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# A corpus-based approach to the reception of Chinese television dramas streamed overseas

Lin Chen<sup>1,2</sup>✉ & Kexin Chang<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the state government of China has vigorously supported the export of cultural projects. As the carrier of cultural output, television dramas carry important missions of cultural communication. In the age of convergence when the practice of watching television involves more viewer engagement, audience reception investigates how audiences may engage in a broad range of interactive experiences and activities. This paper focuses on the reception of Chinese television dramas streamed overseas on two prominent video streaming sites, YouTube and Rakuten Viki. Adopting a corpus-based approach, it first identifies the top ten most popular Chinese television dramas on the two sites. Subsequently, user-generated reviews and comments for the selected dramas are collected, and a corpus analysis is conducted on the data derived from the two platforms. The findings reveal that a) viewers exhibit a notable preference for Chinese contemporary dramas, and in particular, modern romance dramas; b) the predominant concerns underlying the reception of Chinese television dramas revolve around storylines, actors/characters and subtitles; c) reviews and comments related to subtitling can be categorized into distinct themes, which reveal the major concerns of international viewership. Through the investigation, this paper attempts to promote the translation and reception of Chinese television dramas and expand the export market of Chinese productions.

<sup>1</sup> College of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Maritime University, Shanghai, China. <sup>2</sup> College of Foreign Languages and Literature, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. ✉email: [chenlin@shmtu.edu.cn](mailto:chenlin@shmtu.edu.cn)

## Introduction

The past two decades have seen China's "Going Global" project (1999) come into effect. Over this period, the role of film and television works in promoting international cultural exchanges has been emphasized. The export of Chinese drama series has gradually increased following a series of favorable regulatory policies issued by the central and local governments (Zhang, 2011). These policies, designed to promote the selection, translation, and international distribution of Chinese drama series and affiliated content, manifest a dedicated commitment to promoting global cultural exchange. The Chinese Film and TV Import and Export Association was established in 2017 to broaden the marketing and broadcasting of film and television drama abroad. By 2018, the association expanded the total number of member companies to fifty-eight and rolled out further financial benefits and preferential tax measures to accelerate the dissemination of Chinese dramas overseas (TMTPOST, 2019). Concurrently, the burgeoning saturation of China's domestic market for television dramas propels production companies to seek out new markets and sell their productions to a diverse international viewership (*ibid*). Chinese television dramas (hereafter C-dramas) are increasingly consumed by a wider range of audience beyond traditional local and national boundaries.

As articulated by Li (2022: 197), "We live in a digital media-tised world where the boundary between television and online streaming video series has blurred". Streamed media enable the access of international content online and contribute to the formation of a transnational audience group. Internet technologies have, on the one hand, impacted the way people entertain themselves and, on the other hand, influenced interpersonal interactions. Interactive online interfaces empower viewers to customize their viewing options, enabling them to choose what to watch, when and through which technology. Choice and personalization define viewing practices and disrupt traditional distribution and reception mechanisms (Simons, 2014). In addition, viewers are presented with a multi-platform experience, offering a variety of forms of interactivity. Audiences can post their feedback through diverse channels of viewer interaction, which has led to a dramatic increase in online viewing. A recent report by the U.S. media firm Nielsen (Arkin, 2022) states that television streaming services have overtaken traditional cable TV to draw more viewers. Consumers are increasingly "cutting the cord in droves and moving to internet-powered services" (*ibid*), which anticipates a major shift in the viewing landscape.

The proliferation of communication channels on video streaming platforms has propelled the development of C-dramas in the global market. Ratings on these platforms provide an index of viewer feedback, while critical reviews and comments may account for viewer choices, thus providing valuable insights into audience reception (Li, 2022). Therefore, it is worth analyzing these initial observations to investigate the set of factors underlying the reception of C-dramas among global audiences and to account for viewer habits and perception patterns. This paper initiates the investigation by retrieving data on the most popular C-dramas on YouTube and Rakuten Viki (hereafter Viki). Subsequently, a corpus analysis is conducted on user-generated reviews and comments sourced from these platforms. Through the inquiry, this paper aims to address the following questions: a) What are the best-received C-dramas, and do they share common features? b) What are the main factors that determine audience reception of C-dramas? c) Is subtitle a concerning element that influences audience reception? In essence, this study aspires to make a meaningful contribution to the translation and dissemination of C-dramas.

## Reception studies of television dramas and subtitling

Reception studies of television dramas are divided between the study of transnational media content and forms of audiovisual translation. The former often aligns with cultural studies, employing qualitative ethnographic approaches to explore how audiences negotiate media content within their knowledge networks and life practices (Wood, 2006; Adriaens, 2014; Zaborowski, 2016). In contrast, the latter has predominantly focused on the reception of audiovisual translation (mainly subtitling or dubbing), based on the premise that linguistic differences pose the primary barrier for any audience to access media texts across national borders (Díaz Cintas and Sánchez, 2006; Pérez-González, 2007; Fernández-Costales, 2018). Reception studies in Audiovisual Translation (AVT) typically explore viewers' cognitive processes, attitudes, perception, and relevant factors that might influence the viewing experience (Gambier, 2003; Di Giovanni, 2020).

Since the 1980s, audience-oriented research has continued to draw scholarly attention and has established itself as a flourishing area within AVT. In recent decades, studies in AVT have evolved to embrace an array of empirical methods and tools, such as questionnaires, eye tracking, interviews, and direct observations (Chaume, 2018; Orrego-Carmona, 2019). Although these studies have yielded useful findings, relatively less attention has been paid to the audience reception of subtitles in online streaming videos. On the other hand, the flow of streamed media disrupts "fixed territories and national structure" (Athique, 2014: 2). Audiences are increasingly connected through a virtual community, within which viewer engagement with streaming networks lies at the heart. The practice of watching television has transformed from a passive process that occurs in front of the TV screen to an active, perpetual process. Media research has examined TV programs offered on these streaming platforms (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Perryman, 2008; Evans, 2011). Nevertheless, few studies have investigated how audiences respond to multiple media platforms and engage with the content. User-generated reviews/comments on video streaming platforms provide valuable resources for investigating reactions based on viewers' natural viewing experiences, the details of which are yet to be systematically examined.

