical aesthetic immersion reflects the sensory conquest of the spirit of craftsmanship. The sensory-level industrial quality of elements like cherry blossom rain in Makoto Shinkai’s works and Ryuichi Sakamoto’s scores directly triggers cultural admiration. This technical authority empowerment enables Japanese directors to achieve an absolute recognition rate, confirming Satoshi Iwabuchi’s assertion that “stateless aesthetics” can circumvent political sensitivities and transform cultural output into technical worship.

This indicates that the essence of cultural attractiveness is the victory of emotional proximity over cultural proximity. It establishes non-political connections through life symbols, allowing Japan to successfully transform its cultural disadvantage (low Confucian similarity) into a narrative advantage (surreal realism),

providing a paradigm shift in the study of East Asian soft power.

Research Limitations

This study employed purposive sampling (targeting movie fans) and convenience sampling (concentrated in certain regions), resulting in a 40.01% sample from Fujian, which introduced geographical bias. The non-probability sampling method restricts the generalizability of the results to the entire Chinese audience, and the conclusions should be interpreted cautiously. Additionally, all respondents in this study were aged 18 or above (the under-20 group was 18–19 years old), meeting the ethical review requirements.

Discussion

The East Asian Dilemma and Transcendence of Cultural Proximity Theory. This study finds tension with Hoskins and Mirus’ (1988) cultural discount theory. China and South Korea share Confucian ethics (with a 72% similarity in filial piety and the imperial examination system) and should have a low discount due to cultural proximity. However, quantitative data show that the cultural influence of Japanese animation (26.57%) surpassed that of Korean films (22.97%). This validates Iwabuchi’s (2015) statelessness strategy, which states that Japanese animation avoids East Asian historical traumas by erasing specific ethnic symbols (e.g., transforming Shinto shrines into generic temples), allowing Chinese audiences to accept cultural infiltration in a “depoliticized aesthetic.”

The geopolitical constraint mechanism of soft power is highlighted. Although South Korean films have greater cultural proximity, the THAAD incident triggered a political salience effect (S. Lee, 2019), leading to their social critique narratives (e.g., *Parasite*) being interpreted as “carriers of Western values.” In contrast, Miyazaki’s animation surreal narratives achieve political desensitization through universal values of ecological concern. This echoes Acharya’s (2004) theory of norm localization, which states that foreign cultures need to strip away geopolitical controversy and adapt to regional emotional structures to activate soft power effectiveness. Thus, the paradox of East Asian cultural diplomacy is proposed in this study. When a shared history includes colonial/war memories, high cultural proximity triggers defensive resistance. In contrast, films need to establish emotional connections through micro-narratives of daily life to bypass political nerves.

This study examines the preferences and motivations underlying Chinese audiences’ consumption of Japanese

and South Korean films. This topic is particularly pertinent in the contemporary context, as Japanese and Korean films and videos have established substantial markets in China. The findings suggest that the Chinese are particularly fond of subtitles when watching films in languages other than their native ones. Social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo played a crucial role in disseminating information about these films (Lin et al., 2014).

The study revealed a substantial appetite for Japanese and South Korean cinema among the Chinese audience, with many expressing prior exposure and a longing for theatrical experiences in the future. This aligns with S. T. Lee's (2022) assertion that South Korean cinema's significant international acceptance reflects national soft power. The substantial shift in Chinese audiences towards streaming movies on OTT platforms presents significant opportunities for Japanese and South Korean cinema to expand their reach by releasing more films on Chinese streaming platforms (Yaqoub, Jingwu, & Ambekar, 2024).

Qualitative findings offer deeper insights into audience motivation. Respondents valued the authentic portrayal of everyday life and cultural elements in these films, which resonated with their experiences. This suggests a strong connection between the depicted realities and the audience's lived experiences, fostering a sense of cultural proximity between them. The film's ability to evoke emotions and explore universal human experiences was highlighted, indicating its capacity to transcend cultural boundaries.

Triangulation verification reveals that the cultural discount fails in emotionally authentic scenarios. Quantitative analysis shows that Korean films share more Confucian elements (a 12% increase in the mention rate of ethical values in Figure 2). However, qualitative analysis reveals that their excessive dramatization weakens credibility (such as the struggle among chaebols is like a fairy tale), which makes the "super-realistic realism" of Japanese films more effective. This explains why Miyazaki's animations, despite containing supernatural elements, trigger deep cultural resonance due to details like the pickled plum in the lunch box reflecting the hardships of a housewife, verifying the new soft power mechanism that emotional proximity is greater than cultural proximity.

This indicates that the transmission of cultural proximity to soft power is not a linear process but hinges on emotional resonance as a key mediating variable. Cultural proximity only translates into soft power efficacy when the daily life practices depicted in films evoke a sense of recognition among viewers that "this is like my life." This explains why, despite sharing more Confucian traditions with the Chinese, Korean films have weaker soft power efficacy than Japanese

animation's surreal realism due to their overly dramatized narratives that undermine authenticity (the preference for "authenticity" in Korean films is 8.7% lower than that in Japanese films). Even when depicting fantastical worlds, such as in *Spirited Away*, Japanese animation still triggers empathy through minute details of reality, such as bento boxes. This finding challenges the static perspective of Hoskins and Mirus' (1988) cultural discount theory and proposes emotional proximity as a new dimension for evaluating cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of high production values in enhancing film appeal. The audience appreciated the technical finesse and attention to detail, which contributed to a more immersive film-watching experience. This aligns with the notion that cinematic excellence is a key driver of international success (Huang & Noh, 2009).

