

The Study of Highest-Rated Chinese Films (2015–2025) in Thailand

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Abstract

This study is guided by three core objectives. 1) To analyze the ten most popular Chinese films in Thailand using a formalist-based, five-dimensional framework of theme, plot, character, symbol, and music, while integrating cultural elements; 2) To investigate Thai audiences' perceptions and viewing preferences regarding Chinese films through a survey and empirical analysis; 3) To propose a new cinematic adaptation model designed to address the unique characteristics of the Thai film market. A mixed-methods approach was employed, grounded in Metz semiotics, cinematic formalism, and cultural globalization theory. The analysis encompassed ten high-grossing, culturally significant Chinese films. Data were collected via a survey of 100 Thai viewers (analyzed using SPSS) and in-depth interviews with five film industry practitioners. The findings resulted in the "Thai Audience Preference Model," which posits that appeal is driven by a synergy of the following elements: culturally familiar visual elements, emotionally universal characters, themes of romance or LGBT, plots with strong dramatic tension, and soundtracks that effectively incorporate traditional instruments. The study identifies religion and food as the most resonant cultural symbols. It concludes that China's international film communication should shift from pure "output" to strategic "adaptation".

Keywords: Chinese Films in Thailand, Chinese Culture, Thai Audience

Introduction

The dissemination of Chinese films in Thailand has become a significant case study in cross-cultural research, integrating market expansion, cultural adaptation, and policy support. Since entering the Thai market via videotapes in the 1980s, Chinese films have transitioned from theatrical releases to digital platforms. Thai audiences' acceptance stems from cultural affinity and the dual impetus of the new media ecosystem and official cooperation mechanisms. However, cultural cognitive differences and genre imbalances remain major challenges. Past studies have focused on market trends and policy frameworks, with limited systematic examination of the specific cultural elements

and cinematic features that resonate with Thai audiences at the textual level. Furthermore, audience insights have not been translated into concrete, data-driven adaptation strategies for the Thai market. To address these gaps, this study pursues three objectives. By integrating formalist film analysis with empirical audience investigation, this study contributes to cross-cultural film reception literature through an audience-centered analytical framework and offers practical guidance for content localization in the Thai film market.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the ten most popular Chinese films in Thailand using a formalist-based, five-dimensional framework (theme, plot, character, symbol, and music) while integrating cultural elements.
2. To investigate Thai audiences' perceptions and viewing preferences regarding Chinese films through a survey and empirical analysis.
3. To propose a new cinematic adaptation model designed to address the unique characteristics of the Thai film market, grounded in the synthesis of textual analysis and audience data.

Literature Review

1. The History of Chinese Film Dissemination in Thailand

The circulation of Chinese films in Thailand has a long history, sustained through cultural ties with the ethnic Chinese community functioning as a crucial cultural intermediary (Skinner, 1957; Ang, 2001). This study defines "Chinese films" as films originating from Mainland China, including Mandarin-language productions and co-productions where Mainland China is the primary production entity. This cultural affinity drives audience acceptance. Buddhist themes facilitate resonance with Thai viewers, while Confucian family values have proven widely relatable. Chinese films entered the Thai market as early as the post-World War II era, initially through Chinatown theaters and later via videotapes in the 1980s, with wuxia and martial arts films achieving notable popularity (Chaiworaporn, 2015).

Action films have been particularly effective in cross-cultural transmission due to their reliance on visual spectacle, resulting in a lower "cultural discount" (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988). Existing studies provide a foundational understanding of dissemination patterns but predominantly examine Chinese films at the macro-level, lacking systematic investigation into which thematic, narrative, and symbolic elements drive Thai preferences at the textual level. This study addresses this gap through formalist textual analysis of the ten most popular Chinese films in Thailand.

2. New Media Empowerment and Policy Synergy

The dissemination ecosystem has been fundamentally reshaped by digital streaming platforms adopting localization strategies- multilingual subtitles, dubbing, and adaptive marketing (Lobato, 2019; Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). Tencent's WeTV targets Southeast Asian audiences through Thai-language interfaces and localized content (Media Partners Asia, 2023). Fan-based subtitle communities have facilitated cross-border cultural flows (Lee, 2011). These digital and informal channels directly influence consumption trends through real-time access, immediate audience feedback, and accelerated genre circulation. Government-led initiatives- such as the China-ASEAN Film Culture Week and the China-Thailand Joint Statement- have formalized bilateral film collaboration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Such policy frameworks create an environment conducive to expanded distribution. However, existing literature on new media and policy has focused on macro-level industrial transformation without linking these forces to concrete audience preferences. This study bridges this gap by investigating how digital consumption patterns and policy-supported visibility interact with audience reception at the empirical level.

