

# Why Korean Dramas are Popular in China

**Junxiong Wei**

Institute of Marxism, China West Normal University,  
No. 1 Shi Da Road, Nanchong, 637009,  
Sichuan, China.  
E-mail: xhsdwjx@163.com

## **Abstract**

*The fundamental reason of Korean dramas' success in China is that they meet Chinese needs which include cultural and psychological contentment, spiritual satisfaction, aesthetic gratification and visual enjoyment. Besides, there is the perfect combination of tradition and modernity in South Korean dramas, displaying the essence of traditional culture in a modern manner.*

**Key words:** Korean dramas; Chinese spiritual and ethical needs; cultural identity

## **I. Introduction**

The popularity of *the Heirs* and *My Love from the Stars* in China shows that Korean dramas return in a revitalized form. Lee Minho, the chief actor of *the Heirs*, became the first South Korean artist participating in CCTV Spring Festival Gala Evening. *My Love from the Stars* was better and had created a craze in China. Iqiyi is a well-known video network platform, and had purchased the broadcast rights to *My Love from the Stars*. According to the statistical data of Iqiyi, “the amount of play broke through ten millions on Iqiyi and PPS during the first week, and it was streamed more than 1 billion when the last episode was played on February 19, 2014”(Yang Weijia 王蔚佳, 2014, March 3). *My Love from the Stars* had not been retreated while *Descendants of the sun*, lived in February 2016, started a new round of more intense agitation. This drama simulcast by China and South Korea got more than 2 billion 680 million viewers on Iqiyi and broke the record set by *My Love from the Stars*. The actor Song Joong Ki in *Descendants of the sun* was far more popular than that whose name was Kim Su Hyon in *My Love from the Stars*. Song Joong Ki successfully created a responsible, manly, tough and tender image of a Special Force officer clear image, which made him “national husband” overnight. He captured countless Chinese female fans' heart. Korean dramas even

became a hot issue at National People's Congress. In the article "Chinese official's debate why China cannot make a soap opera as good as South Korea's" (William Wan, (2014, 3), it has been claimed that *My Love from the Stars* "is more than just a Korean soap opera. It hurts our culture dignity". However, it is obvious that Korean dramas are Superior to us. The paper will argue that why Korean dramas are popular in China and what can we learn from it. The following are the main factors of the prevalent trend of Korean dramas in China: First, there is a common cultural origin and identity between South Korean and Chinese. Second, the positive themes of Korean dramas meet the spiritual demands of Chinese viewers. Finally, fascinating plots and excellent technology of shooting absorb Chinese audience.

## II. Main Part

**First, Chinese emotions easily resonate to affections presented in Korean dramas because there is a common cultural origin and identity between South Korean and Chinese.**

China is adjacent to South Korea and they are homologous in culture. According to Ying.SQ and He.TM (2001, p.3-4), "in Paleolithic period, stone implement of china was similar to that of Korea, which demonstrates that close contacts and cultural communication between the two countries have lasted for thousands of years." In this long historical process, Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, has brought a profound influence to Korean. Just as Lee Meewon said, "In Choson dynasty, Confucianism appeared to be the dominant ideology during".

Furthermore, South Korean has been bravely facing up to the historical reality and devoting themselves to adhere to Chinese outstanding culture. But the most important thing is that South Korean fights hard to maintain its own voice, and eventually has developed Chinese culture in its own characteristic way. Korean dramas present this cultural feature vividly. According to *The Washington Post* in March 2014, Wang Qishan, who is one of China's top seven Communist Party leaders, said, "The core and soul of the Korean opera is a distillation of traditional Chinese culture," "It just propagates traditional Chinese culture in the form of a TV drama."(William Wan) Chinese traditional culture embodied in Korean dramas not only makes Chinese viewers easily find cultural identity but also meets the Chinese desire for traditional culture which has not been persisted and developed well in China now.

