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# How U.S. Audiences View Korean Films: A Case Study of Oldboy

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How U.S. Audiences View Korean Films:

A Case Study of Oldboy

by

Sung Taik Cha

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Of the requirements for the degree of  
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ABSTRACT

Prior studies have shown that the information and cultural product flow is dominantly one direction from large/wealthy markets to smaller markets. Extending this position through the underlying research, it is expected that the audiences in the United States, one of the largest cultural product exporters, may have shaped certain perceptions on the scarcity of Korean films in their domestic film market. By studying the users in an internet film discussion community, this research aims to provide useful ideas about how American audiences perceive Korean films. This qualitative case study conducted a content analysis of the actual postings by the participants on the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>) as they discuss the Korean movie "OldBoy." Then, in-depth interviews with volunteered users were performed.

Foreign films, such as Asian films like *OldBoy*, seem to especially satisfy their needs of alternatives due to these films' scarcity in U.S. market. In other words, participating in community discussion is a means of finding new foreign films, and watching new foreign films works as a way of contributing to their film viewing

communities. Also, contributing to the community enhances their perceived prestige as film enthusiasts.

The investigator started this research from the assumption that the scarcity of Korean films made U.S. audiences ethnocentric. However, the study observed that the scarcity of Korean films and the foreignness of this film is treated as one of the most attractive aspects to this subset of viewers.

This study has shown that by contributing to and participating in message board discussions, the viewers built a film viewing community in the IMDb website. The discussions with others in the film viewing community helped them build and enhance their prestige as serious film-goers as they built an interpretive community. Tracking the posts and respondents' answers, the investigator could predict that they are building exchange networks in their foreign film viewing community, and this process may influence to their future foreign film viewing.

## Introduction

### *Background*

As Sinclair (1992, as cited in Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 1997) claims, “cultural products are the mirrors that reflect the society” (p. 3); cultural products are based on real life and reflect the society itself. Moreover, it is also believed cultural products can affect every aspect of human lives, and through this process, they can influence the values, culture, even the future of that society. In sum, social trends and values are reflected and are also challenged in cultural products. In this respect, cultural products can be treated not just as industrial products, but rather as leaders of the culture and indicators of the future of the society.

Among cultural products, film is considered one of the most powerful media because all the aspects and genres of culture can converge in film. Films reflect music, fashion, food, family, social life, trends, and even the language of that society. Moreover, film not only reflects the society but also can lead the society by creating new trends. In other words, films possibly influence the cultural norms and the values of a society for their strong power of influence to the audiences and the society.

The problem here is that most films in the world are made and exported by U.S. producers. In dominating the world film market, the United States has exported its

cultural norms with the film products and has affected and changed target countries' cultures. Consequently, as scholars like Varan (1998) have suggested, in this world of globalization, many countries are worrying about the contamination of their indigenous cultures by Hollywood. Entire societies and cultures are being influenced by American views and lifestyles, either consciously or unconsciously. In some instances, the indigenous cultures are losing their uniqueness and diversity, and are becoming homogenized (Ferguson, 1992). For these reasons, many countries are striving to escape the influence of U.S. popular culture backed by Hollywood.

On the contrary, the U.S. film market is attractive to filmmakers in other countries because it is the biggest one in the world; moreover, it acts like an information terminal. All information comes into the center and goes out to the rest of the world. Therefore, foreign filmmakers have been trying to expand to the world film market using the U. S. market as an effective information terminal. They think that if they can effectively break into the U.S. film market and grab even a small vein of this information flow, they can share the cultural influences on the world with the dominant film supplier, the United States (S. Kim, 2003).

#### *Rationale of study*

This case study examines the specific impressions and ideas that U.S. users in a internet film discussion website (Internet Movie Database, IMDb <http://www.imdb.com>) have about a specific Korean film, *OldBoy*, and Korean culture that are reflected in that film. The study also examines what barriers and concerns the U.S.



users may face when they watch foreign films. The investigator suggests two major barriers. First, the researcher suggests a linguistic barrier. Most of the foreign films are made in their native language rather than English. The investigator assumes that U.S. users may have a certain impression of translation methods. The other is about the cultural barrier. The investigator's assumption is that U.S. film products' domestic market domination may influence U.S. film viewers' attitudes toward the foreign cultures. In this respect, this study examines how these barriers may work when U.S. audiences watch a film from Korea.

