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The Dissemination of Chinese Fantasy Dramas in Southeast Asia: Cultural Identity and Digital Innovation

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Abstract: This study explores the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia, a genre that uniquely blends fantasy, martial arts, and traditional Chinese culture. Chinese fantasy dramas feature supernatural beings like gods, immortals, and demons, portraying epic battles between good and evil within intricate emotional narratives. Rooted in ancient Chinese folklore and influenced by Taoist philosophy, Chinese fantasy dramas emphasize harmony with nature and spiritual enlightenment, characterized by rich world-building and vibrant visuals. The research examines the reasons behind the growing popularity of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia and their role in fostering cultural identity among local audiences. It highlights the critical impact of digital technologies, such as streaming services and social media, in facilitating cross-cultural dissemination. Findings indicate that these platforms significantly enhance the transnational spread of Chinese fantasy dramas, allowing Southeast Asian viewers to engage with the genre's cultural elements and fostering a shared sense of identity. However, the study also acknowledges challenges, including cultural differences and policy restrictions, that can impede dissemination. Overall, it concludes that ongoing technological advancements and increased cultural exchange are likely to boost the global recognition and impact of Chinese fantasy dramas.

Keywords: Chinese fantasy dramas, cross-cultural dissemination, digital innovation, cultural identity, Southeast Asian market.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The acceleration of globalization and digitalization has created unprecedented opportunities for the transnational dissemination of television dramas [1]. Within this context, Chinese fantasy dramas—characterized by their unique blend of fantasy, martial arts, and elements of traditional Chinese culture—have emerged as a significant genre.

These narratives are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, blending elements of Taoism and Buddhism to craft storylines centered around cultivation and the pursuit of immortality, thereby creating a fantastical world that integrates traditional Chinese culture while catering to the preferences of modern audiences[2]. The settings of Chinese fantasy dramas are often closely tied to natural

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landscapes, particularly in terms of spatial aesthetics and visual representation, showcasing traditional cultural elements of China.

Southeast Asia serves as a critical region for the dissemination of Chinese culture, characterized by its cultural diversity and robust demand for television content. In recent years, the demand for Chinese television dramas in Southeast Asia has surged, particularly in Thailand, where Chinese dramas have surpassed Korean dramas in popularity[3]. According to data from Statista, the online streaming market in Southeast Asia is expected to continue to grow over the next five years. Additionally, there are approximately 400 million online video users in the region, with a significant increase in interest in Chinese dramas. This study aims to analyze the specific types of Chinese fantasy dramas that resonate with Southeast Asian audiences, their cultural impact, and the role of digital innovation in facilitating this phenomenon.

1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

The primary objective of this study is to explore the dissemination pathways of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia and analyze the reasons behind their growing popularity. It will specifically define the characteristics of Chinese fantasy dramas, focusing on the aspects that make them appealing to audiences in this region. Furthermore, the research aims to assess how Southeast Asian viewers develop a cultural identity towards fantasy culture and the critical role that digital innovation plays in this process. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the global dissemination mechanisms of Chinese fantasy dramas and their potential contributions to cultural exchange, particularly within the vibrant context of Southeast Asia.

2. The International Dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas

Chinese television dramas initially entered the East Asian and Southeast Asian markets through traditional media, with Journey to the West garnering widespread attention due to its unique mythological storyline[4]. With the advent of digital technology, Chinese fantasy dramas, as a continuation of Chinese mythology and chivalric spirit, began to gain traction in international markets through streaming platforms such as WeTV and iQIYI. In Southeast Asia, dramas like *Till the End of the Moon*, *Love Between Fairy and Devil*, and *The Untamed* have become widely popular, attracting significant viewership [5].

