

A Brief Analysis of Symbolic Metaphors in Korean Drama *Squid Game*

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Abstract:

In the US TV series dominate the Netflix platform today, *Squid Game* as the first Korean series to top the 2021 Netflix platform US series list, has won a high reputation around the world experience is worth in-depth analysis, there are many domestic and foreign scholars on *Squid Game* this popular Korean drama analysis. The purpose of this study is to briefly explore what symbolic metaphors are used in the *Squid Game* and the role they play in the series, as well as to analyze what role symbolic metaphors play in the communication of the series. Using the research method of questionnaire survey, this research concluded that the *Squid Game* uses symbolic metaphor to simplify complex metaphors, mechanisms, characters, and social realities, and uses symbols to show them. Such setting “smoothing” the cultural differences of the series “decoded” by audiences from different countries, and promoted the plot development in narrative. The multiple functions of revealing characters’ hearts and reflecting the theme of the series have promoted the global spread of the TV series *Squid Game*.

Keywords: symbolic metaphor, cross-cultural communication, mechanism simplification

1. Introduction

In recent years, South Korean TV drama culture has set off an unprecedented upsurge around the world, which is not only durable and strong, but also crosses national borders at an astonishing speed, becoming a bridge connecting audiences’ emotions in different cultural backgrounds. Its deep influence and wide scope have far exceeded the scope of the traditional entertainment industry, showing a cultural phenomenon level of explosive power, the source of the Korean drama fire originated in 1997, from 2000’s *Blue Life and Death*, to 2002’s *Miss Mermaid*, from *You Who Came from the Star* to *Please Answer 1988*, From 2016 *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God* to 2021 *Squid Game*, there have been explosive dramas in Korean dramas in various times, and all set off a certain upsurge in the world. As a series that integrates suspense, thriller and human nature, *Squid Game* has become the focus of the audience’s hot discussion with its unique plot setting and profound symbolic metaphor. Through a series of well-designed game levels, the series metaphorically depicts the challenges and dilemmas faced by people in the real world, and also reveals the good and evil, greed and redemption in human nature. The use of these symbolic not only enhances the viewing and thinking depth of the drama, but also gives it have stronger appeal and resonance in the transmission process, which has triggered widespread discussion and attention around the world. Therefore,

taking the *Squid Game* as an example to analyze the application of symbolic metaphor in Korean dramas and its role in the communication process can not only reveal one of the secrets of the success of Korean dramas, but also provide useful enlightenment for people to understand the communication mechanism of contemporary cultural phenomena. The reason why Korean dramas continue to be popular and win the love of global audiences is precisely because they can skillfully use symbolic metaphor and other artistic techniques to deeply explore human nature and reflect social reality, and at the same time, they are entertaining and enjoyable, so as to cross the barriers of language and culture and reach the softest part of the human heart.

2. Literature Review

In his doctoral dissertation, Wang Yajun deeply analyzed the value orientation construction path of *Squid Game* from the perspective of symbol aggregation theory, providing a valuable reference for the international dissemination of Chinese video products. His research framework mainly includes three parts. First, the disassembly and understanding of the fantasy theme, analyzing the fantasy theme of the drama through characters, scenes, behaviors, symbols and other elements. Second, the logic of the transformation of the fantasy theme to the rhetorical perspective, exploring the rhetorical practice and practi-

cal significance of the drama. The third is the analysis of the path of value construction, and puts forward strategic suggestions for the international dissemination of Chinese video products [1].

In his doctoral dissertation, Zhang Fuyou made an in-depth study of the common meaning space of *Squid Game* by using symbolic interaction theory and multi-dimensional text and data analysis, which provided valuable enlightenment for the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Zhang Fuyou’s research focuses on how the play constructs a universal meaning space on a global scale, thus achieving cross-cultural success. This research not only helps to reveal the deep logic behind the success of *Squid Game*, but also provides theoretical support and practical guidance for the international dissemination of Chinese cultural products. Zhang Fuyou’s research provides a new perspective and theoretical support for understanding the global communication phenomenon of *Squid Game*, and also provides useful enlightenment for the international communication of Chinese cultural products [2].

