

Chinese Remake of Korean Films: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

This paper conducts an in-depth research and analysis on the challenges and dilemmas faced during the process of Chinese remake of Korean film, as well as the strategies to address these issues. Firstly, the paper reviews the historical development of cooperation between the Chinese and South Korean film industries, noting the rapid growth of the Chinese film industry around 2005 and the increasing collaboration with South Korea. However, with the changing times and the impact of political events, cooperation between the Chinese and South Korean film industries has gradually been restricted, leading to a shift towards transnational remakes. Subsequently, the paper explores the quality issues of Chinese remake of Korean film, analyzing aspects such as script adaptation, character development, and plot treatment. Particularly, focusing on the remake case of *Sunny*, it points out the shortcomings of Chinese remakes in retaining the essence of the original work, emotional resonance, and innovation. Finally, the paper proposes strategies to address these issues, including suggestions on emotional resonance and theme preservation, flexible plot adaptation and character development, and the incorporation of regional characteristics and innovative elements. By effectively applying these strategies, the quality and market performance of remake productions can be improved, achieving a win-win situation for both commercial and artistic endeavors.

Keywords: Chinese remake of Korean films, script adaptation, remake strategies

1. Introduction

In the Chinese Spring Festival box office of 2024, the film *You Only Live Once* garnered attention with a box office revenue of nearly 3.5 billion RMB. This film is a remake of the Japanese movie *100 Yen Love*. Interestingly, in recent years, China has seen an increasing number of films achieving high box office revenues through transnational remakes. In 2023 alone, remakes earned over 5 billion RMB in China (Pipi Films,

2023). Remake films such as *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, *Too Cool To Kill*, *Sheep Without A Shepherd*, and *Lost in the stars* have created box office miracles and received critical acclaim. Zhang Jingchao (2023) argues that Chinese cinema now possesses mature conditions for remakes.

However, not all remake films achieve outstanding box office results and critical acclaim. According to information from the 1905 Film Network (2023), most remake films are not

as well-received as the originals, with *Sunny Sister* being a representative example. Although the Chinese version of *Hachiko* received critical acclaim and achieved a box office revenue of 286 million RMB, it still pales in comparison to the original work. While the Chinese film market does not reject remake films, many producers are still searching for a suitable approach to remaking films. Compared to the mature remakes in Hollywood, Chinese film remakes still have a long way to go. Academic research related to this area is also urgently needed to fill the gaps.

2. The Current Situation of Chinese Remakes of Korean Films

What is a remake film? Larke-Walsh (2021) defines a remake as a film, television series, video game, song, or similar form of entertainment that is based upon and retells the story of an earlier production in the same medium — for example, a “new version of an existing film”. In China, Korean films have been remade the most, while also contributing the most to the production of poorly received remake films. From 2012’s *Bunshinsaba* to 2023’s *Who’s the Suspect*, there have been over 20 remake films. According to ratings on the Chinese Douban website (2024) (Refer to Table 1), all remake films have received poorer reviews than the original Korean films, with the majority being labeled as poor-quality films. Among the relatively better ones, the highest rating is only 6.4 for *The Big Shot*, barely passing the mark of acceptability.

Table 1.

Remake Film Title	Rating	Original Film Rating
<i>Bunshinsaba</i> 2012	4.7	6.3
<i>A Wedding Invitation</i> 2013	5.8	7.5
<i>Ex-Files 2: The Backup Strikes Back</i> 2015	5.2	5.6
<i>The Witness</i> 2015	6.3	7.5
<i>Let’s get married</i> 2015	5.9	6.4
<i>Papa</i> 2016	5.6	6.7
<i>My New Sassy Girl</i> 2016	3.8	8.5
<i>Honeymoon Hotel</i> 2016	3.5	8.6
<i>Scandal Maker</i> 2016	4.2	7.9

<i>Beautiful Accident</i> 2017	5.5	7.4
<i>Peace Breaker</i> 2017	6.1	8.0
<i>The Big Shot</i> 2019	6.4	7.7
<i>The Last Wish</i> 2019	5.0	7.5
<i>The Guilty Ones</i> 2019	5.5	8.2
<i>Warm Hug</i> 2020	5.2	7.4
<i>My Love</i> 2021	4.7	7.3
<i>Sunny Sister</i> 2021	4.4	8.8
<i>Remember Me</i> 2023	6.3	8.5
<i>Who’s the Suspect</i> 2023	5.8	7.5

Although the original films have many masterpieces that break through the 8-point mark, it is thought-provoking that every remake has failed without exception. Among them, original Korean films *Sunny* ranks 158th in all films on Douban website, representing its position and popularity among Chinese audiences, and it has received a high rating of 8.8 points. However, its remake only received 4.4 points, unquestionably indicating its low quality.

