

A Study of the Impact of Social Media on the Popularity of Chinese Film and Television in the Australian Market

Lei Liu

*School of Journalism Communication, Film and Television, Hainan Normal University, Haikou City,
China
frankliu126@126.com*

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Abstract: This study examines the role of social media in shaping the reception and popularity of Chinese film and television content within the Australian market through an in-depth qualitative exploration of audience experiences. Employing semi-structured interviews with ten Australian viewers, this research investigates how audiences discover, interpret, and engage with Chinese media content via digital platforms. The findings reveal that social media functions as a dynamic ecosystem for cultural discovery and negotiation, facilitated through three interconnected mechanisms: algorithmic curation that normalises Chinese content within users' media diets, fan-generated cultural translation that mitigates the effects of cultural discount, and micro-communities that foster authentic engagement beyond traditional marketing approaches. The study identifies persistent challenges in sustained engagement and cultural comprehension, highlighting the complex interplay between platform affordances, audience agency, and cultural barriers. This research contributes to media globalisation studies by providing a nuanced, audience-centric perspective on cross-cultural media consumption and offers practical insights for content producers and distributors seeking to build meaningful connections with international audiences through digital platforms.

1. Introduction

The global media landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the pervasive influence of social media platforms. These digital arenas have redefined the discovery, negotiation,

and consumption of film and television content across international borders. While quantitative studies have documented the growth of Chinese media exports, few have explored the qualitative experiences of international audiences engaging with this content through social media. This paper addresses this gap by examining the nuanced role of social media in shaping the reception and popularity of Chinese film and television within the Australian market, employing an in-depth qualitative methodology to understand audience perspectives and engagement patterns.

2. Literature Review

This literature review synthesises existing scholarly work to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding how social media platforms facilitate audience engagement with Chinese film and television content. It examines three critical domains: the role of social media in contemporary media consumption, the trajectory of Chinese media globalisation, and the transformative power of audience engagement and online communities in shaping media reception. Particular attention is given to research that informs the qualitative, audience-centric approach of the present study.

2.1 Social Media and Audience-Centric Media Consumption

Social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped media consumption patterns from passive viewing to active participation. While quantitative studies have documented the reach of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube^{[1][2]}, emerging research emphasises the need to understand the qualitative experiences of audiences within these digital spaces. The interactive architecture of these platforms—featuring algorithmically curated content, peer-to-peer sharing, and community features—has created new pathways for media discovery that operate outside traditional marketing channels. Contemporary research has begun to explore how these features facilitate not merely visibility but meaningful engagement through personal connection and shared audience experiences^{[3][4]}. This shift from top-down distribution to participatory, audience-driven consumption underscores the need for research that prioritises audience perspectives in understanding international media flows.

2.2 Chinese Media Globalisation and Digital Audiences

The globalisation of Chinese media has evolved from state-supported initiatives to increasingly digital and audience-driven circulation patterns^{[5][6]}. While earlier research focused on institutional frameworks and formal distribution networks, recent scholarship has begun to document the role of digital platforms in expanding the international reach of Chinese cultural products^[7]. This digital expansion has been particularly effective in engaging Western markets such as Australia, where content can bypass traditional gatekeepers and connect directly with audiences. However, much of this research remains focused on macro-level distribution patterns rather than audience experiences.

The current study addresses this gap by examining how these digital distribution channels are experienced and navigated by international viewers, particularly how audiences negotiate cultural distance through digital means.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to conduct an in-depth, exploratory investigation into the role of social media in shaping the popularity of Chinese film and television within the Australian market. Given the complex and nuanced nature of audience perceptions and behaviours, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to generate rich, detailed insights into the underlying motivations, experiences, and cultural negotiations of viewers^[8]. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilised as the sole method of data collection to capture the lived experiences of the target audience.

3.1 Research Design

The study was designed as a qualitative exploratory inquiry. This design was selected to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, without the constraints of predetermined quantitative metrics. The focus was on exploring the "why" and "how" behind social media's impact, prioritising depth, detail, and context over generalisable statistical trends. The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed for the emergence of unexpected themes and a nuanced understanding of the cultural and social processes at play.

3.2 Participant Recruitment and Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit ten (10) Australian residents who actively consume Chinese film and television content, primarily discovered through social media. This sample size aligns with established qualitative research norms for achieving data saturation within a homogenous group^[9].

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, resulting in a comprehensive textual dataset for analysis. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke^{[10][11]}:

- 1) Familiarisation with the data: Repeated reading of transcripts while noting initial observations.
- 2) Generating initial codes: Systematic coding of salient features across the entire dataset.
- 3) Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential overarching themes.
- 4) Reviewing themes: Evaluating the coherence of themes in relation to both coded extracts and the entire dataset, leading to thematic refinement.

5) Defining and naming themes: Conducting a detailed analysis of each theme to ascertain its essence and scope.

6) Producing the report: Selecting illustrative extract examples to finalise the analysis and contextualise findings within the research objectives and existing literature.