3. Theoretical Foundations

This study draws on three interconnected theoretical perspectives. Metz's film semiotics (1974) decodes how cinematic signs- from shots to narrative structures- generate culturally legible meanings. Cinematic formalism (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010) supplies the systematic method for analyzing the five film elements as interdependent components of an integrated formal system. Cultural globalization theory, particularly Appadurai's (1996) concept of "mediascapes" and cultural hybridization, frames the processes through which Chinese films are adapted, localized, and reinterpreted within the Thai cultural context. These three lenses collectively bridge textual analysis, audience reception, and transnational cultural flows, directly informing the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design.

Research Framework

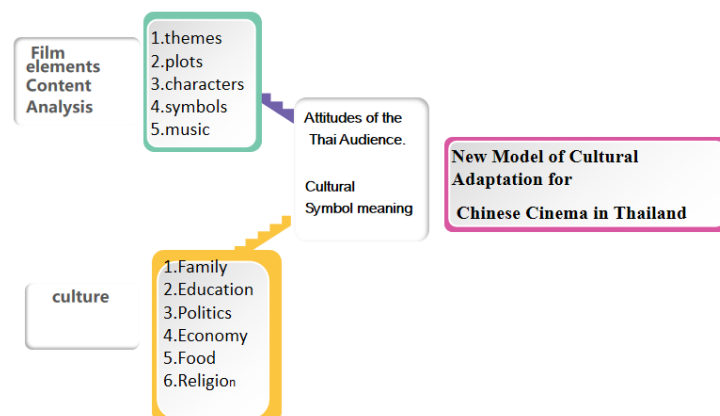


Figure 1. Study framework for the research

The arrows indicate that the five film elements are analyzed through the lens of the six cultural aspects, which together shape Thai audience preferences.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. This design was chosen over other approaches because it enables findings from the qualitative textual analysis to directly inform the quantitative survey instrument, ensuring measured variables are grounded in actual film content features (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The research comprises three phases:

1. Qualitative Textual Analysis. This phase conducts a formalist analysis of the ten most commercially successful Chinese films in the Thai market, systematically examining theme, plot, character, symbol, and music to identify and model their effective content features.

2. Quantitative Audience Survey. This phase measures audience viewing behaviors, overall attitudes, and specific preferences towards key cultural dimensions.

3. Qualitative Expert Interviews. This phase involves interviews with Thai film and cultural professionals to provide in-depth explanations for the quantitative findings.

2. Population and Sample

The target population comprises Thai nationals aged 18 years and above who have viewed at least one Chinese film within the preceding 12 months. The sample ($n = 100$) was drawn using purposive sampling. One hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed, yielding 100 valid responses after excluding incomplete or ineligible submissions, resulting in a valid response rate of 66.7%. The sample consisted of 58 female (58%) and 42 male (42%) respondents, with a mean age of 27.4 years ($SD = 6.8$).

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with five Thai film and cultural experts. The experts were purposively selected based on: 1) a minimum of five years of professional experience in the Thai film or cultural industries, and 2) direct involvement in film production, distribution, criticism, or cultural policy.

3. Research Instruments and Validation

The questionnaire was developed specifically for this study to measure film preferences and cultural perceptions. "Viewing habits" was operationally defined as frequency, platform, and genre preferences in consuming Chinese films (sample item: "How often do you watch Chinese films per month?"). "Cultural perceptions" was defined as the degree to which respondents resonate with specific cultural elements-language, religion, food, customs, values, and aesthetics-present in Chinese films (sample item: "To what extent do you agree that Buddhist elements in Chinese films enhance your viewing experience?").

The questionnaire comprised four sections: demographics, viewing habits, cultural perceptions, and open-ended feedback. Three experts in cross-cultural film studies reviewed the tool to ensure content validity (Brace, 2018; Turner & Carlson, 2003). A pilot test ($n = 30$) and formal survey ($n = 100$) demonstrated high scale reliability. Internal consistency for each sub-dimension was: viewing habits, $\alpha = 0.82$; cultural perceptions, $\alpha = 0.88$; attitudes toward Chinese films, $\alpha = 0.85$. The overall composite reliability was $\alpha = 0.91$ (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The survey was administered via wenjuan.com.