Unlike conventional filmmaking, the process of film remakes primarily emphasizes commercial profits. However, the reality is that the box office performance of most works has also disappointed distribution companies (Ren, M & Zhang, J, 2024). Clearly, the film producers have failed to achieve their original goals.

3. Why China Prefers to Remake Korean Films

Despite the prevalence of poor-quality films and the high risks involved, Korean films remain the top choice for remakes in China. According to Wang Xixi (2022), an analysis of films released in the mainland Chinese market from 2010 to the present shows that out of a total of 49 remakes of foreign films, 26 are remakes of Korean films. Moreover, the share of remakes originating from Korean films has been continuously increasing over the past decade. From 2018 to 2021, for instance, apart from 7 domestically produced films remade from works of other countries such as Italy, there were 13 remakes derived from Korean films.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, historical disputes, the South Korea-U.S. alliance, trade frictions, China-North Korean relations, and the North Korean nuclear issue have not

hindered the two countries' leapfrog development in the tide of the times. The progression of their relationship can be traced from the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992 to the comprehensive partnership in 2003, strategic partnership in 2008, deepening and enriching the strategic partnership in 2014, and further deepening and developing the strategic partnership in 2019. The exchange of films between the two countries is inevitably influenced by international political relations. However, both countries have consistently found ways to mitigate conflicts, strengthen communication, and focus on the stability of bilateral relations.

The specific forms of cooperation and exchange between China and South Korea in the film industry can be divided into six categories: actor participation, overseas shooting locations, labor services, directorial production, digital effects collaboration, and financial investment. Around 2005, with the rapid development of the Chinese film industry, cooperation between China and South Korea strengthened continuously, resulting in films such as *The Seven Swords*, *The Myth*, *The Promise*, and *Assembly*. Starting from 2009, a batch of films with joint Chinese and South Korean investment and production emerged, such as *My Ex-Wife's Wedding*, *Late Autumn*, *Detective Dee: The Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, and *1942*. By 2013, China-South Korea film cooperation entered a period of prosperity, giving rise to excellent co-produced films like *Miss Granny*. However, with the occurrence of the THAAD incident and the progression of China-South Korea relations, the introduction of *Korean ban* policies forced a transformation in China-South Korea film cooperation. Both sides shifted their strategy to purchasing rights to each other's excellent films and engaging in cross-border remakes. Films such as *A Wonderful Accident*, *The Last Wish*, *Warm Hug* were remakes of South Korean films, while *Heart Blackened* and *Believer* were remakes of Chinese films.

Against this historical backdrop, Chinese cinema still favors remaking Korean films, primarily for the following three reasons:

Firstly, the film genres preferred by the Chinese film market align closely with those in which Korean cinema excels.

The foreign films remade in China primarily belong to genres such as comedy (represented

by films like *Goodbye Mr. Loser*), romance (represented by films like *Let's Get Married*), crime (represented by films like *The Devotion of Suspect X*), and suspense (represented by films like *Lost in the stars*). These four genres happen to be the specialties of Korean cinema and also possess strong elements of commercial appeal.

Secondly, the close cultural background between China and South Korea facilitates the localization process of cross-border remakes.

China and South Korea share a long history of close ties and belong to the same cultural sphere. Not only are the two countries culturally similar, but they also share similarities in terms of geography, climate, and other aspects. Therefore, when Korean films are brought to China, they do not require extensive localization. For example, the film *The Last Wish* is a remake of the South Korean film *The Last Ride*, and by simply changing the Korean setting to a Chinese one, the film does not appear strange at all. In contrast, although Japan also belongs to the Han cultural sphere, it has a more unique culture and independent cultural history, often requiring significant localization efforts when remaking its films. For instance, *Too Cool to Kill* is a remake of the Japanese film *The Magic Hour*, and the film chose to set the story on a vaguely defined island to mitigate localization issues. As for remakes of Southeast Asian and Western films, more effort is required for localization.

Thirdly, it is easier to purchase copyright from South Korea compared to other countries.

According to an article on Baidu TA Shuo (2016), major film companies primarily purchase scripts from South Korea, the United States, and Japan, with South Korea being one of the top choices. For instance, the partner of the production company of *Miss Granny* revealed, "Among the scripts and rights we currently own under our IP company 'Birth Machine,' 40% are from the United States, 40% are from South Korea, and 20% are from Japan." Compared to other countries, these three countries are more mature in terms of script and film rights, with higher transaction volumes.