Besides, the objective attitudes to history make South Korean win respect and admiration from Chinese audiences, and it closes the distance between Chinese viewers and Korean dramas. For example, *Daejanggeum*, which was played on television in 2005 and was another wave of Korean dramas in China, is just as a museum display of the essence of Chinese culture. The background of this play was in the 17th century, in Ming dynasty of china. At that time, Chinese culture, especially Confucianism permeated all aspects of Korean life. On the TV screen, there are Chinese ancient characters with vertical typesetting on the books, on the royal decrees, on regular test papers and even on their door jacarandas. In *Daejanggeum*, the most powerful plot for Chinese is that one of the questions for entrance palace examination is from *the Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In brief, it is a great opportunity for Chinese audience to enjoy their excellent traditional culture when they watch *Daejanggeum*.

On the whole, the fundamental idea of East Asian values output by South Korean today is Chinese traditional culture, so it is liable to generate a common moral and cultural identity for Chinese viewers.

**Second, the themes of Korean dramas that perpetually advocate the true, the good and the beautiful and eternal love are positive energy which can meet the spiritual and ethical demands of Chinese people.**

Nowadays, it is an undeniable fact that Chinese spiritual vanity is gradually becoming serious and moral standards are deteriorated sharply. In such an environment, Chinese people, especially Chinese women, have not enough security of emotional sense. Facing the worrying reality, Chinese audiences hope to acquire the spiritual consolation when enjoying dramas.

However, the main types of Chinese dramas are about court intrigue, bloody war and realistic life. Intriguing Court plays and bloody war plays are relatively cruel, brutal, and ruthless. For instances, the theme of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* is how the heroine changes herself from a kind and pure girl to a mature, scheming and cruel queen confronted with complex struggle in the court. *The Legend of Zhen Huan* is one of relatively successful plays in 2013, but its theme indicates that only in grievous and harsh way, can we live in society and acquire success and promotion. Regarding modern Familial dramas of China, they pay much attention to severe reality, mainly touching upon the amatory material basis, such as houses, the fighting between a wife or a husband and their mothers-in-law or an affair of actors. Moreover, the end of dramas, good or bad, is more conceptual and formalistic, which can not high-profilingly propagandize the true, the good and the beautiful. In short, a great amount of Chinese dramas are heavy topic, which can not purify the audience's mind well, or generate positive encouragement and relax the audience well.

Meanwhile, the themes of South Korean dramas are mostly based on the harmony and affection of family, the divine and persistent love and sincere friendship which can meet a greater degree of the spiritual demand of Chinese. First of all, "Solid storylines of unconditional love" ( Jimmyn. P and Hwy.CHM. 2013) is indispensable. Besides, there always are decent and loving fathers, gentle and kind-hearted mothers, energetic and affectionate young people in South Korean dramas. Certainly, there are also villains, but they will be punished. Their relatives will not shield them, on the contrary, they will rack their brains to relieve them.

In addition, dramatists of South Korean dramas specialize in creating good stories in ordinary, authentic, and simple way. It makes all spectators, even ordinary watcher, can find corresponding roles in the dramas. Then, in the plot, there are also many humorous life details, performed by the actors with rich facial expression, exaggerated body language and nifty bicker, which often make people laugh. This comedy can let people temporarily forget the stress in work and in life, acquire spiritual relaxation and emotional adjustment. It is very necessary for contemporary tired people.

Moreover, actors in South Korean dramas always express their emotion in implicit, subtle and refined way, which caters to aesthetic appreciation of Chinese. There are almost no excessive intimate scenes on screen, so if the whole family members watch TV together they will not meet the awkward occasion.

In short, Chinese people are liable to obtain a strong emotional satisfaction, moral encouragement and relaxing pleasure when enjoying South Korean dramas.