Compared with dubbing, subtitling is the most economical and efficient form of audiovisual translation for television dramas (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2007). It involves rendering the original verbal message and other useful multimodal information into the written target language. Subtitling is a useful activity that enables audiences to understand content in another language other than their own, through which the popularity of the media content may be achieved. Reception studies in AVT have rested on the presumption that viewers tend to pay prior attention to subtitles in their viewing practice, the validity of which has yet to be addressed (Li, 2022). In light of this, this paper focuses on the top-rated C-dramas published on video streaming platforms. Drawing on sizable user-generated comments and corpus analytical tools, it explores the factors that might influence the viewing experience of audiences and attempts to identify the role of subtitles in the audience reception of C-dramas overseas.

## Corpus and method

**Data collection.** The C-dramas analyzed in this paper were derived from two online streaming sites, YouTube and Viki. The selection of the two platforms was based on their status as major video streaming websites for C-dramas to reach a global audience. As the streaming giant, YouTube has stood out as a reliable source for exported C-dramas, boosting more than 2.70 billion active users as of 2023. This extensive user base contributes to a

**Table 1 Top 10 C-dramas on YouTube based on the average view counts.**

	English title	Chinese title	Total VC	Number of EPs	Average VC	Category
1	Boss & Me (2014)	杉杉来了	3.183 b	33	96.5 m	Cp
2	Eternal Love (2017)	三生三世十里桃花	5.368 b	58	92.6 m	Cos
3	A Love So Beautiful (2017)	致我们单纯的小美好	2.024 b	24	84.3 m	Cp
4	Put Your Head on My Shoulder (2019)	致我们暖暖的小时光	1.959 b	24	81.6 m	Cp
5	Princess Agents (2017)	楚乔传	4.497 b	58	77.5 m	Cos
6	Falling into Your Smile (2021)	你微笑时很美	1.850 b	31	59.7 m	Cp
7	Sweet Combat (2018)	甜蜜暴击	1.826 b	37	49.4 m	Cp
8	Go Go Squid! (2019)	亲爱的热爱的	1.906 b	41	42.4 m	Cp
9	The Brightest Star in The Sky (2019)	夜空中最闪亮的星	1.853 b	44	42.1 m	Cp
10	Empresses in the Palace (2011)	甄嬛传	3.149 b	76	41.4 m	Cos

1. In Table 1, VC stands for view counts, EPs for episodes; b for billion, m for million.  
 2. In Tables 1 and 2, the last column lists the category of the dramas, Cp for contemporary drama, Cos for costume drama.

**Table 2 Top 10 C-dramas on Viki based on the number of ratings.**

	English title	Chinese title	Number of ratings	Rating	Category
1	Go Go Squid! (2019)	亲爱的热爱的	193,631	9.6	Cp
2	Falling into Your Smile (2021)	你微笑时很美	185,057	9.6	Cp
3	You Are My Destiny (2020)	你是我的命中注定	163,684	9.4	Cp
4	My Little Happiness (2021)	我的小确幸	127,489	9.6	Cp
5	Go Ahead (2020)	以家人之名	126,955	9.6	Cp
6	My Unicorn Girl (2020)	穿盔甲的少女	111,931	9.6	Cp
7	Love O2O (2016)	微微一笑很倾城	97,454	9.5	Cp
8	A Love So Beautiful (2017)	致我们单纯的小美好	91,843	9.4	Cp
9	Put Your Head on My Shoulder (2019)	致我们暖暖的小时光	87,331	9.6	Cp
10	You Are My Hero (2021)	你是我的城池营垒	74,454	9.5	Cp

substantial number of comments on audiovisual content and their reception of subtitles. These comments serve as an ideal source of reception that spans a wide range of audience types (Wu and Chen, 2022). Engagement metrics on YouTube, including views, likes, dislikes, and subscriptions, which reflect how many times a video has been interacted with, are crucial measures of the popularity of a video on the site (YouTube Website, 2023).

Viki is the world’s leading platform for Asian entertainment and culture owned by the e-commerce company Rakuten. Viki is a fusion of the words “video” and “Wiki”, alluding to its resemblance to Wikipedia with respect to user-generated content, such as subtitles (Li, 2022). Viki prides itself on offering online viewing of an extensive catalog of Asian primetime shows and films from South Korea, China, Japan, Thailand, etc., to international audiences, as well as having created a sizable community for fansubbers. It has a collection of avid fans providing multilingual subtitles in over 200 languages (Rakuten Viki Website, 2023). The platform’s specific focus on Asian content enables transcultural flow to global audiences with shared cultural interests (Chin and Morimoto, 2013). Furthermore, Viki enhances audience interaction through its rating and commenting functions, allowing viewers to rate shows, comment on episodes and actors, produce their own videos, and engage with one another.

Both YouTube and Viki offer accessibility to television series without a subscription, and a paid membership provides access to additional series depending on the region. These platforms have carved out a niche for global audiences with a shared interest in Asian culture and television dramas (Zhang, 2022). The rating-salient viewing environment may not only influence viewers’ choices of what to watch but also motivate them to contribute feedback (Li, 2022). Viewers can read the comments and post

their own voice to contribute (requires registration), which has fostered a dynamic form of active reception. The interactive features of YouTube and Viki make them suitable choices for studying viewing experiences and audience reception.

