

# Analysis of the Cultural Reconstruction of Chinese Remake TV Series

## Taking the Remake of “Ugly Betty” as an Example

Yiping Gao

School of Chinese Language and Literature  
Liaocheng University  
Liaocheng, China 252000

**Abstract**—Like other countries around the world, remake TV series also occupy an important share in Chinese TV series industry market. Among them, whether the remake requires cultural reconstruction has always been the focus of attention. So far, Colombia’s “Ugly Betty” has the most remakes in the world, this paper compares Chinese version, US version with master version of “Ugly Betty”, queries some previous conclusions of academic circles from the “Reconsideration of the Cultural Reconstruction of Chinese remakes”, searches the drawbacks of Chinese remakes, discusses the “rationality of cultural inheritance” and the thoughts about “cultural reconstruction in remakes”.

**Keywords**—Chinese TV series; cultural remake; reconstruction; “Ugly Betty”

### I. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Chinese TV series industry was bewilderingly changeable, forging audience ratings, yin and yang contracts, and tax policy changes were wave after wave. In order to ensure the broadcast safety, more and more production companies turned their attentions to the old TV series, so they started the blowout period of “remake”. [1]The year of 2018 was called the “The year of remake films and TV series”. Along with this change, the reconstruction problem in the remakes back to the academic circle.

The Colombian TV series “Ugly Betty” produced at the turn of the century has not only been broadcasted in more than 130 countries around the world, but also has 35 remake versions, thus making it the most influential TV series. Among the remake versions, the US version of “Ugly Betty” won many awards such as “Amy Award” and “Golden Ball Award”, which has a great influence. The Chinese remake version is called “Invincible Ugly Girl”, produced in 2008-2010, it was China's first remake TV series with purchased copyright, which broke the previous plagiarism situation, and its audience rating was listed as the first place in China mainland and Taiwan during that time. So far it has maintained its status as an important remake TV series.

According to this, this paper studies and compares “Invincible Ugly Girl”, the US version of “Ugly Betty”, and the Colombian version of “Ugly Betty”, try to find the

difference in reconstruction between China and the American remake versions, and explores the direction of remake production in China.

### II. THE ISSUE OF CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION IN CHINESE REMAKE TV SERIES

Cultural reconstruction refers to the reconstruction of culture, it means re-creation of a certain cultural phenomenon. Remake TV series requires cultural reconstruction, moreover, some scholars believe that Chinese remake TV series have already achieved cultural reconstruction. Taking “Invincible Ugly Girl” as an example, Liu Binbin compares the two “ugly women” between China and the United States and concludes that the Chinese version of “Invincible Ugly Girl” did not follow the style of the American “Ugly Betty” during the remake. [2] Zhang Xiaoxiao and Anthony Fung conducted an ethnographic study on the production process of “Invincible Ugly Girl”, and also compared “Invincible Ugly Girl” with the American version of “Ugly Betty”, they reached a similar conclusion: “Invincible Ugly Girl” positioned and reflected Chinese political, cultural and business rules, rebuilt China's unique culture. [3]

However, is this really the case? Is there a cultural reconstruction problem in Chinese remake TV series? Now compare the Chinese version, US version and Colombian master version, and observe the results.

First is to compare five aspects of the framework structure of the three versions, including the type, theme, model, role setting, and narrative structure. All three versions are inspirational comedies, which commonly use the repertoire mode of “Betty” to explain the modern “Cinderella” theme which happiness could happen without beauty and background. The stories are basically the same: an ugly girl's “heroic myth”, she rescued “Beautiful man” with her own strength, and finally achieved a “Cinderella fairy tale”. Therefore, in terms of type, theme, and mode, the three versions are basically the same, with no significant differences.

The situation has changed in other three areas. In role setting, the Chinese version is the same as the master version: honest father, virtuous mother, loyal and capable male friend,

rich and handsome pursuer (the competitor of leading actor), ringleader who makes trouble in secret, attired, jealousy and stupid opponent, mighty girlfriend of the leading actor, a group of sincere, kind and gossip female colleagues and so on. In the US version, the change in role setting is more obvious. Besides the boss (leading actor), the father, and the reception at the front desk are the same, the roles of mother, opponent and director are missing, and two roles of sister and nephew are added; the female friend Christina, boyfriend Henry, boss's multiple girlfriends, the behind-the-scenes mastermind Wehrmina (female, work in the same company) all have different levels of role adjustment.

In narrative structure, the Chinese version absorbs the beginning, development, and ending of the master version. In the US version, every aspect of the story has been adjusted, especially in the development stage of the story, which is

more tortuous and difficult. The "Ugly Girl" resigned from the company of the leading actor and went overseas to work, and the leading actor and actress developed their respective relationships even during this period.