4. Film Selection Criteria

The ten films were selected based on: (1) ranking among the top-grossing Chinese films in Thai theaters for their respective release years, and (2) high viewership metrics on major streaming platforms in Thailand (e.g., WeTV, iQIYI, Netflix Thailand). Where multiple versions existed, the theatrical release version was selected for analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected via questionnaires distributed through wenjuan.com and interviews via online video conferencing. The questionnaire remained open for four weeks, and each expert interview lasted 45-60 minutes, audio-recorded with informed consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26.0). Descriptive statistics summarized demographics and viewing habits. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and correlation analyses, examined associations between variables (Field, 2013). The statistical significance threshold was set at $p < .05$. Independent variables included demographics and viewing habits; dependent variables included cultural perception scores and genre preferences.

Qualitative data employed thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Two researchers independently coded the data, with intercoder reliability ensured through iterative discussions (Nowell et al., 2017). NVivo 12 facilitated code organization.

Quantitative and qualitative results were integrated through triangulation: significant correlations were cross-referenced with qualitative themes to determine convergent or divergent explanations. This integration directly informed the development of the "Thai Audience Preference Model," ensuring each component was supported by both statistical evidence and qualitative insights.

Results

Table 1 Analysis of Factors in Popular Chinese Films

FILM TITLE	THEMES	PLOTS	CHARACTERS	SYMBOLS	MUSIC
Monster Hunt1	Family, Kinship, Personal Growth	A pregnant man builds family-like ties with the monster	A reflection of human society.	Wuba's Adorably Designed	Electronic sounds traditional ethnic instruments
Wolf Warrior	Contemporary Construction of Nationalist Consciousness	Ex-special forces soldier conducting evacuation missions in Africa	Leng Feng embodies the modern archetype of Chinese heroism	National flag, scar, African ruins, Red Cross	A blend of Western orchestral music, traditional Chinese elements
IP MAN	Racism, Confucian, Strength-based dignity	Father-son mission, Nationalism/ family duality	cultural agents, guardian, innovator, collective identity	traditional Chinese instruments	Chinatown lanterns/Mid- Autumn
The Wandering Earth	Collectivism and Cooperation, with Homeland Complex	Civilizational Preservation through Global Collaboration and Ethos of Sacrifice	Astronaut as Ethical Embodiment of "Sacrificing Life for Righteousness	Planetary Engines, Underground Cities, MOSS, Ice-Entombed Landmarks	Symphonic Score × Electronic Soundscape
NeZha	I am the master of my own fate	Defying Heavenly Thunder and Subverting Destiny	Nezha: Duality of Demonic Nature and Humanity / Ao Bing: From Spirit Pearl to Rebel	Primordial Chaos Pearl / Shanhe Sheji Tu	Heaven-Made Curse Symphonic Fusion of Ethnic Instruments
Hi, Mom	Advocating Cherishing the Present Moment	Time-Space Transmigration with Mother-Daughter Role Reversal	Li Huanying: Deconstructing Traditional Matriarchal Archetypes	Faded Factory Jumpsuits × Enamel Cups	Disco × Symphonic Juxtaposition
Detective Chinatown3	Genre-Blurring Fusion of Comedy and Suspense	Locked-Room Murder Mystery × Whodunit Narrative	Qin Feng: Prodigal / Tang Ren: Street- Smart Pragmatism	Semiotic Vortex of Modernist Alienation	Nostalgic Gold- Remix with Subversive Audio
Creation of The Gods I : Kingdom of Storms	Clash of Power vs. Cosmic Destiny	King Zhou's Bewitchment by Daji: Tyranny Unleashed	Yin Shou: The Theocratic Tyrant, Daji: Shapeshifting Fox-Spirit	Nine Tripods, Shattered Jade Pendant	Ethnic Instrumental Soundscape
Hidden Blade	voids nominal existence through righteous anonymity	Action-Packed Spy Thriller	Personal sacrifice for the collective in a special era.	Drunken Shrimp, Lamb, Cement Entombed Laborer	Electronic sounds traditional ethnic instruments
You Only Live Once	personal growth, love, family,	a stay-at-home slacker, finds self- redemption through boxing training	Du Leying: The Transformation from People-Pleaser to Independent Subject	Overweight physique, boxing gloves	Urban & Sports Rhythm Fusion

The ten films were selected based on two criteria: (1) ranking among the top-grossing Chinese films in Thai theaters, and (2) high viewership on major streaming platforms in Thailand. The

study distinguishes between market popularity-defined by box office and streaming metrics—and audience preference, defined as viewers' self-reported liking measured through the survey.