The C-dramas under discussion in the present study encompass those that attract the largest fanbase on both platforms. To gain an overview of the presence and reception of C-dramas, this study collected the titles and number of views of all popular C-dramas on YouTube. The goal was to identify the top C-dramas with sizable view counts. To achieve this, the numbers of views for each episode of a drama were retrieved, and these numbers were then added up for the total number of views since this information was not directly available on YouTube. The number of views for the entire drama was then divided by the number of episodes to calculate the average view counts for a single episode. The top ten most popular C-dramas based on the largest average view counts on YouTube were presented in Table 1. In contrast, data collection on Viki was more straightforward. Viki provided viewing for a total of 615 series (as of May 1, 2023) in the “Mainland China” category, encompassing genres such as romantic comedy, costume and period, crime and mystery, thrill and suspense. These series were sorted by “Popularity”, and the numbers of ratings were provided. The top ten C-dramas, as measured by the number of ratings, were selected and presented in Table 2.

To further explore the reception of C-dramas, reviews/comments for each of the aforementioned top ten most popular C-dramas were extracted from the “Comments” section on YouTube and the “Reviews and Comments” section on Viki using Octoparse, a visual web data extraction software. This tool allows users to scrape information from websites on a large scale. Subsequently, 1000 of the most recent publicly available reviews/comments for each drama were selected to compile the research

**Table 3 Top 50 keywords of the target corpus.**

	Type	Frequency	Keyness (Likelihood)		Type	Frequency	Keyness (Likelihood)
1	drama	6305	13077.533	26	heart	441	880.517
2	love	5847	12119.964	27	lot	436	870.22
3	watch	4639	9597.905	28	movie	433	864.043
4	time	2112	4339.652	29	wait	432	861.984
5	story	1394	2850.646	30	smile	428	853.747
6	character	1338	2734.636	31	enjoy	424	845.512
7	episode	1332	2722.207	32	cast	422	841.395
8	series	1186	2419.857	33	nice	407	810.518
9	lead	1061	2161.124	34	hope	404	804.344
10	cute	1054	2146.639	35	favorite	395	795.098
11	feel	876	1778.454	36	acting	393	781.708
12	actor	873	1772.251	37	funny	382	759.077
13	amazing	802	1625.487	38	handsome	375	744.678
14	Chinese	777	1573.824	39	couple	370	734.395
15	beautiful	705	1425.083	40	shan	370	734.395
16	English	650	1311.514	41	recommend	368	730.282
17	season	618	1245.461	42	plot	367	728.226
18	scene	538	1080.419	43	romance	362	717.944
19	life	532	1068.046	44	Wei	356	705.608
20	main	521	1045.366	45	guy	349	691.218
21	chemistry	520	1043.304	46	perfect	347	687.107
22	subtitle	502	1006.198	47	relationship	346	685.052
23	fall	488	977.343	48	song	345	682.996
24	girl	477	954.676	49	happy	334	660.391
25	start	466	932.012	50	people	333	658.336

corpus. Since the data are not restricted and is openly accessible, the use of this data is considered permissible with respect to research ethics. Given the status of English as the main lingua franca, the reviews/comments on the two sites were predominantly written in English. As English reviews/comments had the highest frequency and took the majority account, the reception reflected in these reviews/comments was deemed fairly representative. Therefore, the present study is limited to the analysis of English reviews/comments by native and non-native speakers. A manual check was conducted, and non-English reviews/comments were excluded. If needed, the next most recent review/comment on YouTube and Viki was added to maintain a count of 1000 reviews/comments for each drama. The entire data collection process took approximately six months, from December 2022 to May 2023. New television dramas and reviews/comments were continually updated, and the data used for the analysis in this paper were current up to May 1, 2023. The resulting corpus consisted of 20,000 user reviews and comments in English from the two online platforms, amounting to a total of 14,257 word types and 390,588 word tokens. It is hoped that the analysis of common features and user-generated reviews/comments of the most popular C-dramas would reveal patterns of audience reception.

**Procedure for data analysis.** The analysis initiates by examining the features of the top ten C-dramas on the two streaming platforms, YouTube and Viki (the first section of Statistical analysis). The genres, number of views, and number of ratings of these dramas were gathered and analyzed. To delve further into the factors that concern audience reception, especially behaviors and reactions to subtitles, a corpus analysis of user-generated reviews/comments was adopted, the results of which were presented in the second section “Keyword analysis” and the third section “Collocation and concordance analyses”. The research tool employed for the present study was AntConc (version 4.2.0), the latest version.

Firstly, a keyword analysis was applied to identify possible factors of concern among commenters. For the keyword analysis, the compiled corpus was lemmatized with TagAnt (a multi-language tagging tool built on top of the SpaCy natural language processing framework) and processed in AntConc. Since the keyword analysis aimed to characterize only the target corpus, a large normative corpus, the British National Corpus (BNC) with 710,680 tokens, was used as the reference corpus. Words with significantly higher frequency in the target corpus compared to the reference corpus were identified. This study excluded all function words based on Nation’s (2013) list, as it did not focus on grammatical patterns. The resulting keyword list contained different word forms and their frequencies. The identification of keywords, based on log-likelihood, highlighted fairly common words, serving the purpose of genre-oriented research and favoring keywords that are relatively frequent across the target corpus (Pojanapunya and Todd, 2018), and thus, pertains to the scope of the present study. The top 50 highest-ranking keywords were sorted by keyness (log-likelihood) value and their frequencies, as provided in Table 3.

To determine the role of subtitles in audience reception, collocation and concordance analyses were conducted. A combined search term “sub/subs/subtitl/translat” was used with the regular expression function activated in AntConc, encompassing all possible subtitling-related words: sub, subs, subtitle(s), subtitling, subtitler(s), translate, translation, translator(s), translating, and translated. In line with Brookes and McEnery (2020), the word span was set as five words to the left and right of the search term. Collocates were ranked by log-likelihood scores, indicating the confidence level of whether a collocate typically co-occurred with the search term. The top 50 content collocates were grouped into coherent themes, which illustrated what kinds of thematic content tended to co-occur with subtitles (see Table 4).

