

A Probe into the Factors of Rise and Fall of Co-produced TV Series in China

Case Analysis of the Co-produced Teleplay *Princess Pearl*

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Abstract—Standing at the peak of the co-produced teleplays in China, *Princess Pearl* represents the heyday of Chinese co-produced teleplays. At the same time, the course of cooperative production and broadcast of the *Princess Pearl* Trilogy accords with the rise and fall of co-production in mainland China and is of great referential value for investigating the future development of China's co-produced teleplays. Among all the conditions, the power of political, economic, and social network capital jointly drove the birth of the teleplay; regional cultural consultation contributed to its access to cross-regional markets; and the squandering of icon resources and hybridization strategy led to the decline of the co-production in this field.

Keywords—Chinese teleplay; co-produced teleplay; fandom; hybridization strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, co-production of TV series seems to be far away from people's attention in China's TV industry. Although great progress has been made in the hardware equipment in today's prophase filming and post production, and co-produced online plays like, *The Unlawful Justice Squad*, *Line Walker* in 2017, and *Another Era* in 2018 were well received, no matter from the number of episodes and scale, or to the quality, effect and star-making ability of the work, cannot compare with the grand occasion of co-produced teleplays created by *Princess Pearl*.

The *Princess Pearl* at the turn of the century is a trilogy, co-produced by Hunan TV (HNTV) station and the Yiren Communication co. LTD of Taiwan. The first two are the pinnacle of co-produced teleplay, creating and maintaining the highest rating of 65% in Asia so far. This set off "a wave of Xiao Yanzi" and started the "idol era" of Chinese film and television. However, the *Princess Pearl III*, as well as the *New Princess Pearl* remade in 2011 were seen crashing to earth, and thus the co-produced play became a flower of yesterday. The whole making and broadcasting process of *Princess Pearl*, from its timing and ups and downs, are in line with the rise and falls of Chinese co-produced teleplays, presenting a three-dimensional picture of the vicissitude of Chinese co-produced plays. Therefore, examining this process will be of great significance for the development of future co-productions of teleplays.

II. POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL NETWORK CAPITAL

In terms of packaging, the first two of the *Princess Pearl* had almost shabby clothing and make-up, nearly no extravagance and rough publicity, just the same as other costume pieces of the same time. But all these didn't hinder them from becoming landmark works, which was closely related to the politics, economy and social network factors at that time.

In the process of globalization, the mainland and Taiwan, which are originally of the same family, have become regional communication relations, which is directly related to the change of international situation. In 1979, the Mainland issued the *Message to Compatriots in Taiwan*, proposing to end the military confrontation between the two sides of the Taiwan straits and maintain free exchanges. In the face of the appeal from the Mainland, although Taiwan continued to rely on the United States at this time to maintain the cold war posture, the private capital of the two sides began to go into circulation. In 1987, Taiwan established the Straits Exchange Foundation under the principle of "no contact, no compromise, and no negotiation", and approved the one-way "visits to relatives on both sides of the Taiwan straits". This marked the end of the "cold war" between the two sides and the beginning of a social network of economic and trade ties and blood ties that began to work beyond politics.

In terms of the difference between the neo- and old regionalism, the old regionalism that emerged in the 1950s was formed in the bi-polar system in the Cold War [1]. Created from top to down by the US and Soviet powers, it has an inward turning and protectionist tendency. The neo-regionalism that was initiated in 1980s belongs to the multi-polar world order. It was a bottom-up spontaneous process, in which member states or actors are major drivers of regional integration and are interdependent and compatible with the world economy. From this point of view, cross-straits relations have undergone the evolution from old regionalism to new regionalism. The 40-year confrontation between the two sides of the Taiwan straits was the result of the operation of the "old regionalism" under the leadership of the United States and the Soviet Union. And the thawing and

exchange of cross-strait relations show the track of the operation of new regionalism from the bottom up. The private capital accumulation, industrial division of labor, and cultural circulation created by "globalization" have crossed the national boundaries. Both sides are eager to seize the opportunity brought by "globalization". Taiwanese business owners find China an ideal industrial base, and the Mainland wants to develop itself rapidly with the help of the advanced culture in Taiwan [2].