Based on the data analysis, Thai audiences exhibit clear preferences for fantasy-action hybrids and family-themed emotional dramas. Plots driven by strong conflicts with universal emotions are most resonant; characters with heroic growth arcs or complex emotional transformations are particularly appealing.

This reception is rooted in cultural affinity (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). Cross-cultural transmission is facilitated through visual reinterpretation of traditional symbols and modernized

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	52	52%
	Male	48	48%
Age group	18–28 years	59	59%
	29–44 years	28	28%
	45–60 years	13	13%
Education	Bachelor's degree	59	59%
	Master's degree	21	21%
	Doctoral degree	2	2%
	Below undergraduate level	18	18%

adaptation of traditional music.

Table 2 Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 100)

Over half of the respondents were female (52%), and the largest group consisted of those aged 18–28 (59%) with a bachelor's degree. The mean age was 27.4 years (SD = 6.8).

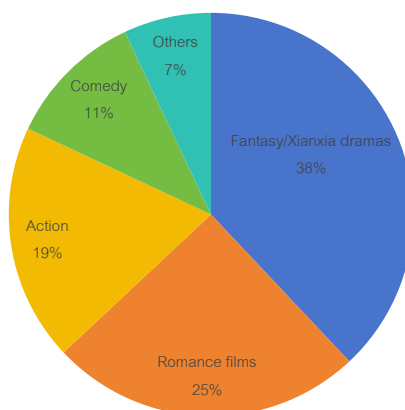


Figure 2 Favorite Genres of Chinese Films Among Thai Audiences

The top three genres are Fantasy/Xianxia (38%), Romance (25%), and Action (19%)

Table 3 Frequency of Watching Chinese Films

FREQUENCY	ONCE A YEAR	ONCE A MONTH	2-5 TIMES A MONTH	>5 TIMES A MONTH	DEPEND ON OCCASION
PERCENTAGE	29%	14%	9%	2%	46%

As shown in Table 3, nearly half (46%) watches based on popular releases.

Table 4 The Extent of Respondents' Preference

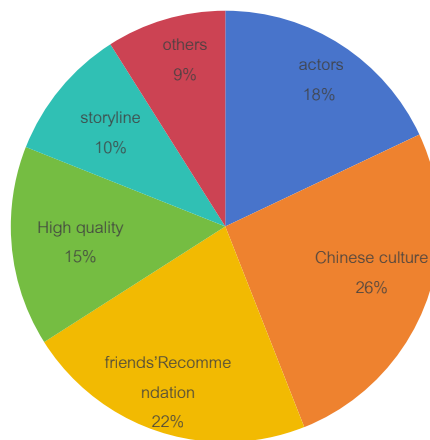
Level	STRONGLY LIKE	LIKE	NEUTRAL	DISLIKE	STRONGLY DISLIKE
PERCENTAGE	5%	55%	27%	10%	3%

The majority (60%) like or strongly like watching Chinese films.

Table 5 The way Thai Audiences First Encountered Chinese Films

FREQUENCY	FRIENDS' COMMENDATION	INTERNET	TELEVISION	CINEMA	OTHERS
PERCENTAGE	49%	39%	7%	4%	1%

New media has significantly replaced traditional media. In Thailand, 47% of viewers now consume content via streaming platforms (Nielsen Thailand, 2024). Social media remained the dominant channel with 70% usage; Line (78%) and Facebook (68%) were most popular, followed by TikTok (29%) and Instagram (21%) (Marketbuzz, 2024). Acceptance of social networks is influenced by social, hedonic, fashion, and cognitive motivations. These patterns align with findings that social media serves multiple functions for the majority of the Thai population (Content Shifu, YouGov Thailand, & Adapter, 2024).

**Figure 3** Reasons for Continued Viewership of Chinese Films Among Thai Audiences

The most common reason is "interest in Chinese culture" (26%).

Regarding the first research question—how do Thai audiences watch Chinese films?

Thai audiences are attracted by diverse cultural elements. They are introduced through friend recommendations, but viewing frequency remains low. The main audience-young women favoring xianxia and romance genres-perceives a unique "Chinese flavor." Dissemination relies heavily on word of mouth, though new media has enabled active selection of international content.

This study frames these phenomena within cultural globalization theory (Appadurai, 1996). Thai audiences watch Chinese films out of cultural curiosity and due to aesthetic familiarity and emotional resonance derived from cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007).