To triangulate quantitative findings, a manual analysis of concordances on the aboutness of the texts was conducted. The same combined term “sub/subs/subtitl/translat” was applied in

**Table 4 Top 50 content collocates of subtitling-related words.**

Categories	Collocates (frequency)
Audiovisual contents	<i>episode</i> (7450), <i>Boss</i> (770), <i>episodes</i> (5950), <i>channel</i> (180), <i>epi</i> (530), <i>title</i> (390), <i>YouTube</i> (650), <i>ep</i> (1560), <i>dramas</i> (6300), <i>lead</i> (6330), <i>version</i> (1020), <i>characters</i> (7800),
Locales	<i>English</i> (6500), <i>eng</i> (1820), <i>Indo</i> (70), <i>French</i> (80), <i>Urdu</i> (20), <i>international</i> (290), <i>languages</i> (80), <i>Polish</i> (60)
Evaluation	<i>loved</i> (8630), <i>appreciated</i> (240)
Consumption	<i>dots</i> (150), <i>missing</i> (660), <i>watched</i> (10,800), <i>click</i> (180), <i>reading</i> (750), <i>time</i> (14,660), <i>stopped</i> (200), <i>innuendo</i> (20)
Production	<i>subtitles</i> (4060), <i>upload</i> (450), <i>add</i> (580), <i>subtitle</i> (1110), <i>translate</i> (300), <i>uploading</i> (490), <i>provide</i> (140), <i>subbltit</i> (50), <i>translated</i> (200)
Request	<i>pls</i> (850), <i>plz</i> (500), <i>plzz</i> (130), <i>complete</i> (390), <i>pl</i> (30), <i>plzzzz</i> (40), <i>plzzz</i> (100), <i>proper</i> (130)
Acknowledgment	<i>finally</i> (1680),
Others	<i>onwards</i> (70), <i>June</i> (230)

AntConc to search concordance lines (with an extended co-text of 25 tokens on each side). A total of 1815 concordance lines were returned and treated as the concordance corpus for annotation. During manual annotation, 113 lines were excluded as the word “sub” in the concordances referred to “subtle”, “subscription”, “subpar”, “substance”, etc., rather than “subtitles”. The subsequent concordance analysis was based on 1702 concordance lines. Similar concordance lines were grouped based on different themes. The categorization of reception themes was largely informed by Wu and Chen (2022), who distinguished audience reception themes for *Dianxi Xiaoge* on YouTube, a series of videos featuring the local cuisine and lifestyles of Yunnan, southwestern China. These themes were adapted and applied to categorize the concordance lines in the present study, the results of which are presented in Table 5. All concordance lines were carefully annotated by the second author and cross-checked by both authors. Inconsistencies were jointly discussed, and necessary changes were made.

**Statistical analysis of the reception of Chinese television dramas**

**Chinese television dramas on video streaming platforms.** Building upon the statistical analysis delineated in “Corpus and method”, Table 1 presents the top list of C-dramas featured on YouTube, gauged by the average view counts per episode, while Table 2 enumerates the top ten C-dramas garnering the largest number of ratings on Viki.

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, contemporary series and costume dramas emerge as the most popular genres among Chinese productions. Both genres receive official endorsement from the National Radio and Television Administration of China for global promotion, aiming to spark global interest in the country and illuminate aspects of Chinese history and customs (Ji, 2018). In contrast to the prevailing perception that European and American markets lean more towards period dramas from China (TMTPOST, 2019), contemporary dramas dominate the list of the most popular drama on both YouTube and Viki. Costume dramas, including period, martial arts (*Wuxia*), fantasy (*Xuanhuan*), and fairy (*Xianxia*), secure the second position in terms of popularity. Research by Li (2022) suggests that the temporal and spatial distance created in costume dramas demands considerable cognitive resources, potentially causing some viewers to cease information processing and discontinue viewing, thereby accounting for the observed result.

More specifically, both YouTube and Viki audiences exhibit a strong affection for modern romance dramas. The statistics of view counts and the number of ratings indicate that modern romance stands out as the most popular sub-genre of C-dramas on both platforms, as reflected in the last column of the tables. As seen from Table 1, of the top ten C-dramas on YouTube, only three fall under the category of costume drama, *Eternal Love* (2017, Rank 2), *Princess Agents* (2017, Rank 5), and *Empresses in the Palace* (2011,

Rank 10), while the rest belong to the modern romance genre. On Viki, all top ten C-dramas, based on the number of ratings, are categorized under modern romance. The assessment of the top ten C-dramas has prioritized the number of ratings over rating scores to exclude dramas with exceptionally high ratings but a limited number of ratings. For example, despite achieving high ratings of 9.7, costume dramas like *Love between Fairy and Devil* (2022), *Ashes of Love* (2018) and *Eternal Love* (2017) fell short in popularity, with only 48,967, 37,758, and 37,429 ratings, respectively. Therefore, this study casts more attention to dramas with a substantial fanbase rather than those with the highest ratings.

While the analysis of Tables 1 and 2 indicates a notable preference for modern romance dramas among audiences on both YouTube and Viki, the evaluation of this genre among domestic Chinese viewers on *Douban* paints a different picture. As the largest online community in Chinese culture focusing on film, books, drama, and music recommendations and commenting, *Douban* boasts over 60 million registered users and 150 million unregistered frequent visitors (*Douban Website*, 2023). Its large user base contributes a considerable volume of comments and opinions. Of the top 10 C-dramas, *Falling into Your Smile* (2021), a modern romance drama centered on e-sports, secured the 6th position on YouTube and 2nd on Viki. With a YouTube view count exceeding 1.850 billion and an average of over 59 million views per episode, coupled with 185,057 ratings and a Viki score of 9.6 out of 10, it stands as a popular choice among international audiences. However, it has received a remarkably low 3.2 out of 10 on *Douban*. As seen from Fig. 1, a total of 413,614 viewers rated this drama, and 69.8% assigned it just one star. A significant disparity in the reception of the drama between domestic Chinese and overseas audiences has been revealed.