In role setting, the US version does not have the role of mother, male friend, pursuer, group secretary, but add the image of sister, nephew, female friend, and several romances of "ugly girl", which is based on the open marriage and love consciousness in the United States, and the more independent female cultural foundation. The reconstructed plot is more in line with the psychological expectations and emotional tendencies of the American audiences while the Chinese version has no other significant modifications except for the characters change from South American faces to Oriental faces. (See "Table I")

TABLE I. STRUCTURE COMPARISON OF CHINA, US AND MASTER VERSION OF "UGLY BETTY"

Item		Master Version	Chinese Version	US Version
Type		Inspirational comedy		
Theme & Mode		Modern "Cinderella" fairy tale: Poverty-stricken+balance+unbalance[4]		
Role setting(perspective of "Ugly Girl")		Boss(leading actor), father, mother, male friend, pursuer, boss's girlfriend, mastermind behind-the scene(male, outside company), front desk reception, group secretary	Same: Boss(leading actor), father, mother, male friend, pursuer, boss's girlfriend, opponent, director, mastermind behind-the scene(male, outside company), front desk reception, group secretary	Same: Boss(leading actor), father, front desk reception Add: sister, nephew Cancel: mother, opponent, director Adjust : female friend, male friend, boss's girlfriends, mastermind behind-the scene(female, inside company)
Narrative structure	Beginning	Leading actor choose "Ugly Girl" as secretary in order to avoid girlfriend		Father arranges "Ugly Girl" to be his son's secretary to avoid his overflowing emotion
	Development	"Ugly Girl" becomes a beauty, works as the CEO of the company and deeply loved by the leading actor		"Ugly Girl" becomes good friend with leading actor, develops respective romances and careers
	Ending	Get married and have children	Proposal of marriage	Date

Second is to compare the image structure of the "Ugly Girl", and observe from the aspects of demography and social relation, appearance and personality.

In terms of demography and social relation, the three versions are basically the same: gender (female), age (youth), times (contemporary), social stratum (white collar), profession (economics), income (average), marital status (unmarried), work unit (fashion), type of work (secretary). There are differences in family economic situation and workplace, the "Ugly Girl" in US version is from a well-off home, and her workplace is an open office. The Chinese version is the same as the master version, the "Ugly Girl" works in a claustrophobic storage room, and is from a poor home. There are 9 indicators in appearance and

personality. The three versions are only consistent on "Facial modeling": large frame glasses, full mouth of dental braces. Among the 9 items in Chinese version of "Ugly Girl", 7 items are consistent with the master version, leading actress has a good face, proud figure, gentle traditional character, friendly and passive interpersonal relationship, working for the job, unrequited affection with leading actor, but compare with master version, she has a more masculine name and always wear outdated clothing. Contrary to this situation, the "Ugly Girl" in US version only maintains the master setting in terms of name and clothing, others are completely subversive. US version of "Betty" is a real "ugly girl" with chunky, thick figure and unremarkable face, but she has a strong career will, she is optimism and independence, and adhere to an equal view of marriage and love. (See "Table II")

TABLE II. COMPARISON OF APPEARANCE FEATURES AND PERSONALITY STYLE OF “UGLY GIRL”

Type		Master Version	Chinese Version	Us Version
<i>Appearance feature</i>	Facial modeling	Large frame glasses, full mouth of dental braces	✓	✓
	Face	Good looking	✓	Ugly
	Figure	Tall and slim	✓	Dumpy and sturdy
	Clothing	Conservative and fit	Outdated and dowdy	✓
<i>Personality style</i>	Name	Feminine	Masculine	✓
	Working motive	Survival	✓	Ambition
	Personality	Gentle and traditional	✓	Strong and modern
	Human relation	Kind and passive	✓	Optimistic and independent
	Status of love	Unrequited affection and obedient	✓	Equal and helpful

<sup>a</sup>. Note: ✓ means the same with master version

In contrast, the “Ugly Girl” of the United States has transformed from a traditional, kind, gentle intellectual female image of the master version to a more independent professional female image. This new “Betty” with ugly face but with more independent personality and equality consciousness has become the new and most successful “Ugly Girl” image in the world; while the Chinese version has no substantive changes, basically copy the overall structure, plot setting, role arrangement of the master version, and even being criticized as “copycat style” by party newspaper.[5] From this point of view, the current academic view of “Invincible Ugly Girl” to achieve cultural reconstruction is not realistic.

