

A Study of the Pirated Distribution of Japanese Variety Shows in China and the Chinese Audience

--Take the Chinese Special Episodes of Monday Late Show as an Example

Xuan Chen*

Cheung Kong University of Journalism and Communication, Shantou University, Shantou, Guangdong, 515063, China

*Corresponding author: 21xchen2@stu.edu.cn

Abstract:

In today's cultural global village, Japanese variety shows have always had a large audience on Chinese networks, among which *Monday Late Show* has a group of loyal Chinese fans. This study investigates the process of the distribution of *Monday Late Show*'s Chinese special in China by analyzing the three dimensions of the viewers (university students), the producers of the content (Chinese producers of the Chinese special episodes), and the intermediary of the cross-cultural distribution (subtitle groups). The study found that Chinese producers, Chinese viewers and the subtitle team formed an organic link from bottom to top. Viewers interacted with the producers and the subtitle team through social networks and provided suggestions and feedback on the content of the programme, participating in the production of the Chinese special episodes in real-time. However, the subtitle team still acted as an intermediary in the dissemination of the pirated version of the programme, the invisible recognition of the producers reflected the helplessness of the Japanese officials who had a weak awareness of the copyrights in the Chinese market. In the future, there is still a need to raise Chinese viewers' awareness of copyright and strengthen intellectual property protection to promote the dissemination of Japanese variety shows through legal channels in China and the healthy development of cross-cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Japanese variety shows; Subtitle translation; Cross-cultural communication; Media interaction

1. Introduction

Japanese variety programs have a long history and a wide global reach. Since the 1960s, Japanese programs have gradually developed a distinctive style that includes entertainment, creativity, and a keen sense of capturing social and cultural phenomena [1]. Although the Japanese variety format has changed significantly in recent years with the popularity of digital media and streaming platforms, traditional television stations remain the primary production and broadcast platforms.

An example of this is the Japanese television variety show *Monday Late Show*. Although the programme has no official rights in China and viewers watch pirated videos via the Internet, subtitle groups play an important role in the distribution process. In addition, the interaction of the producers and subtitle teams with Chinese viewers through the microblogging platform, which allowed viewers to participate in the construction of the programme's content

and localized adaptation on social networks, is also a new spectacle derived from cross-cultural communication.

The author searched the literature based on the keywords of 'Japanese variety show', 'localized adaptation', 'pirated distribution', 'subtitle group adaptation', etc. The keywords were searched in the Knowledge Network, and the number of documents was no more than 20, among which there were only a few studies on *Monday Late Show*.

According to the research direction, the past literature is divided into three categories for discussion. The first category is the research on the localization of reality TV shows with foreign countries, which contains many practical cases, analyses the adjustments of the programmes in terms of content, form and communication strategies in different cultural backgrounds, and in-depth analysis of the cultural mechanisms behind them. For example, *exploring the localization adaptation of overseas TV program models and Analyzing the localization of car*

programs from the scheduling of cultural adaptation strategies [2]. However, these studies tend to lack sufficient data and analysis at the audience level and often overlook the audience’s response. Much of the literature favors production and adaptation strategies, and less on audience acceptance and feedback.

The second category studies late-night Japanese variety shows. For example, in *A Study of Japanese Late-Night TV Variety Shows - Taking Monday Late Show and Can I Follow You to Your Home*, a study of Japanese late-night TV variety shows was conducted [3]. The content, production characteristics, and cultural background of popular Japanese variety shows such as *Monday Late Show* and *Human Monitoring* are meticulously analyzed, and the popularity of the shows is analyzed concerning the social and cultural contexts of Japan and China. However, most studies like this one focus on the programs themselves, with a single perspective and a lack of cross-cultural comparative perspectives. Moreover, there are fewer studies on the Chinese market, especially the lack of analysis on the localization of the programs after their introduction [4]. There is insufficient research on the acceptance and dissemination effects of Japanese variety shows in overseas markets, especially in China.

The third category of content which the discussion of subtitle translation, which analyses the linguistic and cultural difficulties encountered in the process of subtitle translation. For example, the article *Exploring the Difficulties in Subtitle Translation of Japanese Variety Shows - Taking VS Arashi as an Example* provides specific translation strategies and methods, and applies the concept of ‘cultural default’ to analyze the translation methods that should be applied by Chinese and Japanese translators in the cultural gaps of Kansai accents and funny segments, helping to understand the cross-cultural translation effects [5]. The article provides specific translation strategies and methods, using the concept of ‘cultural default’ to analyze what Chinese and Japanese translators should apply to cultural gaps such as the Kansai accent and funny passages, which helps to understand the complexity of cross-cultural translation. However, the research mainly focuses on the technical level of translation, and less on the cultural communication role of subtitle teams, especially how to influence the audience’s understanding and acceptance through

translation.