The same pattern is evident in the case of other modern romance dramas, exemplified by *Go Go Squid* (2019), which shares the e-sports theme. It secured the 8th position among the top ten most-streamed Chinese dramas on YouTube while concurrently being the most-rated Chinese drama on Viki. International audiences exhibit profound admiration for both productions, labeling *Falling into Your Smile* as “the best Chinese TV play to see in 2021” (*YouTube Website*). Some viewers engage in repeated binge-watching, commending various elements of the two dramas, such as the plot, actor interactions, themes, emotional resonance, and more. However, akin to the aforementioned show, *Go Go Squid* (2019) received a modest score of 6.6 out of 10 on *Douban*. Among the 473,360 viewers who rated this drama, over half assigned it three stars or fewer, indicating a below-average rating. Dramas that are well-received among international audiences receive low ratings from Chinese audiences on *Douban*. Comparable trends are discernible in other contemporary dramas. In sum, a distinct divergence in C-drama preferences between Chinese and international viewership has been observed.

**Table 5 Different themes of subtitle reception.**

Rank	Reception themes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of reviews/comments
1	Requests	884	51.9%	I like the character and the story... LeTV.....Plz upload all episodes in eng sub for international fans.....
2	Acknowledgment	439	25.8%	Thank you so much for subbing all the eps till now!?! Really appreciate your hard work and effort! I look forward to the next episodes ....
3	Linguistic quality	219	12.9%	It's a pity that so much of the banter/innuendo is lost in the subtitles (at least on Viki), but usually enough comes through you at least get an inkling. All in all, if you like shows about esports or competition in general, I think you'll like this one!
4	Subtitle presentation	114	6.7%	It's a shame that the subs' timing is messed up in just about every episode...
5	Comprehension	106	6.2%	Poor me. My Chinese is weak. Without caption in English, I cannot understand fully the rest of the story.
6	Marked languages	80	4.7%	Please, why do not you have the English subtitles and the option to translate to Brazilian Portuguese?
7	Instruction or explanation	68	4.0%	For subtitles click the 3 dots on the upper right corner of your screen and choose caption then choose English...
8	Emotional reactions	56	3.2%	The subtitles are driving me nuts. Is gonna get better on the following episodes...
9	Subtitle-evoked viewership	33	1.9%	I really liked your channel, therefore, I subscribed it. Subtitles are the best. Keep doing your hardwork.
10	Prosumption	19	1.1%	I am thinking to translate this series in French/Turkish or Korean. But I don't know how to do and I don't know which language I should translate. I want that this series can be seen by a lot of people because it is the cutest one.?
11	Language acquisition	10	0.6%	I am learning Chinese and I want to give thanks to this awesome channel for Chinese subtitles. This series is so good.



**Fig. 1 Rating of *Falling into Your Smile* on Douban.**

**Keyword analysis of the reception of Chinese television dramas.** A word frequency list was generated through keyword analysis. Table 3 presents the top 50 keywords ranked by keyness values and frequencies.

As observed in Table 3, the most frequently used keywords correspond to the genre of the audiovisual content. A significant relative frequency is noted for the words *drama* (1) and *Chinese* (14), as well as words related to the viewing experience or viewers' expectations, such as *watch* (3), *time* (4), *episode* (7), *series* (8), *season* (17), *movie* (28), *wait* (29), and *hope* (34). These keywords

resonate with the core of audiences' reviews and comments. They were used when viewers explicitly mention genre categories and/or express sentiments, whether positive or negative, towards C-dramas. For instance, in Example 1, a viewer expresses deep affection for C-dramas, compares the viewing experience to experiential knowledge and praises the current drama. In Example 2, another viewer reveals affection for the current drama and expresses expectations for the second season.

(1) *I watched this series almost 2 years ago. It was my third Chinese series which made me an actual fan of c-dramas. Today*

I've **watched** probably 150+ *c-dramas* but this is still my favourite one. **Re-watching** for the 4th time <3 Hu Yitian, Wo Ai Ni

--Comment on *A Love So Beautiful* (2017)

(2) This **drama** is amazing have **watched** it more than 3 times and I am still willing to **watch** it. I heard a few rumours are spreader that there is a chance of **season 2** of this **drama** well can't wait. **hoping** for the best.

--Comment on *Falling into Your Smile* (2021)

In addition to the above-mentioned, a substantial portion of keywords in Table 3 represents factors that influence audience reception of C-dramas. Comments touch upon *story* (5), *scene* (18), *chemistry* (21), *cast* (32), *acting* (36), *plot* (42), *romance* (43), and *song* (48) of the drama, which all contribute to the development of the storyline. As showed in Examples 3 and 4, viewers focus on the artistic aspects of the video and discuss the conditions that underpin their choices of C-dramas. Notably, music emerges as a significant factor in audience reception, as highlighted in Example 3, where the theme song holds a pivotal position as cast and storyline in the viewer's choices of C-dramas. In other comments, some viewers claim that they discovered the drama through the song, which indicates the importance of music in viewers' choices of C-dramas. Statistical analysis also reveals that *subtitle* (22) as a keyword with high frequency in reviews/comments, emphasizing the significant role of subtitles in audience reception. Simultaneously, the keyword *English* (16), frequently used with subtitles, verifies its status as a lingua franca (see Example 4).

(3) This is one of my favorite *c-drama* I watched so far, not only because of the handsomeness of ex-Exo Z-Tao, because of the **story** itself is so good...I love all the **songs** they put in to this drama...

--Comment on *The Brightest Star in The Sky* (2019)

(4) Not from China but been watching Chinese series for so many times now, with **English subtitles**; the **story plots** are amazing, the **acting** are superb and the **scenes** and **sceneries** are simply magical. Will take some long convincing for me in this lifetime to watch Hollywood films again - no offence intended. Particularly after Harvey Weinstein.