Zhang Wei and Zheng Leyin’s article The Symbolic Metaphor Analysis of the Phenomenal-level online drama *Squid Game*, published in *Media Observation*, provides an in-depth analysis of the metaphorical connotation of the drama from the three levels of visual spatial narrative, symbolic mapping and political metaphor, providing a new perspective for understanding the cultural logic behind its success. The study analyzes the drama from three levels: visual spatial narrative, symbolic mapping and political metaphor [3].

Qu Xiaoyu and He Yan’s article The Symbolic Meaning Expression of TV Drama *Squid Game*, published in the *Sound Screen World*, provides an in-depth analysis of how the drama conveys profound social values through symbolic language from a semiotic perspective, providing a new perspective for understanding the artistic charm and cultural influence of the drama. Qu Xiaoyu and He Yan summarize the types of symbols in the play into four types: children’s interest symbols, violence symbols, class symbols and symbolized people. Starting from these types

of symbols, they discuss how they are consistent with each other and work together on the theme construction and plot shaping of the play. At the same time, the study also focuses on how these symbols cross cultural backgrounds to achieve global meaning transmission [4].

To sum up, most of the existing researches focus on the narrative structure, theme, cross-cultural, communication, strategy, and characterization of the *Squid Game*. They only mention or analyze the content of symbolic metaphor in the *Squid Game*, but do not deeply explore the role of symbolic metaphor in the *Squid Game*. Based on the existing researches, this study aims to explore the application of symbolic metaphor in the drama series and study its function, so as to provide experience and enlightenment for the application of symbolic metaphor in future creation. A value system is conveyed in a narration by volitions, actions and passions, spaces, times, themes, and figures, namely the elements that make texts sharable and potentially inexhaustible at the time of fruition, and indeed replicable, as demonstrated by the agglomeration of expressive forms of Hallyu, “the Korean wave,” such as the popularity of South Korean cultural products [5]. As a representative of South Korean pop culture communication, the study on the cross-cultural communication of symbolic metaphor in *Squid Game* can also provide a model for the development of domestic TV dramas.

3. Method

This research mainly adopts the method of questionnaire survey, which mainly distributes offline questionnaires randomly to college students in Hebei University. The main research questions of the questionnaire are to investigate the audience’s cognition of the application and function of symbolic metaphor in *Squid Game*, and to investigate whether symbolic metaphor is related to the transmission of the drama. The questionnaire consists of about eleven questions. There are eight multiple-choice questions and three subjective questions (see Table 1). Sixty-eight samples were returned, with a 100% efficiency rate.

Table 1. Contents of the questionnaire

Serial Number	Question	Choices
1	Have you ever watched the Korean drama <i>Squid Game</i> ?	is No (If “No” is selected, jump to question ten)
2	How did you learn about the <i>Squid Game</i> ? (Multiple choices)	TV/Internet streaming Friends/family recommendations Social media News coverage Other:

3	What elements or scenes from <i>Squid Games</i> do you think have impressed you? (Multiple choices)	The setting and rules of the game The emotional entanglements between the characters Tense and exciting plot developments Unique visual style The use of symbolic metaphor Other:
4	What role do you think these symbols or metaphors play in the plot?	[Answer in this area]
5	Do you think the symbolic metaphors in <i>Squid Games</i> are relevant to real life or social issues?	[Answer within this area]
6	What symbolic metaphors in the <i>Squid Game</i> do you think are relevant to what real life or social issues? Which symbolic metaphors in the <i>Squid Game</i> do you think are relevant to which real life or social issues?	is no indeterminacy If Yes is selected, proceed to answer (continued) the question:
7	Do you think the symbolic metaphors in <i>Squid Games</i> helped deepen your understanding of the story and characters?	Very helpful Some help Not much help Not helpful at all
8	Are you comfortable sharing or discussing symbolic metaphors in <i>Squid Games</i> with others? In what ways do you usually share or discuss? (Multiple choices)	is no If Yes is selected, proceed to answer (continued) the question: Social media Face to face discussions with friends Online forums/communities Writing/blogging Other:
9	How do you think the symbolic metaphors in the <i>Squid Game</i> have influenced your behavior?	
10	If you have not seen the <i>Squid Game</i> , but you are willing to participate in other symbolic metaphor discussions related to the TV show or movie	