In China, relevant papers often focus on the localized adaptation of overseas reality TV shows, the study of late-night Japanese variety shows, and the challenges faced by subtitle teams in translating Japanese programs. However, there is a lack of research on how Chinese viewers accept and perceive these shows. Additionally, the significance of subtitle teams in cultural communication and the issues of piracy and dissemination are often overlooked. There is also a lack of research on Chinese viewers’ acceptance and perception of Japanese programmes, as well as a discussion of the significance of subtitling in cultural transmission and the phenomenon of piracy.

In summary, the existing literature has not explored audience acceptance and cultural identity in cross-cultural communication in sufficient depth. There is a lack of research on how the program itself and the translation by subtitle teams influence audience perception and acceptance. Additionally, there is insufficient theoretical and empirical study on the role and function of subtitle teams in cross-cultural communication, particularly regarding the impact of pirated content on official communication channels and audience behavior. This study attempts to explore, from a cross-cultural perspective, what role the subtitle team played in the cross-cultural dissemination of *Monday Late Show*? Why do Chinese viewers perceive *Monday Late Show* Unchained as more authentic and grounded than local vegetarian variety shows? How do Chinese viewers perceive and accept the localized Japanese variety format?

2. Research Methodology

Interviews and secondary data analysis were used in this study.

2.1 Interview Method.

Interviews were conducted with three college students majoring in media from different regions (Hangzhou, Shantou, and Hong Kong) to collect their feelings about watching the Chinese version of *Monday Late Show*.

The author developed an interview outline before the interviews, which contained three dimensions: Knowledge of *Monday Late Show*; perception of Chinese elements; and attitudes towards media practices (see Table 1).

Table 1. Synopsis of an interview

No.	Questions
1	Through what sources did you find out about <i>Monday Late Show</i> ?
2	Have you watched the China special of <i>Monday Late Show</i> ? If so, which episode do you remember the most?

3	What do you think makes the China special of <i>Monday Late Show</i> different from other Japanese variety shows (of clips about China)?
4	What do you think of China (image) shown in the programme? (e.g. Tianjin bosses practicing kung fu Zhaoqing monks eating grass)
5	How localised do you think the programme is? (Subtitles translated by the subtitle team, interviews with the programme team, that sort of thing)
6	Are there any aspects of the programme that you think could be improved in presenting Chinese culture?
7	Do you feel that the programme explores the commonalities between Chinese and Japanese culture? (If so, how do you feel about the commonalities?)
8	Would you recommend China Special of <i>Monday Late Show</i> to a friend? Why?
9	What other suggestions or expectations do you have for the China special episodes of <i>Monday Late Show</i>
10	Since you major in Journalism and communication, do you have any ideas of how to imitate <i>Monday Late Show</i> or have you already made content about it?

Interviews were conducted in any format, either face-to-face one-on-one, or via WeChat, with an average interview length of 15 minutes. Recording was done by audio recording, and the language and text were organized after the interview.

2.2 Analysis of Secondary Interview Data

This study analyses the contents of an interview with NYLON_CHINA magazine, *I brought the Japanese variety film crew back home*, and a podcast program from June 2024, *What does P. Xu think about the popularity of the Japanese variety show Monday Late Show's China Special Episode* [6]?

The views of the Chinese producer responsible for the special and the role of the Chinese subtitle team are examined through secondary data analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Chinese Viewers' Viewing Motivations

Culture is an important factor driving the transnational flow of finished TV programmes, including proximity in terms of geo-cultural markets, language, beliefs and customs [7]. The cultural proximity created by the similar social atmosphere between Japan and China in the China special is one of the reasons why Chinese viewers watch and enjoy the Chinese special episodes.

Chinese viewers generally watch the programme through pirated channels such as the Bilibili video website and Weibo. Their motives for watching the programme include their interest in Japanese culture and the attractiveness of its content, with 'truthfulness' and 'interesting' being the most frequently used words in their evaluation of the program's content.

In the new media era where multicultural communication is so mature, the audience has gradually entered a period

of acceptance and aesthetic fatigue for the program content in a series of cultural fields that they are familiar with. Therefore, the new era of online variety shows has turned its attention to the more "niche" cultural market [4].

This is also why the "satisfaction-style humor" unique to Japanese variety shows on *Monday Late Show* has been widely spread in China's "niche" market.