This iterative process ensured that the findings were rigorously grounded in participants' experiences and narratives, culminating in the identification of key themes such as "Algorithm as Serendipitous Cultural Gatekeeper," "The Primacy of Authentic Micro-Community Connection," and "Fan Labour as a Bridge Across the Cultural Discount."

4. Analysis and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with ten Australian viewers revealed a complex interplay between social media platforms, content, and audience agency. The findings demonstrate how social media functions not merely as a promotional channel but as a dynamic ecosystem for cultural discovery, negotiation, and community formation. Three central themes emerged from the data, detailing the mechanisms of engagement and the persistent challenges therein.

4.1 Theme 1: The Algorithm as a Serendipitous Cultural Gatekeeper

A dominant finding was the significant role of platform algorithms, particularly those of TikTok and YouTube, as the primary and often unintentional gateway to Chinese media. Discovery was consistently described as a passive, algorithm-driven experience rather than an active search.

"It just appeared on my page": Nearly all participants recounted their first exposure to a Chinese drama or film as a serendipitous event. They described scrolling through their feeds and encountering compelling clips—a visually striking scene from a Chinese fantasy drama, or a captivating fight sequence. This algorithmically curated discovery normalised Chinese content within their daily media consumption, embedding it alongside domestic and other international offerings.

From Clip to Commitment: The power of these clips lay in their ability to function as compelling micro-narratives. Participants observed that a well-edited 30-second clip could effectively establish a show's aesthetic, emotional tone, and core conflict, serving as a highly effective hook. As P4 noted, "One does not need to understand the language to be impressed by the visuals... that initial clip from *Nirvana in Fire* was so beautiful and intriguing, I had to find out what it was." This illustrates a shift from traditional marketing to an organic, content-led discovery process, where the algorithm serves as the initial—and most influential—cultural curator.

4.2 Theme 2: Mitigating the Cultural Discount: Fan Labour as a Translation Bridge

While algorithms facilitated discovery, the interviews confirmed that the cultural discount

remains a significant barrier to comprehension and sustained engagement. However, the data indicate that this discount is not a fixed value but is actively mitigated by the efforts of online fan communities.

The Challenge of Nuance: Participants openly discussed points of disengagement, most frequently related to unfamiliar historical references, complex social hierarchies, or culturally specific humour that was not explained within the narrative. P7 stated, "I abandoned *Story of Yanxi Palace* twice because I was entirely confused by the palace ranks and the dynamics of who was plotting against whom. It was frustrating."

The Critical Role of Fan-Created Explanatory Content: The primary mechanism for overcoming this barrier was the availability of supplementary content generated by fans. Participants reported relying extensively on resources produced by international fan communities:

"I rely on the comment section": Many described consulting comments beneath YouTube or TikTok clips, where other viewers frequently provided crucial contextual information.

Seeking Out Explainers: They actively sought dedicated fan videos on YouTube ("I watch 'Chinese drama explainer' channels before starting a new historical show" - P2) and utilised fan-maintained wikis and forums to understand character motivations and plot points. This fan labour effectively functions as a form of cultural translation, bridging the gap and enabling international audiences to access and appreciate the depth of the content, thereby reducing the cultural discount.

4.3 Theme 3: Authenticity and Niche Communities Over Broadcast Marketing

The interviews revealed a strong distrust of traditional, corporate-style marketing and a pronounced preference for authentic, community-driven engagement. This underscores a fundamental shift in how trust and interest are cultivated.

The Power of Micro-Influencers and Peer Recommendations: Participants distinguished clearly between posts from official studio accounts and those from individual creators. Content from micro-influencers or fellow fans within niche online communities (e.g., specific Facebook groups or Subreddits) was perceived as more genuine and trustworthy. P9 explained, "If a large account posts about a show, it feels like an advertisement. However, if someone in my Chinese drama group shares a post enthusiastically discussing it, including their own screenshots and thoughts, I perceive it as a genuine recommendation. I am more likely to explore that content."

The Limitation of Viral Trends: Although participants engaged with viral trends (e.g., TikTok duet challenges), they regarded them as transient. The excitement generated was perceived as superficial unless supported by an authentic community. P5 noted, "Those challenges are fun for a day, but they don't make me care about the characters. For that, I need to talk to other people who are also invested." This suggests that while viral marketing can generate initial awareness, sustained, authentic dialogue within smaller communities is essential for fostering long-term engagement and

viewer loyalty.

4.4 Discussion: Towards a Community-Centric Model of Cross-Cultural Promotion

The findings from this qualitative study suggest a revised framework for understanding the popularity of Chinese media in international markets such as Australia. This model shifts from a top-down diffusion approach to a community-mediated paradigm.

Within this framework, social media platforms serve as the infrastructure for content discovery (through algorithms) and as tools for cultural negotiation (via community features). However, the primary drivers of sustained popularity are the international fan communities themselves. These communities do not merely consume content; they actively curate it through sharing and recommendations, facilitate understanding through explanatory discussions, and sustain engagement through ongoing communal interaction.