Regarding the second research question-what constitutes the appeal of Chinese films in the Thai market?

Chinese films serve as vehicles for disseminating Chinese culture through visual symbols, costumes, spatial aesthetics, and East Asian artistic conception.

Regarding the third research question-what model of Chinese films do Thai audiences prefer?

Table 6 Thai Audience Preference Model: Synthesis of Key Findings

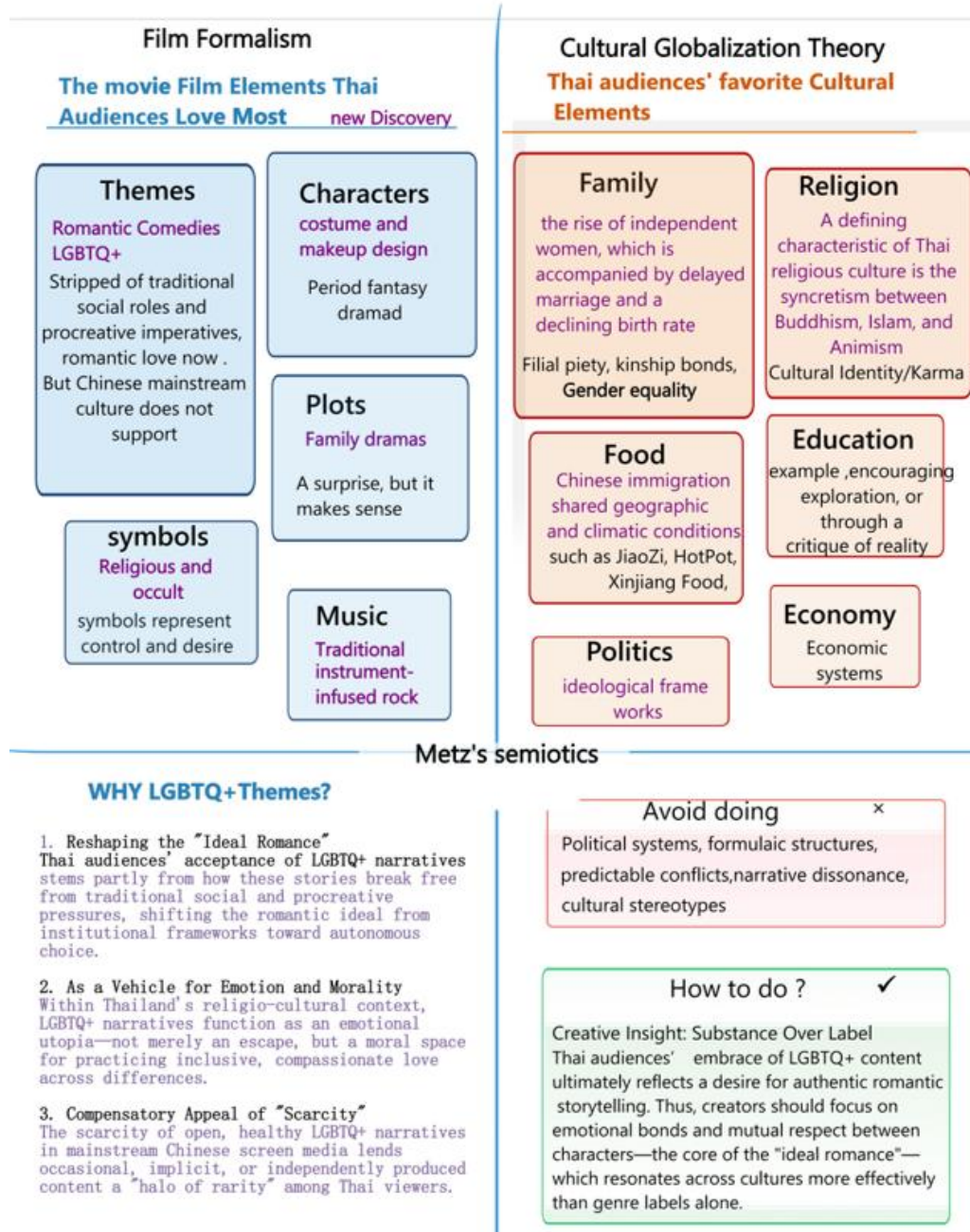
Model Component	Key Findings	Data Source
Preferred Themes	Fantasy/Xianxia (38%), Romance (25%), Action (19%)	Survey; Interviews
Preferred Cultural Symbols	Religious/spiritual imagery, food symbolism	Survey; Interviews
Preferred Character Types	Heroic growth arcs, complex emotional transformations	Textual analysis; Survey
Preferred Narrative Structures	Strong conflict-driven plots with universal emotions	Textual analysis; Survey
Preferred Music Styles	Traditional ethnic instruments fused with modern elements	Textual analysis; Survey
Key Demographic Trends	Female viewers favor relationship-centric narratives; younger viewers prefer contemporary themes	Survey ($\chi^2 = 12.34-18.67$, $p < .05$)

This model was derived through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings.