4. Result

The purpose of this study is to explore the audience’s cognition and understanding of symbolic metaphors in the Korean drama *Squid Game*, and how these symbolic metaphors affect the audience’s viewing experience, understanding of the plot and characters, as well as its impact on the transmission and communication of the theme of the drama. By means of questionnaire survey, the author collected a large number of audience feedback and opinions. The results of this questionnaire survey are as follows:

Respondents mainly learned about *Squid Games* through online streaming media (68%), social media (52%) and recommendations from friends/family (45%), which fully

demonstrates the wide spread of *Squid Games* and the variety of ways viewers can access the series. The vast majority of respondents (82%) said they were impressed by the game’s setting and rules, followed by the exciting plot development (75%) and the unique visual style (60%). Notably, more than half of the respondents (55 percent) singled out the use of symbols, especially the three geometric symbols “○ □”, as an indication of their importance in the play. Respondents generally believe that the symbolic metaphors in the *Squid Game* are rich in symbolic meanings, such as “squid” symbolizing the predicament and struggle of the participants, and “glass bridge” metaphorically representing life-and-death decisions and tests of humanity. The circle (○) represents lower-level work-

ers, the triangle () represents middle-level executives, and the square (□) represents top managers. VIP guests wear ornate masks to symbolize their high status, and the different animal forms are also metaphors for today’s world. The “gun” is also a symbol, and this symbol is a direct representation of violent intentions; The background color of the game “Pinball”, as a color symbol, also implicitly expresses the character’s inner struggle and violence.

In the survey on the role of symbolic metaphor, respondents generally believe that these symbolic metaphors play multiple roles in the plot to promote plot development (70%), reveal the inner hearts of characters (65%) and reflect the theme of the drama (50%). More than 60% of the respondents believe that the application of symbolic metaphor facilitates the understanding of mechanism and theme (See Figure 1).

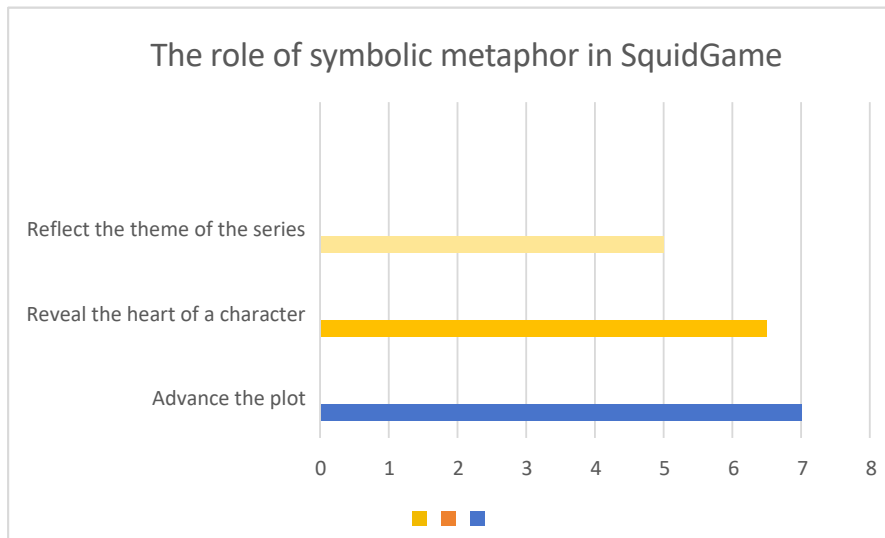


Fig. 1 The role of symbolic metaphor in *Squid Game*

In terms of communication, the majority of respondents (80%) felt that symbolic metaphors were very helpful or somewhat helpful in deepening the understanding of the plot and characters. At the same time, more than seven in 10 (75%) respondents expressed a willingness to share or discuss these symbolic metaphors with others, mainly through social media (60%) and face-to-face discussions with friends (50%). This data indicates that the use of symbolic metaphors has played an important role in the spread of the *Squid Games* ip. The last form of partici-