The implications for content producers and distributors are evident. Success is less contingent upon large-scale, high-budget promotional campaigns and more reliant on strategically supporting and engaging with these organic online communities. Potential strategies could include officially endorsing fan subtitling groups, providing creators with early access to trailers for reaction videos, or producing official supplementary materials that elucidate cultural context. By nurturing rather than attempting to control the community ecosystem, marketers can more effectively mitigate the cultural discount and cultivate enduring appeal among Australian audiences.

5. Research Contributions

This qualitative study, through its in-depth exploration of Australian viewers' lived experiences, is expected to make significant and nuanced contributions to both academic scholarship and industry practice. By prioritising the voices and subjective perceptions of the audience, the research provides rich insights that quantitative metrics alone cannot reveal, offering a more comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural media engagement in the digital age.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in its qualitative elaboration and refinement of existing models of cultural diffusion and media consumption. By moving beyond top-down frameworks, this research presents a detailed, audience-centric perspective that highlights the nuanced human factors underlying the data. Specifically, the findings contribute to theory by:

Elucidating the Lived Experience of Algorithmic Discovery: While algorithms are often discussed in abstract, technical terms, this research provides a qualitative narrative of how users experience them in practice. It positions algorithms not as impersonal forces but as serendipitous cultural gatekeepers that actively, albeit unintentionally, shape cultural tastes and normalise foreign

content within personal media consumption. This personifies a key mechanism of cultural globalisation in the digital era.

Theorising Fan Labour as a Mitigating Factor for Cultural Discount: The study offers empirical, qualitative evidence that cultural discount is not a static barrier but a dynamic challenge that audiences actively work to overcome. It formally theorises the role of international online communities and their explanatory content (videos, comments, wiki entries) as a form of digital fan labour that functions as a bridge for cultural translation. This reframes the cultural discount from a fixed economic concept to a negotiable cultural challenge mitigated by community engagement.

Articulating a Model of Authenticity-Based Engagement: The research validates and expands upon concepts of source credibility and parasocial interaction by demonstrating, through audience testimony, a clear preference for micro-community authenticity over macro-influencer reach. It contributes a nuanced understanding of how trust is established in cross-cultural contexts, highlighting that perceived authenticity and cultural proximity within niche communities are more significant drivers of engagement than the broadcast messaging of global celebrities or official studios.

5.2 Practical Implications

For producers, distributors, and marketers of Chinese film and television targeting international audiences, this research provides empirically grounded, evidence-based guidance derived directly from audience insights. The practical implications are threefold:

Shift from Influencer Marketing to Community Partnerships: The findings advocate for a strategic reorientation. Rather than investing primarily in influencers with large follower counts, resources should be allocated towards collaborating with and supporting niche online communities (e.g., dedicated Facebook groups, or fan-operated YouTube channels). This includes providing exclusive content, facilitating question-and-answer sessions with cast members, and formally acknowledging their critical role in cultural mediation. Such an approach fosters genuine trust and promotes more meaningful, sustained engagement.

Optimise Content for Algorithmic and Community Sharing: The study highlights that the most effective promotional content is not conventional trailers but self-contained, visually compelling clips tailored for platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Marketing efforts should prioritise creating shareable content that requires minimal contextual knowledge, thereby serving as effective stimuli for algorithmic promotion and subsequent community discussion and exploration.

Invest in Official Cultural Context Resources: To mitigate the cultural discount, distributors should proactively develop and disseminate official supplementary materials. These may include concise "cultural explainer" videos, companion podcasts discussing historical contexts, or integrated platform features such as pop-up "Trivia" annotations during streaming. By formally addressing the role currently fulfilled by fan-generated content, studios can reduce barriers to entry for new

audiences, demonstrate cultural sensitivity, and enhance viewer retention and satisfaction.

6. Conclusion

This study has employed in-depth qualitative interviews to examine the multifaceted role of social media in shaping the popularity of Chinese film and television within the Australian market. Through detailed analysis of participant experiences, the research provides valuable insights into how digital platforms function as critical intermediaries in cross-cultural media consumption. The findings demonstrate that social media platforms, particularly TikTok and YouTube, operate as dynamic ecosystems that facilitate discovery, enable cultural negotiation, and foster community engagement around Chinese media content. This study highlights that in the digital age, social media has fundamentally altered the pathways for cross-cultural media consumption. For Chinese film and television to achieve sustained success in Australia and similar markets, content producers and distributors must develop a nuanced understanding of these digital ecosystems. Success will depend on strategies that extend beyond viral marketing to foster genuine community engagement, support cultural translation efforts, and adapt continuously to the evolving dynamics of social media platforms. Future research should build on these qualitative insights through mixed-methods approaches that incorporate behavioural data, examine longitudinal engagement patterns, and compare these findings across different international markets.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that sustainable cultural appeal in the digital era is achieved through the strategic navigation of social media's connective framework—where algorithms, communities, and content converge to create new opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and media appreciation.

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