The interviewees said that *Monday Late Show* uncovers many scenes and people that they have never noticed before, and because it is told from a point of view that is new to Japanese people, they have discovered "a lot of Chinese culture that they usually take for granted, but which they find interesting when they dig deeper. " For example, compared to Japan, Chinese people name their dogs casually. In addition to this, the interviewees also felt that the programme tapped into the cultural commonalities between China and Japan, such as the similarities between the cities of Tianjin and Osaka. The program's analogy between the two language art forms of "Manzai" and "Crosstalk", and the image of both Tianjin and Osaka as " Older women who talk a lot ", have created a similarity between the two cities, which may trigger the viewers of the two countries to think of the two cities in the same way [8]. The similarities between the two cities may arouse the curiosity of audiences in both countries about each other's culture and local life. "I felt that Japanese culture, which seems so distant and strange, is understandable, and the analogy made me want to go to Osaka to see what the amazons there look like, and I felt that they would also be very warm and cute.

At the same time, Chinese viewers are still aware of the cultural stereotypes presented in the *Monday Late Show's* China special, such as the "pandas", "Sichuan cuisine" and "Shu Kingdom" in Sichuan, Fujian's tea culture and Guangdong's food culture ("Cantonese people eat every-

thing”). In response, Chinese viewers presented a layered assessment of Weibo comments and interviews. The first tier is that they feel it fits their own stereotypes of other regions, “It fits my stereotypes of Chengdu people, very chill and in a very good spirit.” (Cai) “The subtitle team’s translations are also very localized, and will use a lot of familiar domestic stems ... will also explore the city according to regional ‘stereotypes’ (or regional characteristics), and find out another side outside the ‘stereotype’.” (Liang). On the second level, I hope the program team will export Chinese culture internationally while discovering interesting material on stereotypes, “While entertaining, I also hope the programme will focus on its educational significance. By showcasing the deep heritage and unique charm of Chinese culture, it will inspire viewers’ pride in Chinese culture and awareness of its inheritance.” (Li) “Guangdong is closely related to ‘eating’, but this Cantonese person still wants more culture other than ‘eating’ (like flip-flops hhhh)” (Liang).

The study shows that despite the convenience provided by the distribution of pirated copies, it also exposes Chinese viewers’ shortcomings in terms of copyright awareness [4]. Because Chinese video sites have long been filled with pirated content, and because laws protecting intellectual property rights have not yet been fully implemented, the majority of Internet users have little awareness of copyright. The three university students interviewed were aware that they were “whoring” (enjoying paid content without having to pay for it), but this is the mainstream channel through which Chinese viewers watch *Monday Late Show*. Interviewees also mentioned that only a small number of overseas viewers or domestic viewers connected to the Internet through “scientific Internet” tools were able to download and pay for the content of *Monday Late Show* on streaming platforms such as Hulu (Li).

3.2 Motivations Behind the Scenes of Programme Production

Combined with the content of Chinese producer Xu Zhenran’s interviews, this study can provide a clearer understanding of the motivations behind the scenes of the programme’s production, as well as a better answer to some of the questions that have puzzled Chinese viewers, such as, “Why is it that every time at the beginning of the Chinese chapter, we have to introduce the popularity of *Monday Late Show* in China and interview fans, isn’t it boasting about ourselves?” and other questions [9]. It can be noted that the report and podcast sections focus mainly on two types of content from Chinese viewers regarding the programme’s crew and production, considerations for Japanese viewers, and motivations for producing the Chinese chapter of *Monday Late Show*, with a small

amount of discussion in the podcasts regarding the spread of piracy. Regarding the question of the programme’s localization strategy, since the Chinese side did not acquire the rights to the Japanese television programme *Monday Late Show*, the producers prioritized the needs of the Japanese audience during the production process, and had fewer localization strategies for the Chinese audience. For example, in the podcast, the producer mentions that “we [*Monday Late Show*] are a programme broadcast on Japanese TV, so first we have to consider the feedback from Japanese viewers, and only when the feedback is good can we continue to do it [the Chinese episode].” Therefore, at the beginning of the programme, it was important to explain to Japanese viewers the motivation for making the Chinese special, and to tell them that it was due to a combination of factors such as “the outcry from Chinese fans” and “the popularity of *Monday Late Show* in China” that the production of this special was able to move forward. It was important to inform the Japanese audience that it was due to the combination of “Chinese fans” and *Monday Late Show*’s popularity in China” that the production of this special was able to move forward. Although the producer did not explicitly discuss the localization strategy, she interacted with Chinese viewers through the microblogging platform to solicit opinions. This practice also reflects the producer’s (the programme’s team) balance between Chinese and Japanese viewers and concern for Chinese viewers.