Apart from the *Princess Pearl*, Chiung Yao played an important role in the cooperation and exchange of TV dramas between the two sides. "There are few other people like Chiung Yao who have penetrated the whole process of China's mass culture market growing out of nothing, from germination to segmentation." [3] Through the "elastic accumulation" of cultural production, she transformed her "native land" into a resource to create business interests. [4] As the region that co-produces most TV dramas with the Mainland, Taiwan is driven by the "myth" of blood ties between the same family, as well as the capital accumulation brought by cultural circulation. When the political environment approved inter-regional mobility, the business transformed by consanguinity took off quickly and frequently.

Specific to the operation of "*Princess Pearl*", in addition to political and economic capital factors, social network capital also played a role. HNTV is the only partner of Chiung Yao in TV drama co-production. The long-term and stable partnership between the two sides is based on Chiung Yao's trust and friendship to Ouyang Changlin and HNTV. From 1992 when the mode of association to the *Flowers in Fog* co-produced in 2013, a total of 18 TV series have been filmed by the two sides. [5]

According to the relational network view, social network is a non-commodity exchange relationship different from the market and the connection relationship between the target enterprise and other social members or organizations in social exchange constitutes the enterprise relationship network [6]. The relational network is very significant in the organization, and the transnational industrial market is the relation network of the mutual connection among the enterprises. Enterprise internationalization is the process of establishing and developing enterprise network relationship with other countries. [7] The *Princess Pearl* co-produced by the Mainland and Taiwan benefited from the thawing of the political environment and the promotion of commercial interests, and the setting up of social network of blood relatives, friendship and kinship, and other forces also promoted the birth of "*Princess Pearl*".

III. CROSS-MARKET ROAD: INTER-REGIONAL CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

Chiung Yao once said, "*Princess Pearl* is the most popular one among my works" [8]. Another factor in its great success is directly related to inter-regional cultural hybridization. As a biological term originally, hybridization is then widely used in social sciences, and refers to "a process of mixing different races, populations, ideologies,

cultures and languages". [9] It also refers to "the convergence and reinterpretation of different traditions, including basic languages, cultures, races and even ideologies". [10] From this point of view, hybridization will liberate people from their previously entrenched countries, nations, classes and communities, and construct a vision of the future with a renewed collective experience. In the production of the first two sections of *Princess Pearl*, Taiwan provided quality scripts, modern production concept, and excellent shooting technique, while the Mainland provides excellent actors, broad shooting venues and huge market potential. With blurred geographic division, the co-production of a physical combination produces chemical reactions that form a new collective experience.

A. The Integration of Modern Production Concept and Traditional Cultural Connotation

From the time and space of the production process, the Taiwanese production rhythm was used in the production cycle. At that time in the Chinese mainland, the production of a long television series, from the preparation of the script, modification, review and approval, to the recruitment of staff, funds collecting, and from the pre- to the post-phase production, took more than a year and a half. However, the first *Princess Pearl*, from the writing of script which began in June, 1997, and raising funds, looking for actors and organizing the crew at the same time, to starting up on July 18, a total of five months was used to finish the shooting. The second session adopted the method in which group A and group B shot at the same time and it took only four months and 23 days to finish, with less than 3 months for post-production. From making preparation to the launch of the 72-episode *Princess Pearl*, it took over a year, with the actual shooting time less than a year. [11] This Taiwanese style of fast-paced production breaks domestic production precedents and conforms to the global popular production beat, eliminating backward production rhythms that could not catch up with market information. The whole production and shooting was completed in the Mainland. Ancient architecture complexes in Beijing, Daming Lake in Jinan, Emperor Kangxi's Summer Mountain Resort in Chengde in Hebei, the Grassland next to the West of Beijing, the Bashang Grassland in Chengde, Hebei, and Xishuangbanna, etc. became the spaces for plot development. The vast territory and abundant resources and magnificent and open sceneries add much imagination for the audience to feel the joys and sorrows of the characters.