In 2015, *The Journey of Flower* aired in Thailand, quickly becoming the highest-rated imported drama of that year. And it also appeared in primetime television slots in countries like Singapore[6]. Similarly, *Eternal Love* achieved significant success, ranking fifth among imported dramas in Thailand in 2017. The popularity of *The Untamed* in 2019 further underscores this trend, as it ranked first on Thailand's trending charts and gained considerable viewership on WeTV's international accounts[7]. These milestones not only highlight the growing influence of Chinese fantasy dramas in the Southeast Asian market but also underscore the need for further research into their cultural impact and dissemination mechanisms.

Understanding the dynamics behind this popularity is crucial, as it reflects broader trends in cultural exchange and globalization. Furthermore, this research addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding the cultural identity development of Southeast Asian audiences in relation to Chinese fantasy dramas, which blends traditional Chinese aesthetics with local cultural elements. By examining these aspects, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of cross-cultural media consumption and its implications for cultural identity in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

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3. Current Dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia

3.1. Audience Analysis

The primary audience for Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia predominantly consists of young viewers, especially women. This demographic demonstrates a strong affinity for the supernatural elements, romantic storylines, and the visually stunning aesthetics that characterize the genre. For example, Yang highlights that the therapeutic governance and escapism offered by Chinese fantasy dramas appeal to young audiences facing the pressures of modern life[8]. These viewers are often drawn to the themes of personal growth, love, and the battle between good and evil—elements that align well with the socio-cultural and emotional needs of Southeast Asian youth. For instance, the series *Love Between Fairy and Devil* exemplifies how fantasy romance integrates concepts of ideal masculinity and female empowerment, attracting significant attention due to its therapeutic value for female viewers, aligning with the Confucian "structures of feeling" and contemporary emotional needs in China.

The success of dramas *The Untamed* and *Eternal Love* in Southeast Asia further underscores the widespread appeal of Chinese fantasy dramas among this demographic. Li notes that *The Untamed*, in particular, sparked considerable discussion in Thailand, South Korea, and other Southeast Asian countries through platforms such as Netflix and YouTube, establishing itself as a successful example of Chinese web series reaching overseas audiences[7].

Chinese fantasy dramas have evolved through a fusion of martial arts and fantasy, with their aesthetic appeal and world-building drawing on traditional Chinese landscapes such as mountains and forests. These elements create a uniquely Chinese experience that distinguishes the genre, appealing to Southeast Asian audiences familiar with similar cultural tropes. This success reflects Southeast Asian audiences' demand for high-quality scripts and production values, as well as their desire for emotional fulfillment through romantic narratives set against supernatural backdrops.

3.2. Dissemination Channels and Platforms

Streaming platforms have played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia. The proliferation of OTT platforms like WeTV has made Chinese television dramas easily accessible to Southeast Asian audiences. Through international partnerships and tailored subtitling services, these platforms have significantly enhanced the spread and popularity of Chinese fantasy dramas in the region. Furthermore, social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube provide secondary dissemination opportunities, allowing fans to engage with the content through creative productions and discussions. This interactive engagement fosters a deeper connection with the dramas and promotes their cultural significance[9].

On platforms like TikTok, viewers contribute to secondary creations, including short videos and edits, which expand the reach of Chinese fantasy dramas. For example, *The Untamed* has generated a substantial volume of fan-created content on TikTok, amplifying its influence among young audiences. These secondary dissemination activities not only enhance the popularity of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia but also indicate a growing trend of participatory culture surrounding this genre[10].

Despite the significant impact of these platforms, there is a notable gap in scholarly research focusing specifically on Chinese fantasy dramas, particularly compared to the more extensively studied genre of Wuxia dramas. While previous studies have explored various aspects of Wuxia, the unique characteristics and cultural nuances of Chinese fantasy dramas remain underexamined. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing how digital platforms facilitate the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas, thus contributing to the understanding of cross-cultural media dynamics and

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the cultural exchange between China and Southeast Asia. By focusing on fantasy dramas, this study not only highlights an emerging genre but also sheds light on the broader implications of digital innovation in cultural dissemination.