### III. THE RATIONALITY OF CULTURAL INHERITANCE

Cultural reconstruction does not exclude cultural inheritance, and it inherits the excellent elements in the master version seasonably, which is the fundamental way to reproduce the long-lasting TV series. “Invincible Ugly Girl” has created the highest audience rating in Taiwan and Chinese mainland. It won the 2008-2010 Chinese TV series ratings, and the image of “Lin Wudi” has once become a phenomenal hot topic. These reflect the Chinese audience's welcome and demand for remakes of overseas culture, and also show that the culture of Chinese TV series needs to supplement the fresh nourishment of global excellent culture. As a classic case of the counterattack of weak culture, the master version of “Ugly Betty” fills the modern spirit core into traditional “Cinderella” story, and the remake of “Invincible Ugly Girl” draws from the two essences of this modern spirit:

First is the love appeal that reflects “pure relationship.” Giddens believes that pure relationship refers to an intrinsic intimacy, for which both two sides are in an independent and equal position and have no control factor of power. The important form is modern love and modern friendship, appealing to the emotional satisfaction and spiritual communication between partners and friends, rather than external conditions and material interests, thus getting rid of

the constraints of traditional social concepts and social structures, its substance is mutual democratic relationship.[6]The traditional discourse implied in the classic “Cinderella” story is the “well-matched marriage” of love and marriage, this culture left to the modern society with the woman's face as the weight of her own worth. Wealthy husband and good-looking wife is the ideal contract of social love and marriage. In the modern spiritual context, “the higher the degree of modernity, the more the pure relationship that transcends the utilitarian condition becomes the norm, and sympathy has become the dominant and legal discourse of the marriage relationship.” [7] In “The Invincible Ugly Girl”, the girl is not beautiful, but full of talent; the “Prince” is not perfect, he is full of shortcomings and encountering embarrassment at any time, the girl saved the “prince”. This kind of narrative subverts the traditional cultural discourse, the marriage in modern spirit is based on love, and the generation of love is based on emotional satisfaction and spiritual connection, it has nothing to do with power, position or appearance. This modern concept of love embodies a kind of social attachment value which excludes the traditional cultural concept, advocates the purity of the relationship of love, and embodies the equal democratic relationship in modern consciousness.

Second is to integrate with feminist gender politics. In the mid-1970s, feminist interpretation was introduced into aesthetic criticism of film and television, demanding subversion of patriarchal film and television narratives and exploring the “writing” form of feminist audiovisual language. From this point of view, the “Ugly Girl” model is the practice of feminist discourse narrative, in the series, the “Ugly Girl” image with big-framed glasses and mouthful of dental braces defeated the beauties in fashion world, and conquered global audience outside the series. In the traditional cultural context, men are transcendental and creative, and they are in a dominant and decisive position. Women are passive objects as the vassal of men, their mission and value is to please men. The classic “Cinderella” story continues this patriarchal narrative tradition. The “Ugly Girl” model created the modern version of

"Cinderella", "Ugly Girl" as a modern woman, replaced weakness with courage, replaced beauty with wisdom and knowledge, "Ugly Girl" does not need "Prince" to save, on the contrary, the "prince" who always has troubles needs "Ugly Girl" to save him. "Ugly Girl" has become a symbol of women's political awakening under the global feminist trend of thought, conquered the global audience, including the Chinese audience: "The first four weeks of the broadcast, the ratings have climbed at an average rate of 30%, and ranked on top three of the channel's weekly program. Fans are staying at the TV every night, sweating for the progress of Betty and the president Armando and the fate of Ike Fashion Company". [8]

#### IV. OBJECTION OF REPLICATION REMAKE

The US version of "Ugly Betty" has won widespread recognition in the industry for its successful cultural reconstruction. In terms of style, it has more plot color than the master version; in terms of content, it touches the hot topics of scandal, transgender, and immigration in reality of the American; at the same time, it reshapes the original traditional female image of the leading actress into a professional female image with more independent personality and equality consciousness. Then, why does Chin's "Invincible Ugly Girl" make replication remake, not make cultural reconstruction based on China's real life?

In fact, "Invincible Ugly Girl" is not an isolated case, the remake production of Chinese TV series generally has "replication" and "copycat" problems, such as Hunan TV's "Home Temptation", which remake the Korean series "Temptation of Wife", the structure of the whole story is unchanged, the names and styles of the characters are unchanged, the room layout, the shooting angle, the theme song, the soundtrack are unchanged, and even the position of a sly on the heroine's face has not changed. Then what is the significance of remake? The producer explained that the copyright has been purchased, this is a tribute to the classics and they already made deletion of the overflowing emotion of the leading actor.[9] This explanation is obviously too pale. The reason is that in addition to the producer's level limitation and personal motivation factors, there are deep political and economic factors.