B. "De-culturalization" and "Re-culturalization" Led to the "Semiotic Excess"

From the perspective of production team composition, the scriptwriters, producers and directors are mainly from Taiwan, and the main roles are played by mainland actors. Different regional cultures in front of and behind the stage caused direct collision, and because conflicts occurred many times during the shooting, resulting in slow progress, they even planned to stop shooting at one time. [12] Behind the obliterated shooting is the process of "de-culturalization" caused by regional cultural differences. De-culturalization refers to the removal from cultural products of certain parts

or specific historical geographical ethnic elements including plots, scenes or dialogues that are exclusive to a certain culture. It is mostly used for cultural products that are based on or adapted from a certain ethnic story but targeted at transnational/regional cultural consumers. [13] "Due to the historical reasons, the Mainland and Taiwan have been separated for many years, forming regional cultures with different styles. Yet in the process of co-production without distance, there is a conflict between the need to remove the region-specific culture and the dedication that each side holds. However, when faced with the "abyss" of the termination of cooperation, game cooperation turns into negotiating cooperation, thus realizing "de-culturalization".

The purpose of "de-culturalization" lies in "re-culturalization". "Re-culturalization" refers to the inclusion of a specific cultural element in global cultural products, so as to facilitate the acceptance of local audiences." [13] In the script of *Princess Pearl*, the "specific cultural elements" of "re-culturalization" are the characteristics of hybridization in cultures. That is, the hybridization of costume drama and idol drama, modern consciousness and traditional culture, the folk and the court, love play and slapstick comedy, as well as elegance and crudeness. In this play, affectionate and monkey-business scenes staggered; characters proficient in Kungfu and those adept at poetry and painting are combined with each other; in terms of lines, the delicacy of "Everyone is composing verse for our sidekicks, I am also writing a piece of poetry for our sidekicks. The red smartweed flowers in south and north banks of the river, Are all like blood in the eyes of the ones parted" and the crudeness of "In front of the door is one dog, gnawing a meat bone. Then here comes a second dog, only to get a broken head in pairs with the other", forms a humorous scene.

A collective experience of "semiotic excess" of high degree has emerged in all kinds of hybridization. In Fiske's discourse, "excess" is the measurement of "certainty, [14] order and predictability" of information, any program needs complex "semiotic excess" if it is to be well received. [15] The heroine "Xiao Yanzi" in *Princess Pearl* has a high degree of "semiotic excess". She is neither a weak woman like those in the previous works of Chiung Yao, nor a virtuous woman in a traditional Chinese TV series. Instead, incorporates the multiple elements of including "semiotic excess" gallantry, loyalty, valuing friendship, lying and making trouble, rampancy and rebellion. Since then, a superstar era represented by the icon "Zhaowei" has been ushered in.

With hybridization as an effective means of co-production, the experience exchanging and cooperation that realized complementary advantages and powerful combination, created a collective experience of "semiotic excess" of high degree, so that it crossed the barriers between regional cultures and achieves the "myth" in the history of TV dramas in mainland China and Taiwan.

IV. THE SQUANDERING OF ICON RESOURCES AND HYBRIDIZATION STRATEGY

The *Princess Pearl III* was born in expectations yet went no further in despairs of each party. Taking Hong Kong as an example, since the first two sessions of *Princess Pearl* bought by Asia Television Limited (ATV) achieved ideal results, its long-time rival TVB snapped up the copyright of the third session which was then in preparation. Once again, however, TVB was thwarted. The audience rating of *Princess Pearl III* was extremely low, and TVB could not help but removed it from the prime time in the midway of broadcast. In Taiwan, too, it has been snubbed — the ratings were described as "ridiculously low" by the media. Even in the Mainland where there was a better audience basis, the ratings were far from the first two sessions. [16] Similarly, the *New Princess Pearl* remade in 2011 also met its Waterloo, with a premiere rating of only 0.76. CTS who bought the copyright at about 12 million yuan was directly criticized as "a sucker" by the print media in Taiwan. [17]