--Comment on *Eternal Love* (2017)

Viewers also look beyond the drama itself, drawing attention to *character* (6), (*main*) *lead* (20, 9), and *actor* (12) in the drama. Words like *girl* (24), *guy* (45) are also frequently used in reviews and comments to refer to characters or actors. Names of characters, such as *Shan* (40) and *Wei* (44), which represent the female lead Xue Shanshan in *Boss & Me* (2014) and the male lead character Gu Weiyi in *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* (2019) respectively, are ranked in the keyword list. This shows the significant influence of characters and actors on the reception of C-dramas. Examples 5 and 6 highlight viewers commenting on characters' and actors' appearance, looks, or voice, e.g. their *smile* (30), as well as their *relationships* (47) as a *couple* (39) in the drama. In Example 5, viewers display their knowledge of actors by sharing information about the real-life (19) relationships of lead actor and actress, and reveal they are fans of actors. All these contribute to their choices of C-dramas.

(5) Different story i like it Luhan and his girlfriend wowww i really love the drama series whose the leading **actor** and **actress** is in **relationship** in real....i can see the sweetness now i know why its so called Sweet Combat.

--Comment on *Sweet Combat* (2018)

(6) 36:09 the proud **smile** after he succesfully praised momo.. *gu wei yi* why u soo cutee ..they such an adorable **couple**.

--Comment on *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* (2019)

Furthermore, this study reveals that a majority of the keywords characterize audience reception of C-dramas as positive. This may be linked to the fact that these reviews/comments were made about the most popular C-dramas on both platforms.

Descriptions such as *love* (2), *cute* (10), *amazing* (13), *beautiful* (15), *enjoy* (31), *nice* (33), *favorite* (35), *funny* (37), *handsome* (38), *recommend* (41), *perfect* (46), and *happy* (49) were frequently used, as shown in the following examples. The term *heart* also ranks 26 in the keyword list, with viewers expressing that C-dramas have won their hearts or made their hearts flutter (see Example 7). Similarly, there were other viewers describing C-dramas as "brilliant heart touching" and expressing love from the depth of their hearts.

(7) Just finished this drama yesterday and I'm already here to rewatch it again because I just can't live without seeing these **amazing** characters. They totally won my **heart!!** This is the best *cdrama* I've ever watched. Normally watching dramas entertain me, but this drama, it gave me **happiness** that I never felt before while watching something. I **love** everything about this drama. Now my only wish is to get a season 2 with all the same casts!!!

--Comment on *Falling into Your Smile* (2021)

(8) Goosh ....??? ..and after watching this super (!) **amazing** (!) great (!) series. LI XIAN takes the most space in my **heart** and is number one among my seven **favorite** Chinese actors...Wow...I fell in **love** with him...Thank you so much CROTON MEGA HIT for this series Greetings and hugs from Poland.

--Comment on *Go Go Squid* (2019)

In summary, the top 50 keywords of the target corpus, as illustrated in Table 3, can be grouped into five primary categories: a) those related to the genre, viewing experience, or viewers' expectations; b) elements pertaining to the factors that influence viewers' consumption of C-dramas; c) descriptors reflecting viewers' attitude towards C-dramas; d) indicators pointing to self-disclosure of the commenters, exemplified by the term *feel* (11). For instance, a commenter openly expresses, "After watching so many C-dramas I feel like China is my second home"; and e) terms utilized in collocations or specific contexts, such as *main* (20) *lead*, *fall* (23) in *love*, *start* (25) to *watch*, a *lot* (27) of, and *people* (50).

**Collocation and concordance analyses of the reception of Chinese television dramas.** To address the third research question about the role of subtitles in audience reception, collocation and concordance analyses were conducted. The analysis of words co-occurring with subtitling-related terms provided a general overview of viewers' responses to subtitles. In collocation analysis, a total of 104 hits were found. The top 50 content collocates were grouped into different categories and summarized in Table 4. It can be seen from the table that while some categories are generic (e.g. *Audiovisual contents*) and do not reveal much about audience reception, others are more indicative of the audience's responses and attitudes towards the subtitles.

Firstly, it was found that viewers were proactive in asking for diverse non-English subtitles by posting English comments (see the "Locales" collocates). The mostly addressed languages were *Indo* (70), *French* (80), *Urdu* (20), and *Polish* (60). Tracing how non-English subtitles were commented provides insights into geographical and language backgrounds of the viewers and "underrepresented and underserved language communities" in AVT (Dwyer, 2017: 181). In addition, the viewers' reception of the subtitles appeared to be positive (see the "Evaluation" collocates). They tended to *love* and *appreciate* the subtitles. Within the two platforms, the translation quality of Viki was often appreciated as an outcome of dedicated volunteer efforts. It was mentioned in one of the reviews/comments that Viki's translation "offers cultural explanations because fansubbers have more interest and affection to uncover the cultural connotations in the drama" (Viki Website).

The collocates of “Consumption” and “Production” revealed users’ experience and opinions of watching C-dramas on the video streaming platforms. For instance, a number of viewers shared their experience of how to enable the subtitles (by *clicking* the three *dots* on the screen) or reported the *missing* subtitles. Some viewers stated that they had watched the video more than one *time*, while others volunteered to *add* or *translate* the subtitles into their own languages (see the “Production” collocates). It can be seen from the “Request” and “Acknowledgment” collocates that requests for subtitles were far more frequent than acknowledgments of subtitles. Sometimes viewers asked to provide *proper* English subtitles or *complete* English subtitles for all episodes. Words like *please* were frequently mentioned, indicating that the absence of subtitles, rather than their presence, was more saliently felt by the viewers. This trend is further validated by the results from the concordance analysis.