4. Why is the Quality of Chinese Remakes of Korean Films Poor?

In 2011, director Kang Hyoung-chul's *Sunny*, in terms of its theme and genre, was a youth comedy that emphasized the atmosphere of the times and emotional resonance. With its limited production cost, it had a solid foundation in

terms of content. Moreover, its narrative completeness and rich audiovisual presentation provided strong reference and support for remakes. In 2021, the film of the same name directed by Pak Pakbier was released in China and received both box office success and critical acclaim. Wang Xixi (2022) believes that the “stranding” of this film, placed within the overall series of various deficiencies in recent years’ domestic remakes, has a significant degree of typicality and reflection value. Using the domestic remake of *Sunny Sister* as an analytical benchmark, examining the creative and aesthetic issues behind remakes can clarify the dilemmas and challenges faced by Chinese remakes of Korean films at the cultural and creative levels, thus better innovating and differentiating the excellent aspects of the original work in remakes.

Remaking is not mechanical replication. Before the remake creative team adapts the original work, they need to confirm the principles of the script and narrative strategies. Then, they need to start from the micro-settings to carry out localized rewriting, bridging the possible alienation and barriers in cross-cultural communication as much as possible (Zhang Yan & Li Chupeng, 2020). Zhou Wenping (2016) believes that remakes should reflect the reality of Chinese society, creating a Chinese living environment and atmosphere from life details, and shaping Chinese characters. These issues all fall within the scope of script adaptation.

The original *Sunny*, as a standout in the youth genre, is distinguished by its narrative arrangement, particularly in its significant use of parallel narrative contrasting adulthood (present tense) with youth (past tense). Through the juxtaposition of time and space in the narrative, the characters’ fates are linked and collide with the values of the times. The fluctuations in personal emotions correspond to the rise and fall of the spirit of the times. Within the interconnected scheduling of narrative time and space, small emotions and grand epochs interact on the same frequency. Although China and South Korea have different national conditions and vastly different modern historical backgrounds, this does not mean that suitable historical currents cannot be found as a backdrop for remakes. The choice of the historical event of Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997 as a backdrop is made. However, for most ordinary people, this event did not have a

significant impact on their lives and thus fails to evoke a historical resonance for most audiences. Therefore, the setting of this historical background serves only to indicate the time period and does not have a crucial impact on the trajectory of the characters’ destinies.

One of the successes of the original work lies in its delicate portrayal of female emotions and the differentiation of character portraits. It skillfully crafts the characters through the changes in the plot. Initially, the basic outlines of the seven girls are quickly delineated through labeling. Then, through the tearing off of these labels scene by scene, the rich and colorful personalities and destinies of each of them are displayed. Although the adaptation attempts to preserve the original appearances of the seven characters and strives to remain consistent with the original work, the shortcomings in detailed characterization make the expression somewhat vague, and the desired effect is not fully achieved. In terms of character setting, in the past timeline, Ren Namei is a talented and mischievous girl, a trait well reflected in both the original and the domestic version. However, in the present timeline, the original Ren Namei retains traces of her girlish personality and characteristics into adulthood, which are evident in her interactions with her daughter and her actions such as wearing school uniforms to “avenge” her daughter. However, in the domestic version, the innocence and spontaneity of the girl and the desolation of middle age become distinct and mutually irrelevant narratives, leading to a disconnected state between the two. Upon reviewing the character settings of both versions, it is evident that the domestic version, while inheriting the character settings of the original, loses control over the details and nuances of the characters. While it aims to faithfully restore the main plot points, it misses the mark in focusing on the characters’ motivations.

In terms of plot handling, Chinese remakes often exhibit a tendency to forcibly adhere to the original storyline but lack details and logic. In the original version, the protagonist and her daughter have a considerable amount of screen time, aiming to depict the rift between mother and daughter, which leads to the daughter being bullied and the mother, along with her old friends, confronting the bullies in the park. This not only demonstrates the futility of maternal love to the daughter but also strengthens the

bond between the friends, resembling a redemption across time and space, where old grievances and loves are resolved together. However, in the remakes, the mother-daughter scenes are deleted, and the confrontation scene begins directly, completely losing the meaning of the original work. There are many examples in remakes where only half of the original storyline is borrowed, resulting in numerous logical inconsistencies.