**Finally, the fastidious, earnest, delicate production of Korean-dramas creates a fascinating plot, beautiful and natural pictures and situations which are comfortable and fresh to Chinese viewers.**

For one thing, a good plot is the significant precondition for a successful drama. Dramatists in South Korean attach great importance to the innovation of scenarios. “*My Love from the Stars* is about an alien who landed on Earth in the Joseon Dynasty and, 400 years later, falls in love with a top actress in the modern era.” (From WIKIPEDIA, *The Free Encyclopedia*) This drama presents love, romance, comedy, science fiction, suspense, humor and time travel in its scenario, and obviously this is one of the important reasons why *My Love from the Stars* can attract so many people’s attention. The screenwriter of *Descendants of the sun* has achieved historical innovation. First of all, in order to adapt to the fast rhythm of people, time fragmentation of the urban life, the drama adopted short series and compact style of rhythm. Secondly, the drama has changed traditional plot against the background of family, workplace and so on and the only main line of the story mode of love and marriage in the past. It cleverly melt the main theme of romantic love into the the main melody of “world, country, occupation”. Taking the love of “peacekeeping troops” and “Doctors Without Borders” as the main line, it melt military, medical element and anti-terrorism into the love of doctor and serve, full of value of humanitarianism, comradeship and patriotism. The play not only displayed that the soldiers fulfilled their duty of the guardian of freedom, peace and defending the elderly, women and children with their own lives, but also conveyed the doctor criterion that “any world outlook, outlook on life and values are not superior to life”. It made the audience see “big love of the nation and life” by watching ordinary people’ “little love”. So to speak, *Descendants of the sun* is a symbol of political transformation in ideological construction. Moreover, in South Korean, in general, scenarios will begin to be shot when only a small part of them have been completed, since then scenarist continue to write while the scenario is been shooting. The advantage of this approach is that it can realize the interaction between writers and audiences, and writers can change scenarios appropriately according to the requirements of audience and try their best to meet the audience’s needs as possible.

For another thing, in the process of shooting Korean dramas, directors and shooting team pay much attention to create the beautiful, natural pictures and situations. There are so many highlights in shooting Korean drama, including pretty heroines and their carefully designed clothing and props, handsome heros, the beautiful and gorgeous scene, the elaborately created background music, and the mouth-watering delicacies. All above of these give a great opportunity for Chinese audience to taste an aesthetic and visual feast. With the purpose of having a chance to enjoy this cultural charm personally, many Chinese audience choose to travel to South Korea. According to Xu Wei, “China replaced Japan as the largest source of tourists to South Korea in 2013”. They visit the shooting scene of the dramas they like, purchase clothes, accessories and make-up products worn by heroes and heroine s and taste kimchi and bulgogi, seaweed soup, bibimbap, songpyeon and other delicious South Korean food. “the line, ‘Fried chicken and a glass of beer are perfect for a snowy day’, caused a craze for ‘fried chicken and beer’ in China”.( dongA, 2014, Feb 21.) According to the report of *CHINADAILY* in June 2014, in this year, “Among the most popular destinations of Chinese tourists is a display of theatrical sets used in the television series *My Love from the Star* at the neon-studded Dongdaemun Design Plaza.”

In brief, the fascinating plots and the beautiful and natural productions are the charm of South Korean dramas which attract Chinese viewers.

### III. Conclusion

To conclude, the fundamental reason of Korean dramas' success in China is that they meet Chinese needs which include cultural and psychological contentment, spiritual satisfaction, aesthetic gratification and visual enjoyment. Besides, there is the perfect combination of tradition and modernity in South Korean dramas, displaying the essence of traditional culture in a modern manner. Chinese people should learn the successful experience of Korean dramas. First, it is essential to reveal the true needs of the audience. Second, Chinese people should make an intensive study of traditional Chinese culture, then extract the essence and express it profoundly in Chinese dramas. Moreover, the themes and material of our dramas should not only be sourced from reality, but also be transcended actuality to propagandize the positive energy. Finally, Chinese people should focus on details and improve the level of dramas' production and the technology of shooting.

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