With respect to the concordance analysis, a total of 1702 concordance lines were analyzed and coded into different reception themes. Table 5 presents the results of annotated themes, frequency, percentage, and examples from the concordance corpus. In total, eleven different themes were categorized. In Table 5, the percentage was calculated as follows: the frequency of a theme divided by the number of concordance lines. As one comment might contain one or more themes, the percentage added up to more than 100%.

Upon examining the overall distribution, it is found that the reviews/comments represented a broad range of themes. As shown in Table 5, the subtitling-relevant reviews/comments could be coded into eleven reception themes: *requests*, *acknowledgment*, *linguistic quality*, *subtitle presentation*, *comprehension*, *marked languages*, *instruction/explanation*, *emotional reactions*, *subtitle-evoked viewership*, *prosumption*, and *language acquisition*, presented according to their frequency in descending order. It can be seen from the table above that the most frequent reception themes were *requests* and *acknowledgment*. There were 884 (51.9%) reviews/comments showing viewers’ *requests* for subtitles, but only 439 (25.8%) indicating the *acknowledgment* of subtitles. The number of *requests* was more than double that of *acknowledgment*. The predominance of *requests* over *acknowledgment* may suggest that subtitles tended to stay invisible until they failed viewers’ expectations.

In addition to *requests* and *acknowledgment*, the dominant attention of the viewers was paid to the *linguistic quality* of the subtitles, while their attitudes towards it varied significantly. There were 219 instances related to this theme, which accounted for 12.9% of the target corpus. The second most frequently articulated concern was about *subtitle presentation*. The total number of reviews/comments on *subtitle presentation* was 114, accounting for 6.7% of the target corpus and making up a large part. The issues of *subtitle presentation* constituted the focus of viewers’ attention. This theme is closely followed by *comprehension*, with 106 reviews/comments, accounting for 6.2%. A certain number of reviews/comments (80 lines) indicated the demand for non-English subtitles, challenging the current dominance of English. The comments related to *marked languages* made up 4.7% of the target corpus. Most of them fell on the need for subtitles in Indonesia (18 lines), Arabic (8 lines), Polish (7 lines), Portuguese (6 lines), Urdu (6 lines), and Hindi (6 lines), etc., which revealed a wide range of viewership.

Viewers’ attention was also paid to *instruction/explanation* (68 lines, 4.0%), *emotional reactions* (56 lines, 3.2%), and *subtitle-evoked viewership* (33 lines, 1.9%). As illustrated in Table 5, there were only a small fraction of comments concerning *prosumption* (19 lines, 1.1%) and *language acquisition* (10 lines, 0.6%). Results show that *language acquisition* was the least mentioned factor by viewers (see Table 5).

## Discussion

In the first section of analysis, “Chinese television dramas on video streaming platforms”, an investigation into the most favored C-dramas on two online streaming platforms highlights the heightened reception of contemporary C-dramas, particularly those within the modern romance genre, by international audiences. A plausible rationale for this finding lies in the accessibility of contemporary drama themes to global viewers, especially when compared with costume dramas which are deeply entrenched in traditional Chinese culture with a significant historical nexus. Although subtitles may help overcome linguistic barriers, effective cross-cultural communication extends beyond language comprehension. The absence of historical contextualization and variations in cultural nuances may impede international audiences’ reception of costume C-dramas. This observation aligns with subsequent corpus analyses, revealing that television consumption is perceived as a leisure pursuit aimed at eliciting enjoyment, thereby underscoring the preference for narratives demanding minimal cognitive effort from the audiences. This revelation highlights the significance of empirical reception studies, such as the present one, in scrutinizing the proclivities of global audiences during the selection and dissemination of C-dramas.

In the second section, “Keyword analysis of the reception of Chinese television dramas”, an examination of the keyword list suggests that a substantial majority of viewers derive enjoyment from the C-dramas they engage with. The reviews and comments, centered on the top ten C-dramas on YouTube and Viki, predominantly convey a positive sentiment. Crucial contributors to the reception of C-dramas encompass audiovisual contents (e.g. the story, scenes, cast, acting proficiency, plot, song, etc.), the performance of (lead) characters/actors, and the role of subtitles. Watching C-dramas enables international audiences to acquaint themselves with Chinese actors, and they tend to explore more works by the same actors. Remarkably, audiences have acknowledged the significance of music in shaping the reception of C-dramas.

The results derived from the corpus analysis in “Collocation and concordance analyses of the reception of Chinese television dramas” reveal that viewers’ primary concern was either requesting subtitles (*requests*) owing to their absence/incompleteness or acknowledging their presence (*acknowledgment*) with expressions of gratitude. Subsequently, *linguistic quality* emerged as the third major concern for the audience. While certain reviews/comments critiqued the quality of interlingual translation, asserting that much of the connotation was “lost in the subtitles”, others maintained a generally positive attitude towards the subtitles. A viewer, for instance, remarked, “As an American, the Chinese culture and formalities were confusing at first. Translation is always difficult, but the subtitles made the language simple. Perhaps more was gained than lost in translation.” Instead of directly complimenting the *linguistic quality* of subtitles, a considerable number of viewers conveyed positive sentiments by expressing gratitude for the “excellent” or “awesome” work that the subtitlers have done. Locher and Messerli (2020) elaborated that subtitles on streaming platforms like Viki are particularly intriguing as they are crafted by fans. The awareness that subtitles are community-created potentially enhances the recipients’ recognition of their presence and appreciation for the production process. The roles of producers and recipients are less clearly separable than is the case in traditional film reception.