A Korean movie, *OldBoy*, was chosen for this qualitative case study. It is the 2004 *Cannes Film Festival Grand Prix* winner and also was commercially successful in the Asian market as well as in Europe. It was released on U.S. screens in March 2005. However, it failed to achieve commercial success even with its fame from Cannes and commercial success in Europe and Asia. It should be noted that in this study we will use the idiom "Asian" despite our understanding that this is a very generic term and can not be specifically linked to a single people or culture. Despite this understanding, many members of the U.S. film audience categorize the peoples of Asia as "Asians;" a category that is without true distinction.

Two overarching ideas that inspired this study are cultural imperialism and active audience approaches. Cultural imperialism is one of the most applicable theories to explain the U.S. film market and Asian films in the U.S. market. Active audience approaches are helpful to understand audiences' attitudes toward *OldBoy*.

This study performed a content analysis of posting discussions among *OldBoy* viewers in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb; www.imdb.com) website's *OldBoy* exclusive board, and performed in-depth interviews with multiple board users via e-mail. This study has four research questions. 1) What impressions of Korean life and culture are evident to *OldBoy* viewers? 2) How are those impressions expressed? 3) What technical problems do viewers encounter when viewing *OldBoy*? and 4) What aspects of this Korean film, and potentially other such films, attract U.S. audiences?

## Background of Study

### *World film market.*

As Vany (2004, p. 267) stated, “Most of the money has to be spent up front to produce a movie before anyone knows how much it is worth”; because of the high risk, a stable profit model is essential for the major film makers. Therefore, media firms have been trying to build vertically integrated organizations to control the whole spectrum of exhibition windows. This vertical integration guarantees that the companies reduce their risk and make continuous profits by selling the same products in different media forms. In theatres, pay-per-view channels, and DVDs, films can be consumed repeatedly. In other words, if a company can control films at all levels, it can effectively continue its own profit circulation.

Getting a larger audience directly leads to elevation of quality because filmmakers can put more resources into their film products if they have more profit coming in. In this situation, producers gain a competitive advantage in trading media products because there is a causal relation between investment in a film’s production and the film’s quality, diversity, and popularity; conclusively, this circle reinforces the infrastructure of domestic film industry. (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Fin, 1997; S. Kim, 2004; Lee & Bae, 2004; Wildman & Siwek, 1988).

According to Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn (1997), the increase in film production investment shifts the demand curve for domestic films upward. This shift has the dual effect of increasing box office revenues and enhancing domestic films' power against foreign films. Furthermore, the stable profit model makes the film industry export products of higher quality for lower prices than competitors. If the demand for domestic films were elevated, cultural distance and linguistic handicaps decrease the demand for foreign films, and the self sufficiency ratio of the domestic film market increases.

Now consider the preceding argument in the world film market. Filmmakers in Asian countries are only targeting their own regional markets, unlike U.S. producers, who target the whole world. Lower expectations of profit make the Asian film industry put smaller budgets into their products than U.S. filmmakers, and this lower concentration of capital and resources reduce the quality of film products. Consequently, this difference of market size generates a vicious circle (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 1997).

According to Y. Kim, Lee, H. Kim, and Do, (2004), in 2002, there were 17,368 media companies in the world. Among them, 15,544 companies were based in North America and Europe, and their share is 89.5 percent. Most Asian companies are Japanese, so it can be said that approximately 95 percent of the world media market is dominated by the United States, Europe, and Japan, so-called advanced countries. Hancock (1998) also showed the gap between the Asian film industry and Hollywood in investment size. While the Asian film industry is making slightly more films than North America, the budget of North American film industry is about ten thousand times bigger than that of

Asia. In 1997, Asia produced more than 800 films, while North America was producing about 700. In contrast, North America invested \$10 billion U.S. while Asia's budget was 20 times less than that of North America (Hancock, 1998). Although North American studios produce fewer films, the revenue that flows through the integrated distribution mechanism is far more than that of Asia.