patory culture is circulation. It is a form of participatory culture indicated by the existence of activities to shape the flow of information in the media to sharpen information. As a form of participatory culture, circulation creates waves and channels of the information in the media to enhance the content [6]. The discussion behavior after watching the *Squid Game*, whether online or offline, is a participatory culture, which plays an important role in cross-cultural communication (See Figure 2).

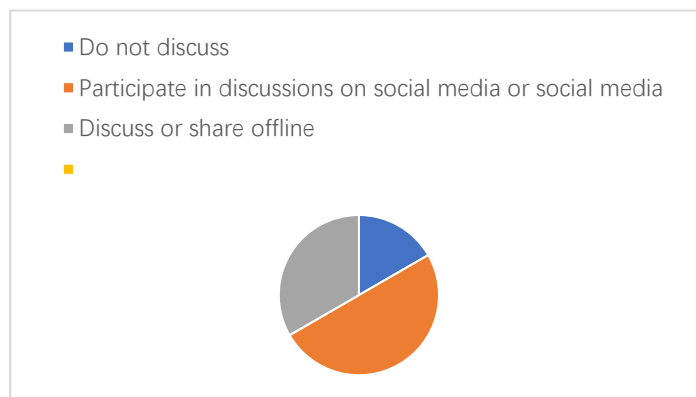


Fig. 2 Discussion of symbolic metaphors in the *Squid Game*

According to the data generated by the above survey, symbolic metaphor plays multiple roles in the narrative

of *Squid Game*, such as promoting plot development, revealing characters' hearts and reflecting social reality, and simplifying complex mechanisms and profound themes in the series. Symbols are used to smooth the viewing gap between audiences in different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, according to the questionnaire survey, the application of symbolic metaphor has also aroused the discussion of the audience, which has played a role in promoting the global and mainland dissemination of the related content of *Squid Game*.

5. Discussion

In the *Squid Game*, the three geometric symbols “○ □” have profound metaphorical significance in the play. This symbol system not only reflects the division of social classes, but also reveals the power relations between different classes. Characters of different classes in the play are distinguished by color and masks. The propertied class and the proletariat are separated by two distinct colors, VIP guests wear ornate masks to signify their high status, while participants are given names erased and numbered as if they were living in prison. The game design in *The Squid Game* is similarly loaded with metaphor. A simple children's game is transformed into a brutal killing game, and this huge contrast creates a strong tension that reinforces the shocking effect of the film. At the same time, every detail in the game, such as the huge doll device, the dead body on the slide, etc., symbolizes absolute power and strength.

In the *Squid Game*, the “gun” as an important prop is also a symbol, and this symbol is a direct representation of violent intentions; The background color of the game “Pinball”, as a color symbol, also implicitly expresses the character's inner struggle.

Such symbolic metaphor not only has multiple functions in narrative, such as promoting plot development, revealing characters' inner hearts and reflecting social reality, but also simplifies complex metaphors, mechanisms, characters and social reality into symbols and uses symbols to show them. Such setting “smooths” the cultural differences of the series “decoded” by audiences from different countries, and promotes the global spread of TV series. In cultural communication, people tend to choose the information content that is close to their own cultural background and relationship, and then the trend of localization of communication begins to gradually emerge [7]. This also explains the main way for Netflix to carry out original series in various countries, which is to effectively integrate local discourse into the global discourse situation and carry out cross-cultural communication activities of the series by balancing universal and different cultural