Beyond this, prevalent concerns regarding *subtitle presentation* (theme 4) encompassed song subtitling and variables such as sync, rate, and fonts. While Wu and Chen (2022) assert that audiences no longer prioritize the variables of subtitle presentation as online platforms enable better control and customization of the viewing experience, the findings of the present study



challenge that assumption. Moreover, a relatively large scale of viewers explicitly voiced a need to understand the actions and dialog of characters, which fell under the theme of *comprehension* (5). The role of subtitles in facilitating reception in an integral viewing experience was emphasized. The viewers stated that their comprehension of the audiovisual content would be compromised without proper subtitles. The escalating demand for non-English subtitles (*marked languages*) indicates a diverse viewership relying on subtitles to understand the videos, which aligns with the findings in the collocation analysis. Existing AVT research has largely centered on a limited set of languages, such as English, Spanish, and Italian. Some viewers expressed a sense of cultural negligence due to the absence of representation of their languages; others lamented having to give up on the drama, while some directly lodged complaints against the channel or platforms for inadequate subtitling supply. These findings support the surging calls for translation in multiple languages and advocate for further research on underrepresented language communities (De Ridder and O’Connell, 2019; Fernández-Costales, 2018).

As noted in Table 5 (theme 7), viewers volunteered detailed *instructions/explanations* on how to enable subtitles or elucidated the process of subtitle production. For instance, one viewer explicitly explained, “It takes several hours and lots of hard work by volunteers to add the English sub since the studio/producers don’t create the subs. Please be patient. The studio is releasing 2 episodes from Mon through Thurs. then it gets uploaded to YouTube raw. The YouTuber then segments the video and translates line by line.” Furthermore, a subset of viewers enthusiastically shared their *emotional reactions* (theme 8) to a viewing experience. They perceived subtitles as an integral component of a satisfying viewing experience and thus felt “disturbed”, “disappointed”, or “sad” in the absence of subtitles, leading some to discontinue viewing midway. In contrast, some viewers would subscribe to a video or channel when subtitles have their linguistic representation (i.e. *subtitle-evoked viewership*). The findings suggest that viewers were keenly aware of their sense of belonging and the emotions triggered by subtitles. The awareness of multi-locality among the audiences stimulates their sense of connection to share experiences or feelings conjured up through viewing. As Locher and Messerli (2020) have noticed, viewers actively engage in identity construction by sharing details about themselves and their viewing experience. The cumulative effect of writing and reading these reviews/comments contributes to community-building through the joint orientation to the practice of C-drama watching.

It is noteworthy that several viewers, though small in number, volunteered to produce interlingual subtitles, demonstrating *prosumption* (see Table 5, theme 10). In assuming the role of subtitlers, these individuals served not only as consumers but also as prosumers of AVT (Dwyer, 2019), which echoes the growing interest in reception studies of fan-subtitled content explored by researchers such as Bogucki (2009), Dwyer (2019), and Orrego-Carmona (2019). On the other hand, the minimal attention dedicated to *language acquisition* (theme 11) suggests that viewers primarily consume videos for entertainment rather than language learning. While AVT studies have extensively researched subtitles’ role in *language acquisition*, the viewers’ scant attention to this aspect underscores potential disparities in consumption and reception between social media and traditional media. Further exploration is necessary to understand the AVT needs and preferences of audiences on new media platforms (Fernández-Costales, 2018; Orrego-Carmona, 2018).

## Conclusion

This paper has investigated the audience reception of C-dramas on the video streaming platforms YouTube and Viki employing

an empirical approach. Through the collection of data on view counts on YouTube and the number of ratings on Viki, this study has identified the top ten most popular C-dramas on the two sites. The findings reveal a marked disparity in reception between domestic Chinese and international audiences. In terms of genre, viewers of both platforms demonstrate a pronounced preference for Chinese contemporary dramas, specifically modern romance dramas, which have garnered substantial popularity abroad despite potential disparities in appreciation among domestic Chinese viewers.

Through a meticulous corpus analysis of user-generated reviews and comments pertaining to the selected dramas, this study has further mapped out factors integral to the audience reception of C-dramas. The findings suggest that viewers’ reception of C-dramas hinges on a range of factors, with audiovisual content and the prominence of (lead) actors/characters being the most salient. Subtitles, identified as pivotal in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, also play an active role. The analysis of subtitle reception indicates that viewers predominantly express concerns about undersupplied subtitles and prolonged delay in updates, although *linguistic quality* and *subtitle presentation* also pose challenges. Notably, the inconsistent feed of subtitles in certain European and Asian languages (*marked languages*) remains one of the main concerns among viewers. These issues may evolve into *emotional reactions* to media content. In contrast to the broad range of research interests, only a small minority of reviews/comments are devoted to the issue of *prosumption* and *language acquisition*. By identifying themes of the reviews/comments, this paper unveils the focal points of viewer commentary and reception patterns of C-drama, thereby addressing the research questions proposed at the beginning of this paper.

The corpus data utilized in this study comprises user-generated reviews and comments. Drawing on corpus data reduces the subjectivity of the present research. The reviews and comments are voluntarily posted by viewers, making this scenario the closest to a natural viewing experience. Relying on a wealth of naturally-occurring data greatly enhances the validity of the study. In this vein, this paper contributes to the understanding of audience reception of C-dramas, a dimension that has yet to be systematically examined.

However, there are limitations to be addressed. Firstly, the findings are limited to the reception of television dramas on two platforms and the inclusion of solely English reviews and comments may not be applicable to other media platforms, diverse genres (e.g. reality programs or talent shows), or languages. Secondly, the possibility that viewers may not feel motivated enough to engage with the video through written comments when their viewing needs are met poses a potential limitation on the generalizability of corpus findings. Thirdly, corpus-analysis, inherently frequency-based, may lack depth in elucidating the underlying reasons for observed patterns. Nevertheless, this paper has managed to illuminate reception patterns specific to C-drama streamed overseas and validate impressionistic understanding of C-drama reception through a quantitative lens. Further research into audience viewing habits promises valuable insights into the motivations behind these reception patterns.

## Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## Author contributions

LC conceived and wrote this paper. KC collected the original data and performed the initial data analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

## Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Additional information

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Lin Chen.

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