Beneath the surface of such failures, reveal the reasons of the decline of China's co-produced teleplays. Compared with the first two sessions of *Princess Pearl*, not only substantial changes in the cast, but also a major change in the style of the play was made in the third one. Eight actors including the two "princesses" were changed and five roles were removed in this play. This drastic change was hard for the audience to accept. It is essentially the producers' neglect and waste of idol resources. The idol resources are concentrated in the existence of "fan" groups and the emergence of "fandom". Sandvoss defines "a fan" as "a consumer who regularly and emotionally engages with a given popular text or narrative. The texts can be books, TV shows, movies or music, and it also includes popular icons and stars ranging from athletes to musicians to actors". [18] Since the "Xiao Yanzi" Zhao Wei ushered in a superstar era of idols, the "fan" groups have gradually shaped scale and "fandom" appears frequently. Fans are not passive consumers. They "are both consumers and producers; both readers and creators; both involved and sidelined." [19] The reason why they can be called "fans" lies in their loyalty and fanaticism to the target. Such loyalty and fanaticism even leads to part of the play losing its sense of value identification and identity belonging to the target. People can see the huge emotional power and action ability of fans in the extreme case of Yang Lijuan. In the cultural context of fan in *Princess Pearl*, Zhao Wei and other actors represent the symbol of "*Princess Pearl*" image. But it is difficult for the new faces to form the image symbol connotation. What's more, these new actors' interpretation of the role is unsatisfactory with plain acting skills. "The added value of star resources sometimes exceeds the film and television works themselves", the Huayi Brothers Media Group knows the truth very well. It thinks that "Artist resources are the core competitiveness of film and TV industry development and operation", [20] and takes "artist" as one of its three core content industries. The production of *Princess Pearl III* not only failed to convert the previous idol resources into industrial capital, but was also unable to maintain the idol resources. Therefore, the loss of such idol resources leads to the psychological gap and resistance of

"fans", represented by a negative "fandom" in which fans keep comparing the new version with the previous one and magnifying the shortcomings of the new images to exclude them.

Moreover, the play style and character setting of *Princess Pearl III* are quite different from the previous two. In terms of style, *Princess Pearl III* gets rid of the anacreontic and free and easy color of light comedy and follows the family disputes of the main characters after they get married, which is full of grievance, helplessness, schemes, separation, disease and other tragic components and returns to the consistent tragic play style of Chiung Yao. But the market response of Chiung Yao's suffering play has been declining in as early as the 1990s, so it was inevitable for *Princess Pearl III* to follow the style ten years ago. In terms of character setting, *Princess Pearl III* abandoned the "hybridization" style adopted by the first two sessions, and the characters of roles turn simple from rich and mixed. Therefore, "Xiao Yanzi" becomes reckless, impetuous when removed the features of naughtiness and loveliness, and "Zi Wei" without the character of a pure heart and spirit becomes an ordinary woman. In front of the irony of fate and sinister acts of enemies, what they mainly show is passive pathos, with a low degree of "semiotic excess". Although the play is more sophisticated than its two predecessors, and the war scenes with exotic charm are more spectacular, the one that has lost its hybridization of content is incapable of re-culturalization the cross-culture of China and Taiwan, and of generating a dynamic collective experience.

V. CONCLUSION

The historical track of the three sessions of *Princess Pearl* shows not only the specific laws of Chinese film and television culture, but also the development trend of global film and television. Today, a Hollywood film, probably financed by Germany, directed by Luc Besson and starring Nicole Kidman and Jackie Chan, might be shot in Africa and completed in Australia, and perhaps four of the six studios under the "Hollywood" label are no longer American. [21] In the process of globalization, hybridization is not only a means to produce TV content, but also a business strategy. When the cultural industry expands, the hybridization strategy can meet the needs of market restructuring, and the co-production of TV series between regions is a production mode itself.

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