4. Cultural Identity and Cultural Export

4.1. Cultural Identity of Southeast Asian Audiences

Culture can be defined as "the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and widely shared ideas prevalent in a society," expressed not only through language but also through various artistic forms, particularly film and television[11]. Chinese fantasy dramas, deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture, incorporate rich elements of Eastern aesthetics while embedding Chinese philosophical thought and value systems. These cultural characteristics resonate with traditional culture in parts of Southeast Asia, especially the mythological elements and the Taoist and Buddhist philosophies in Chinese fantasy dramas, fostering a sense of cultural identity among local audiences. Especially in countries like Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, have cultural ties to Buddhist and Taoist ideologies, which are deeply embedded in their own historical narratives[12].

Moreover, the appeal of personal growth, heroism, and spiritual themes within Chinese fantasy dramas aligns with the local Southeast Asian ethos of balancing personal and communal duty, and the pursuit of harmony with nature, concepts often highlighted in regional art forms like traditional dance and theatre[13]. These shared values help Southeast Asian viewers forge a stronger cultural connection with the content of Chinese fantasy dramas. For example, *Love Between Fairy and Devil* conveys core values of "love and freedom," which transcend boundaries of nationality, kinship, and social class, becoming a universal emotional appeal shared by audiences worldwide[14].

4.2. Cultural Export through Chinese fantasy dramas

Chinese fantasy dramas have served as an important vehicle for the export of Chinese culture. Through their unique aesthetic style and emotional expression, these dramas successfully convey China's aesthetic concepts and cultural values to a global audience. The world-building, character design, and costume aesthetics in Chinese fantasy dramas are deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, allowing international audiences to experience the distinct charm of Eastern civilization. For instance, in *The Untamed* and *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, the depiction of traditional Chinese festivals such as the Lantern Festival, with its intricate details of lanterns and fireworks, not only immerses international viewers in Chinese traditional aesthetics but also effectively promotes the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

The design of costumes, the construction of time and space, and the narrative elements of Chinese fantasy dramas are often derived from ancient Chinese myths, folklore, and popular culture[15]. For example, in *Eternal Love*, mythological creatures like the Phoenix and the mythical serpent Ba She, along with the mystical transportation tool Kun from *Immortal Samsara*, are all sourced from the Chinese literary classic *Zhuangzi*, adding a layer of fantasy and mystery to the series and reinforcing its unique national aesthetic.

Music plays a crucial role in enhancing the cultural richness of Chinese fantasy dramas. For instance, *The Longest Day in Chang'an* incorporates traditional Chinese instruments such as the guqin, flute, and erhu to create melodies that align with the historical setting of ancient Chang'an. These musical elements not only add a layer of historical authenticity to the story but also express the characters' emotions and heighten the drama's tension. During climactic scenes, the use of percussion and string instruments intensifies the emotional impact, allowing viewers to experience the unique appeal of Eastern music. This use of traditional music fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chinese cultural heritage among international audiences.

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Color symbolism is another essential element in Chinese fantasy dramas, contributing to both visual and thematic depth. For example, in *Eternal Love*, the soft pink hues of the peach blossom forest represent love and romance, while the cool tones of blue and white in the heavenly palace symbolize purity and divinity. The use of color not only enhances the visual appeal of the scenes but also conveys concepts of "harmony" and "aesthetic balance" found in Eastern culture. These striking color schemes help international viewers engage with the visual narrative and immerse themselves in the fantastical worlds of Chinese fantasy dramas.

5. Digital Innovation and the Dissemination

5.1. The Development of Streaming Technology

The development of OTT platforms has transcended the time and space limitations of traditional television, allowing Chinese fantasy dramas to swiftly enter the Southeast Asian market. By leveraging big data analytics, streaming platforms can provide personalized recommendations based on viewers' watching habits, significantly enhancing the reach of Chinese fantasy dramas among Southeast Asian audiences. For example, WeTV, Tencent's streaming platform, has adopted localization strategies, offering subtitles in local languages as well as high-quality dubbing, earning high praise from local audiences.