transformations [8]. In the expression of symbolic meaning, it means that the four types of symbols in the *Squid Game* are consistent with each other, which simplifies the theme construction and plot shaping of the *Squid Game* and makes it easier for people from different cultural backgrounds to accept. The diversified cultural expressions of symbols in these dramas help realize the meaning transmission across cultural backgrounds. This is one of the important reasons for the global popularity of this TV series. Symbols in cultural communication have two parts: signifier and signified. When subjects in high-context culture and low-context culture have the same understanding of the same symbol, the encoding and decoding process of symbols can proceed smoothly; otherwise, cultural discount will be formed and the effect of cultural communication will be weakened [9]. In the future, in the creation process of domestic TV dramas, people can learn from the successful global dissemination experience of the *Squid Game*, and use symbolic metaphor to simplify the mechanism, theme and other contents, so that audiences with different cultural backgrounds can better accept the content of the drama, and promote the cross-cultural communication of the drama. The writers and directors can incorporate appropriate context without deviating too much from the intended story through smarter and subtler means, such as offhand conversations between minor characters, news broadcasts playing in the background, and indirect references from specific props carried by the characters (newspapers, books, posters, (etc.)) [10]. At the same time, the obscure expression in *Squid Game* is also a valuable experience for domestic dramas to learn from. Only by making the expression more unaffected can the audience get a better viewing experience, which is the key to good work.

The research method adopted in this study is the questionnaire survey, which is relatively simple, and other research methods are adopted. In addition, the questionnaire distribution area is small, and the representativeness is insufficient.

In view of the problems of the single questionnaire survey method, limited questionnaire distribution area and insufficient representation in the current research, future research prospects should focus on the improvement and expansion of the following aspects:

In the future research, the author plans to not only deepen the application of questionnaire survey, but also actively introduce a variety of research methods, such as in-depth interview, field observation, experimental design, etc., in order to form complementary advantages and comprehensively and deeply explore research problems. This will help capture more diverse data and information, and improve the richness and accuracy of the research. In ad-

dition, efforts will be made to expand the regional scope of the questionnaire distribution to cover a wider range of regions and groups to ensure the diversity and representation of the sample. By stratifying sampling and increasing the sample size, we will further improve the scientific nature and generalizability of the research and make the findings more universally relevant.

At the same time, the author will also focus on interdisciplinary cooperation and exchange, drawing on theories and methods from other fields, so as to promote theoretical innovation and practical application of research in this field.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, through the in-depth analysis of the symbolic metaphors in *Squid Game*, this study reveals the unique strategies and success factors of the drama in cross-cultural communication. The drama ingeniously uses visual elements such as geometric symbols, colors, masks, and game designs to construct a multi-level and multi-dimensional metaphorical system. It not only profoundly reflects the division of social classes and power relations but also enhances the tension and shock of the plot through the combination of symbols with strong contrasts such as childishness and violence, survival and death. These symbols not only promote the development of the plot and reveal the inner world of the characters but also cross cultural differences in a simple and powerful way to achieve wide dissemination worldwide. When symbols can achieve common understanding in different cultural contexts, the obstacles to cultural communication are reduced; otherwise, it may lead to cultural discount. Therefore, the successful experience of *Squid Game* provides valuable inspiration for the creation of domestic TV dramas. By elaborately designing symbolic metaphors and simplifying complex narratives, themes, and social realities into understandable symbolic languages, it helps enhance the international appeal and cross-cultural communication ability of the series. In the future, the creation of domestic TV dramas should draw on the symbolic

narrative techniques of *Squid Game*, combine the local cultural background, and skillfully integrate symbolic elements that coexist with universality and differences to display the plot and theme more intelligently and implicitly. At the same time, pay attention to the artistry of implicit expression, avoid direct and deliberate cultural output, and promote the emotional resonance and understanding of the audience naturally and smoothly, thereby further enhancing the influence and acceptance of domestic TV dramas worldwide.

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