The aforementioned issues all stem from problems in scriptwriting, which constitute the primary issues in most remakes. Interestingly, many production companies opt for remakes precisely because they lack outstanding scripts. Although purchasing the rights to a story may result in acquiring excellent material, the inevitable requirement for localization often necessitates script adaptation. Consequently, production companies still face the fundamental issue of lacking outstanding scripts. The remake of *Sunny* serves as a typical example, and other films encounter similar challenges with script adaptation during the remake process.

In addition to script issues, performances by actors in remakes also present significant problems.

The remake *Scandal Maker* is adapted from the South Korean film *Scandal Makers*. The remake almost faithfully replicates the original's script details, including the storyline, character traits, actor performances, and set dialogues. The most significant difference lies in replacing South Korean actors with Chinese ones. A notable instance of this superficial approach can be observed in comparing the two lead actors, Tong Dawei and Cha Tae-hyun. In the original film, Cha Tae-hyun's comedic performance was distinctive and well-executed. However, in the remake, Tong Dawei's attempt to imitate Cha Tae-hyun comes across as forced and fails to capture the essence of the character. Not only does Tong Dawei's portrayal lack authenticity, but it also erases his own unique style, resulting in a performance that feels out of place. Unlike Cha Tae-hyun, who has portrayed numerous classic comedic roles, Tong Dawei lacks the experience in this genre and consequently struggles to deliver the required comedic flair.

5. Countermeasures for Chinese Remake of Korean Film

Summing up the previous sections, we can see that China encounters numerous challenges

when remaking Korean films. However, the fundamental reason lies in the improper attitude towards creativity, cutting corners in scriptwriting, shallow performances lacking depth, and a lack of directorial ability resulting in mere replication of the original work. These problems are not unique to China's cross-border film remakes but are longstanding issues stemming from China's excessive pursuit of commercial value (Li, 2016). Regarding remakes, we can glean techniques from the remake process of "Sheep Without a Shepherd" to identify the main strategies for remaking Korean films.

Sheep Without a Shepherd is a remake of the Indian film *Drishyam* with a total box office of 1.207 billion RMB and a Douban rating of 7.5, achieving both artistic and commercial success. The success of "Sheep Without a Shepherd" in the remake process mainly lies in three aspects:

Localization of visual symbols. In the film *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, sheep are used as significant symbolic elements. The imagery of sheep not only drives the plot development but also becomes an important symbol for conveying the story's plot and cultural connotations (Zhou, 2020). For example, sheep are used in the story to metaphorically represent the complexity of the protagonist, expressing the character's inner conflicts and struggles.

Localization of family ethics. In the film, the localization treatment of the protagonist's family relationships makes it easier for the audience to emotionally resonate. For instance, the family structure and character relationships of the protagonist, Li Weijie, are made closer to the reality of Chinese society in the adaptation, enhancing the audience's emotional identification with the characters. Li Weijie is not only an ordinary father but also a character full of human complexity.

Innovative directorial techniques. Director Derek Kwok reinterprets and innovates on the original plot and characters, employing novel narrative techniques and visual presentation methods. Through the use of camera language and editing techniques, the story is presented more vividly and engagingly. For example, the adoption of a narrative structure with multiple perspectives and temporal cross-overs allows the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the protagonist's inner world and emotional experiences.

6. Diversified Adaptation and Localized Emotional Resonance

The film employs diversified adaptation techniques to better meet the aesthetic and emotional needs of local audiences. For example, while retaining the core plot of the original work, the film adjusts the storyline and incorporates local cultural symbols to strengthen the emotional connection between the film and the audience. This localization approach enables viewers to have a deeper understanding and emotional experience of the story's expression.

The successful remake of *Sheep Without a Shepherd* provides some strategies for Chinese remakes of Korean films:

Emotional Resonance and Theme Preservation: Maintaining consistency between the new version and the original work in emotional resonance and core themes ensures that audiences can still understand and feel the essence of the story in a cross-cultural context.

Flexible Plot Adaptation and Character Development: Adjusting the plot and character development according to the cultural background and aesthetic preferences of Chinese audiences makes the story more appealing to them and increases audience engagement.

Incorporating Regional Features and Innovative Elements: Introducing elements of Chinese culture and traditional values into the new version while injecting innovative elements and highlights to break through stylistic and narrative boundaries, attracting viewers and enhancing its uniqueness.

In conclusion, successful strategies for film remakes include preserving core emotions and themes, flexible plot adaptation and character development, incorporating local cultural elements, focusing on market adaptability, and maintaining innovation and novelty. The rational application of these strategies can improve the quality and market performance of remake films, achieving a win-win situation for both commercial and artistic aspects.

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