3.3 Analysis of Chinese Subtitle Groups

This study focuses on the Raw grass subtitle group (which has been translating *Monday Late Show* steadily for a long period since 2016) and analyses its material on Weibo regarding the translation and dissemination of *Monday Late Show* [10]. As a subtitle team familiar with the show and its domestic audience base, they can understand the focus of *Monday Late Show* on its home audience in Japan, believing that “the show is made with an eye on the ratings and advertising dollars in Japan. Japanese variety shows are not NHK documentaries that are responsible for ratings. “At the level of Chinese audience acceptance, the subtitle team believes that *Monday Late Show*’s audience on the mainland Internet has expanded somewhat in recent years. “With the increase in popularity, there are also more and more nationals who will take the initiative to seek opportunities to be on camera, and the nationals have been on camera to a certain extent, which in turn facilitates the program to go out of the circle and grow further in popularity. “They believe that *Monday Late Show*’s focus on China has increased somewhat in recent years, but feedback on Chinese netizens is not a major concern for the show’s team. “Because Chinese netizens are all

in China, they can't help it raise ratings and make money. "For the localized adaptation level of the program's translation, the subtitle team, in addition to the principle of "Xindaya" (Translate with faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance), will also change some more colloquial and everyday expressions as much as possible when correcting them [11]. "Depending on the context and scenario, they will also think of funnier translations or add some buzzwords in order to enhance the effect of the programme."

4. Conclusion

Through the study of the communication phenomenon of *Monday Late Show* in China, cross-cultural communication involves not only the translation and dissemination of the program's content, but also the audience's acceptance and participation. The subtitle team plays a bridging role in this process, making the program more in line with the tastes of Chinese viewers through translation and cultural adaptation. Meanwhile, interactions on social media platforms further promote the localization and dissemination of the programs. The prevalence of pirated distribution reflects the challenges of copyright protection, but also shows the strong demand for quality content from viewers. This study fills a theoretical gap in the areas of piracy communication, the role of subtitle groups, cross-cultural interaction, cultural adaptation, and cultural exchange between China and Japan. Future research can further explore the long-term effects of pirated communication and the ways in which subtitle groups adapt and transform in different cultural contexts. However, the scope of the audience is too small, as only the in-depth interviews of three university students majoring in media from different regions were analyzed, failing to filter and analyze the audience of Chinese specials of different ages and genders. Moreover, the analysis of the content of the Chinese specials was too limited, as the subjective interviews with the producers and translators were only analyzed, and there was no objective analysis of the content in terms of symbols or translation logic. In the future, it is hoped that the breadth of audience research and the depth of program content analysis will be enhanced to provide an effective

theoretical approach to how the current state of pirated distribution can be improved to become the future of legal distribution.

References

- [1] H. Zhang, K. Jing Liang, H. Bing Lin. A study on the trend of cooperation and mutual appreciation and power mechanism of variety program models in East Asia[J]. *China TV*, 2023, (10):106-112.
- [2] Chang Z. Exploration of localized adaptation of overseas TV program models[J]. *China Broadcasting*, 2020, (08):69-72.
- [3] Zhang Xueqi. Research on Japanese late-night TV variety programs [D]. Guangxi University, 2020.
- [4] Zhang R. Japanese Anime Marketing Strategy in China[C]// SHS Web of Conferences. EDP Sciences, 2024, 193: 04001.
- [5] Hu Yingfei, Jiang Jingcheng. An investigation on the difficulties of subtitle translation in Japanese variety programmes - Taking VS Arashi as an example[J]. *Modern Linguistics*, 2023, 11(3): 942-947.
- [6] idobata kaigi, What does Xu P. think about the popularity of the China Special Episode in *Monday Late Show*? 2024.6, 2024.8, <https://www.xiaoyuzhoufm.com/episode/6669a3b5c26e396a364eb73e>
- [7] Xie H. Presenting the History of Sino-Japanese Relations: The Visualization from a Chinese Entertainment Reality Show[J]. *Visualized Narratives: Signs, Symbols and Political Mythology in East Asia, Europe and the US*, 2021, 3: 71.
- [8] Wang Yilin, Xia Guangfu. A Brief Analysis of the Dissemination of Multiculturalism in Variety Shows under the Context of New Media [J]. *Journalism and Communication Science*, 2023, 11(2): 185-189.
- [9] NYLON_China, I brought a Japanese variety film crew back home. 2023.5.16, 2024.8.25 https://k.sina.cn/article_6298663816_1776dfb8801901gl4v.html)
- [10] RawGrassSubtitles, information about the RawGrassSubtitles, 2023.4.1, 2024.8.25, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309405035457724678373,202>,
- [11] Hendry J. *The Orient strikes back: A global view of cultural display*[M]. Routledge, 2000.