Conclusion and Discussion

The pattern is summarized in the table below:

New Model of Cultural Adaptation for Chinese Cinema in Thailand



Three core dimensions—themes, religious/spiritual representations, and food symbolism—are the strongest predictors of positive audience attitudes. These findings address the three research objectives: 1) analyzing film models, 2) investigating audience attitudes, and 3) proposing a cinematic adaptation model.

First, younger viewers increasingly favor contemporary social value narratives, including LGBTQ+ themes. In Thailand, BL dramas have become mainstream since 2010 (dela Cruz, 2025). Thailand's same-sex marriage legalization in 2025 further normalizes queer representation, contrasting with China's regulatory constraints (Synergy Journal, 2026). Over 60% of respondents preferred "modern, inclusive, and emotionally expressive" themes; among younger viewers, the preference rate was 68% vs. 33% for older viewers ($\chi^2 = 14.52$, $p < .01$). Qualitative findings further reveal three mechanisms: 1) LGBTQ+ narratives reshape the "ideal romance" by shifting romantic ideals from institutional frameworks toward autonomous choice, free from traditional procreative pressures; 2) within Thailand's religio-cultural context, these narratives function as an emotional utopia—a moral space for practicing inclusive, compassionate love; and 3) the scarcity of open LGBTQ+ narratives in mainstream Chinese cinema lends such content a "halo of rarity" among Thai viewers, enhancing its compensatory appeal.

Second, religious and spiritual symbols serve as a primary source of cultural affinity, supporting cultural proximity theory (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). Audiences perceive spiritual motifs as culturally "adjacent" rather than "foreign." This was significantly correlated with positive evaluations ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), extending cultural proximity theory by demonstrating spiritual imagery as a measurable dimension independent of linguistic or geographical factors. The syncretism between Buddhism, Islam, and Animism in Thai religious culture provides a receptive framework for Chinese films' spiritual and mythological symbols, particularly concepts of karma, reincarnation, and deities.

Third, food culture shapes emotional attachment. Exposure to food imagery correlated with higher cultural affinity scores ($r = .38$, $p < .001$). Food scenes function as symbolic bridges at the sensory level. Shared culinary traditions—owing to Chinese immigration and comparable geographic and climatic conditions—render dishes such as dumplings, hot pot, and Xinjiang cuisine both culturally familiar and sensorially immediate for Thai audiences.

Demographic trends show younger viewers favor contemporary identity narratives, while older audiences remain attached to traditional dramas ($\chi^2 = 18.67$, $p < .01$). Female viewers engage more with emotionally driven narratives ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, $p < .05$).

The "Thai Audience Preference Model" integrates themes, spirituality, and food as synergistic dimensions. The cinematic adaptation model recommends strategically incorporating spiritual imagery to establish cultural proximity, food scenes to build emotional connection, and themes balancing universal emotional appeal with contemporary social values. To operationalize this model, producers should prioritize authentic romantic storytelling focused on emotional bonds and mutual respect—the core of "ideal romance" that resonates across cultures. Creative approaches should avoid political systems, formulaic structures, predictable conflicts, narrative dissonance, and cultural stereotypes. Instead, productions should leverage the substantive emotional content of

LGBTQ+ narratives rather than genre labels alone, while embedding culturally resonant symbols to reduce interpretive friction and stimulate sensory engagement among Thai viewers.

Limitations

The sample size ($n = 100$) is modest, with over half of the respondents being female (52%) and the largest group aged 18–28 with a bachelor's degree (59%). The film selection was limited to ten Mainland Chinese films. The survey instrument has not been validated across multiple populations.

Research Suggestions

For practical application, producers should incorporate themes, spirituality, and food as an integrated content design system. Future research should expand the sample with representative stratification, employ longitudinal designs, test the model across other Southeast Asian markets, and include co-productions and regional Chinese-language cinema.

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