During its initial entry into the Thai market, WeTV only offered original Chinese content with Thai dubbing[16]. After acquiring iFlix, the second biggest regional streaming service next to Netflix, Tencent expanded to include Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian subtitles to cater to regional audiences[17].This approach has notably improved the cross-cultural adaptability of Chinese fantasy dramas and contributed to their success in Southeast Asia.

In terms of production, Chinese fantasy dramas employ a combination of on-location shooting and advanced CGI technologies, creating a visually stunning and aesthetically impactful experience. Particularly in *Love Between Fairy and Devil*, the CGI effects enhance the male protagonist Dongfang Qingcang's battle scenes, providing an exciting highlight that attracts viewers. These visually striking effects not only elevate the production quality but also boost the competitiveness of Chinese fantasy dramas in the international market[18].

5.2. The Rise of Social Media and Fan Communities

The widespread use of social media has created new opportunities for the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas. Platforms such as TikTok and YouTube allow viewers to engage in secondary creations like video editing, commentary, and sharing. This user-generated content not only enhances the spread of the dramas among Southeast Asian audiences but also provides fans with an avenue for participation and expression, further encouraging discussions and interactions.

In addition, the formation of fan communities has amplified the cultural impact of Chinese fantasy dramas. Social media facilitates the rapid establishment of these communities, enabling fans to share their enthusiasm for the dramas and organize offline activities. This phenomenon aligns with "Uses and Gratifications Theory", which posits that audiences actively seek out media content to fulfill specific needs, such as social interaction, escapism, and community belonging[19]. By engaging with Chinese fantasy dramas, fans not only satisfy their entertainment needs but also forge connections with like-minded individuals, thereby enhancing their loyalty to the genre.

These fan communities serve as platforms for audience engagement, driving the long-term dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas and their associated cultural exports[20]. Through user-generated content, discussions, and creative expressions related to the dramas, fans contribute to a richer narrative surrounding fantasy culture, further deepening their involvement. "The Social

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Identity Theory" can also be applied here, as fans derive a sense of identity and belonging from their association with the dramas and their communities, reinforcing their cultural ties [21].

As a result of these digital innovations, Chinese fantasy dramas have garnered a substantial fanbase in Southeast Asia and have become integral to cultural exchanges in the region. This research highlights not only the significance of fan communities in the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas but also underscores the need for further empirical studies to explore the dynamics of these communities and their impact on cultural consumption patterns.

6. Challenges

Despite the widespread popularity of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia, certain cultural elements rooted in Taoism and Buddhism can be difficult for Southeast Asian audiences to fully understand. The "good versus evil" philosophy prevalent in Taoist thought may lack corresponding concepts in the religious systems of some Southeast Asian countries, leading to potential challenges in accepting certain plotlines[22].

Additionally, local censorship policies may pose obstacles to the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas[23]. Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, due to their religious backgrounds, may impose strict censorship on the mythological and polytheistic elements present in Chinese fantasy dramas, and in some cases, might even ban certain shows from airing [24].

7. Conclusion and Future Outlook

The development of 5G, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) technologies will provide viewers with a more immersive viewing experience, further enhancing the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas. In the future, Chinese fantasy dramas can incorporate elements of Southeast Asian culture, promoting cross-cultural collaboration and fostering greater cultural identity among local audiences. By drawing on Southeast Asian myths and legends and creating fantasy stories set in the region, the cultural distance between the dramas and local audiences can be narrowed, promoting further international development of the genre[25].

While the dissemination of Chinese fantasy dramas in Southeast Asia has benefited from digital innovation and its unique cultural adaptability, cultural differences and policy limitations remain significant challenges. As technology continues to advance and cross-cultural exchanges deepen, Chinese fantasy dramas are poised to achieve greater success and influence in the Southeast Asian and global markets.

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