### *Cultural imperialism.*

One of the most applicable ideas to explain the environment of the film market is cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism explains the power balance and flow of culture and information between groups by looking at who has more power to shape or influence other cultures (Crane, 2002).

S. Kim (2003) points that all images made by U.S. film producers are being consumed by world film audiences, so the audiences have high tendency to adopt those ideas and assimilate the dominant views. According to this view, the longtime domination by Hollywood made U.S. culture a universal norm; in addition, scholars like Hollifield (2001) add that this cultural domination eventually helped many other U.S. industries easily advance and spread to the world. Through this process, U.S. products and lifestyle became one of the most important icons for the consumers in the world. This cultural homogenization is the basic assumption of cultural imperialism. It assumes that the cultural domination of Western countries spreads Western values around the world, and this homogenization remakes national cultures and identities in Western traditions. Through this, all indigenous cultures would become similar to each other and lose their

uniqueness. This process weakens the diversity of the global culture.

Herbert Schiller suggested the word “Cultural imperialism” in his 1976 work “*Communication and Cultural Domination*” to explain how large, multinational corporations in developed countries had dominated developing countries. Schiller suggested there are global imbalances between the Center, or the advanced countries in the First World, and Peripheries, or advancing or Third World countries. According to Schiller’s view, information and technology are controlled by the center nations, and their flow is in one direction from the core to the periphery, with little opportunity for peripheral nations to participate in that process. According to the cultural imperialism viewpoint, the center will continue to enhance its power, and the periphery will become weaker and more dependent upon the cultural center for information.

Although one-way flow of information and cultural products is evident, the reality is that advancing modern media technology and the new network paradigm are making the world more intertwined. This makes the one-way flow model more complicated (McQuail, 1994). Therefore, cultural imperialism has advanced by adding discussion of cultural counter flow. For instance, the cultural flows and network model has explained recent global information and culture flow that cultural imperialism cannot (Crane, 2002). Cultural flows and networks models suggest an alternative perspective on the flow of information and culture. This model says information is not originated only from the center, and it does not only flow from the center to the periphery. Instead, receivers can also be the producers, and the center can also be a receiver (Crane, 2002).

### *Active audience approaches.*

Watson and Hill (2000) write, “The notion of the active audience considers audiences proactive and independent rather than docile and accepting. The active audience is seen to use the media rather than be used it” (p. 15). While cultural imperialism focuses on the producers, nations, or organizations to explain the flow of information and media products, active audience approaches can add the role of audiences to this discussion. In addition, they would be a keystone of this study because active audience theories move attention from the state of the film market to the viewpoint of audiences, which are the ultimate subjects of this research.

Salwen (1991) asserts that the interpretation of the cultural products varies according to the context in which reception takes place and the audiences’ social characteristics (education, gender, ethnicity, etc.). Fiske (1987) says, “Television audience is composed of a wide variety of groups and is not a homogeneous mass... These groups actively read tele vision in order to produce from it meanings that connect with their social experience” (p. 84). These ideas from two scholars are built on the assumption that audiences also have a certain power on mass communication processes. In order to understand active audience approaches, the researcher suggests two major theories in this study. One is uses and gratifications (fraction of selection), and the other is reception theory (reception studies, reception analysis).