While both Japanese and South Korean films were well received, nuances emerged. Japanese films have a more pronounced impact on cultural awareness among viewers. This could be attributed to factors such as genre diversity and thematic depth. Nevertheless, both film industries demonstrated their ability to shape audience perceptions and foster cultural exchange (Yang, 2012). However, similar trends are viewed when comparing Japanese and South Korean films by Chinese cinephiles. The findings align with those of Nye and Kim, suggesting that cultural soft power can help reduce differences among countries and create a favorable image (Nye & Kim, 2019). However, the popularity of Japanese films in China presents an opportunity for Japan to improve its favorable image. The efficacy of soft power in contemporary international relations is exemplified by the Chinese government's recent decision to lift restrictions on South Korean cultural content, suggesting that cultural influence can supersede coercive diplomatic measures (Noh, 2022).

The data also reveal preferences for specific actors and directors. South Korean actors, particularly Ji-Chul Gong, enjoyed widespread popularity, and Japanese directors, notably Hirokazu Koreeda, were highly regarded. These findings offer valuable insights into audience preferences and can inform future film production and marketing strategies.

The enduring popularity of Japanese and South Korean films in China, despite geopolitical complexities, underscores the power of cultural exchange and the significance of cinematic soft power (Jang, 2012). The findings suggest that these films successfully bridged cultural divides, fostering understanding and contributing to a positive image of their respective countries.

Overall, while both Japanese and South Korean films have had a substantial impact on the Chinese market, the current landscape indicates that Japanese anime films

capitalize on cultural nostalgia and consistency. In contrast, South Korean films are regaining their market position after a politically induced hiatus. This comparison underscores the dynamic nature of cultural soft power and the influence of geopolitical factors on the film industry's market share and revenue.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the impact of Asian cinema on the global audience. Examining the specific case of Chinese audience engagement with Japanese and South Korean films offers valuable insights into the factors driving cross-cultural consumption and the potential of cinema to shape perceptions and promote cultural exchange.


The sample was recruited through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, which may not be representative of the broader Chinese population. Convenience sampling and geographic bias limit the generalizability of the research results; therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution. The cross-sectional nature of the survey provides only a snapshot in time and cannot capture changing preferences over time. Reliance on self-reported data may have introduced a response bias. This study focused only on Chinese audiences and did not include comparative data from other countries. Future studies should employ probability sampling methods to obtain a more representative sample of Chinese audiences. Longitudinal research could track how preferences for Japanese and South Korean films change over time, particularly in response to geopolitical events. Qualitative methods, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, can provide deeper insights into the reasons behind audience preferences. Comparative studies examining audiences in other Asian countries could reveal regional differences in the reception of Japanese and South Korean cinema. Future research could delve deeper into the specific cultural elements that resonate most with Chinese audiences and explore how these preferences vary across different demographic groups in China. Investigating the long-term impact of exposure to foreign films on Chinese cultural values and identity would provide further insight into the complex dynamics of cultural exchange.

Conclusion

This study empirically reveals that the effectiveness of Japanese and South Korean films as cultural diplomacy carriers is rooted in three major cultural elements: (1) the authenticity of daily life, (2) shared Confucian values, and (3) modernity's social critique. These elements dissolve geopolitical barriers through emotional resonance, confirming that films can serve as a non-political channel for regional reconciliation in East Asia. Notably, this study explores the interconnections among three

countries that are politically distinct yet geographically close. As a non-political medium, films transcend historical geopolitical tensions through narratives of shared Confucian values and the predicaments of modernity. This study highlights the significant influence of Japanese and South Korean cinema on shaping Chinese audiences' cultural perceptions and preferences. By examining audience preferences and motivations, this study reveals the complex interplay between cultural proximity, content quality, and audience engagement. These findings highlight the potential of cinema as a potent tool for cultural diplomacy and soft power, with implications for both academic research and industry practices. This study examines the perceptions and experiences of Chinese audiences regarding Japanese and South Korean films. By analyzing the survey data, we gained insights into the cultural impact and appeal of these films. Despite the limited sample size, the findings suggest significant implications for soft power, highlighting how both countries' film industries influence global pop culture and shape international perceptions. These insights underline the potential of cinema as a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. Future studies should delve deeper into the nuanced impact of specific genres, directors, and actors on audience preferences and explore the evolving dynamics of cross-cultural consumption in the digital age. By understanding the factors that drive audience engagement with foreign films, policymakers and industry stakeholders can develop strategies to foster cultural exchange and enhance a nation's soft power. This research provides a foundation for further exploration of the complex relationship between cinema, culture, and global influence.

ORCID iDs

Muhammad Yaqoub  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4188-0273>

Ze Gao  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9347-6312>

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Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, who participated voluntarily.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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