First of all, the master TV series has been approved by market, its subject matter has also been officially recognized. Therefore, the replication remake can successfully pass the audit of the radio and television management department, so it can gain more stable market benefits. According to the data provided by CCTV CSM on March 3, 2011, although the "Home Temptation" did not have any remake significance, its average audience rating reached 2.58%, [10] which at a high level of audience rating among the programmes at the same period. The "Invincible Ugly Girl" was jointly produced by Hunan TV and Nesound International Media. The former is the provincial official media, but it is enterprise management, and is famous for China's most commercialized satellite channel; the latter is a private enterprise, and profit pursue is the target. For the safest and most economical considerations in political review, they chose replication remake. According to CCTV CSM

data, "Invincible Ugly Girl" reached 9.7% of audience rating, which broke the rating record of Hunan TV's self-produced series for four years, and the market feedback verified the investors' expectations.

However, economic benefit is not the only leverage, audience ratings cannot be the reason for replication remakes, the value of social benefits and civic interests are even more important. Replication remakes will discard cultural creation and completely compromise on the parrots of cultural discourse. If things go on like this, cultural renewal will be sacrificed and the discourse of the era will cease to exist. Zhang Yiwu from Peking University said, "Remake is not equal to low-level copycat", as long as there is innovative will and effort, it is not difficult for "copycat TV series" to realize "new wine in old bottles". [11] Remake is a common and effective way to create hit series in the world, and it is also an effective means for countries to absorb other excellent cultural resources, including the United States and other strong cultures, such as the American remake of "The Eye", "Infernal Affairs" and other Hong Kong film and television series. For the undeveloped Chinese TV series, the classic series of the past, especially the global classics, are good learning samples. Remake them will conveniently update and dignify our own culture. Only this kind of remake must be based on one's own culture, absorb and adopt it by creation, and duplication remake should be opposed, reference and creative remake should be encouraged.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The cultivation of culture requires years of accumulation and inheritance. Classic works are time-tested beneficial ingredients, imitation and absorption are effective ways of inheriting cultural experience; while cultural renewal needs to reflect society and leading the development of society with the times, creatively drawing on classic culture and maintain organic original ingredients are the necessary way to enrich their own culture and maintain their vitality.

China has the world's largest TV series market, but it is not a TV series powerhouse. It is a dream of several generations of TV series workers to show China's style on the global film and television stage. With the improvement of China's economic capability, the hardware upgrades in the pre-production and post-production have gradually reached the top level of the world, but its narrative level is still at a low level, and this is the most fundamental core of the level of national TV series. Only by inheriting the culture of human classics, and by localization and original transformation, can we achieve the globalization of narrative level and demonstrate the cultural style of Chinese TV series.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] <http://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1603043287706540308&wfr=spider&for=pc>. 2018 remake TV sires flock together, but why the producers get braver when the remakes were badly reviewed? 18-06-12. (in Chinese)
- [2] Liu Binbin. Historical Evolution and Cultural Review of Chinese TV Series Adaptation [M]. Hunan: Yuelu Publishing Company, 2010: 232-233. (in Chinese)

- [3] Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung. TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty : An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community. *Television & New Media*, 2014, 15(6): 507-522. (in Chinese)
- [4] Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung. TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty : An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community. *Television & New Media*, 2014, 15(6): 511. (in Chinese)
- [5] The Phenomenon of “Invincible Ugly Girl”: The Screen Blows Up “Copycat Style” [Z]. *People's Daily*. 2008, 10 (24): 12. (in Chinese)
- [6] (English) Anthony Giddens. *The Transformation of Intimate Relationships* [M]. Translated by Chen Yongguo, Wang Min'an. Beijing: Society and Scientific Literature Publishing Company, 2001: 50-51.
- [7] Feng Yingqian, Zhang Xiaoxiao. The Symbol Practice of Modern Fantasy in China: the Cultural Analysis of Meteor Garden model [J]. *Journal of Communication and Sociology*, 2012 (19): 68. (in Chinese)
- [8] “Daily Art” “Ugly Betty” Conquers the Chinese Audience. [EB/OL]. [2003-09-19]. <http://ent.sina.com.cn>. (in Chinese)
- [9] Hunan TV's New Series Is Still “Copycat” [N]. *Lanzhou Evening News*, 2011, 02 (25): A32. (in Chinese)
- [10] The Economic Account of the New “Princess Pearl” [N]. *Beijing Entertainment News*. 2011, 7 (27): 16. (in Chinese)
- [11] The Phenomenon of “Invincible Ugly Girl”:The Screen Blows Up “Copycat Style”. [EB/OL].[2008-10-22]. <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/27296/8208103.html>. (in Chinese)