### *Possible barriers*

Segrave (2004) says foreign films have not been successful in the U.S. film

market because of their quality. This term “quality” here does not mean artistic quality, rather the perfection as commercial goods, and the possibility of commercial success. In this respect, quality of films is highly related to the budget of the films. Wildman and Siwek (1988) proposed that producers in larger and wealthier linguistic markets have an incentive to make larger investments in media products. In other words, it is easier for other English speaking countries and European countries to break into the U.S. market because of their linguistic similarity and/or cultural ties with the United States than for Asian countries to break into the market. Additionally, film critics like Major (2004) believe that U.S. audiences do not enjoy foreign films with subtitles or dubbing because they are not used to them. Long-lasting success of the Hollywood film industry has made Hollywood films acceptable to others, but U.S. viewers may not have many opportunities to be exposed to foreign films (Major, 2004). In this context, this study suggests two major possible barriers that U.S. audiences can face when consuming foreign films. Those are linguistic barriers and cultural barriers.



## Review of Literature

### *The history of foreign films in the United States*

*Foreign films in the United States.* Prior to World War I, more foreign films were shown to U.S. audiences than domestic films. According to Segrave (2004), at that time, two-thirds of films shown in U.S. theaters, were produced in Europe. However, World War I, which was fought on the European continent, weakened the European film industry. The war gave U.S. films an opportunity to overcome European domination and reverse the flow of film trade between Europe and the United States. For instance, in 1927, U.S. films dominated French theaters with an 80 percent market share, and only five percent of films, which were shown in French theaters, were domestic ones (Segrave, 2004). During that era, screen quotas emerged in Europe to protect the domestic market.

During the 1950s, foreign films faced stronger barriers in the U.S. market than they had ever experienced before. Block booking was one of them. When a studio sold a major film to a theater, that theater had to buy several other mediocre films in order to buy the desirable one. Because major U.S. film producers had already seized their domestic market and had enough films to fill domestic screens only with their own products, they could adopt these strong barriers confidently (Robinson, 1973).

According to Aberdeen (2001), Adolph Zukor, who built Paramount into the first

vertically integrated film company in Hollywood, originated the block booking system. By packaging B-films with major and powerful films, studios had stronger profit model, which made investments easier and reduced risk. The U.S. film cartel manipulated domestic theaters with this strategy. As a result, U.S. studios became bigger and overwhelmingly powerful both in finances and quantity of production. In contrast, foreign films experienced severe difficulties breaking into the U.S. film market. After the 1950s, the foreign film market share in the States did not begin to improve until recent days.

*Asian films in the United States.* Out of the 54 foreign films with the greatest gross earnings up to the year 2000, there are two Japanese films: *Shall We Dance* (1997, ranked 17), and *Ran* (1983, ranked 26). There are two Taiwanese films: *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994, ranked 27) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993, ranked 30), and one Chinese film: *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, ranked 44). Except for these five Japanese and pan-Chinese films, there have not been any Asian films among the top-earning foreign films. The rest were from European countries, except for one Mexican film, *Like Water For Chocolate* (Segrave, 2004). Moreover, the Top-ranked Asian film, *Shall We Dance*, had box office earnings of \$ 9.7 million U.S. This is less than 2 % of the top gross-earning U.S. film *Titanic* (\$ 600,779,824). It is even less than 10 % of *Jumanji*, which is ranked 330 among all-time U.S. top gross earning films (IMDb, 2005).

As Chen (2004) stated, “American film audiences haven’t been broadly excited by international films in a long time” (Para. 31), Asian films’ successes were also short

ones. The Japanese art house boom, led by Kurosawa, Imamura, and Ohshima, and the partial success of the Hong Kong martial arts action film boom in the 1970s and 1980s, also failed to continue the boom with their successors. To explain Asian films' failure to continuously succeed in the U.S. market, Zuckerman and Kim's (2003) idea is worth considering. They write that the character of film can be defined from the process of production and distribution, not according to the character of the film itself. In other words, many factors contribute to a film's placement among the spectrum of blockbusters for the mass market or independent films for niche markets. In the case of Asian films, most are released on a small number of screens in the U.S. market, and promotion budgets are also low. According to this categorization, they can be defined as independent films for niche markets. Whether they are blockbuster films in their regional markets or are commercially successful domestically, most are treated as independent films for niche markets in U.S. theaters because of their distribution process in the United States.

Because Asian films have few examples of commercial successes in the U.S. market, it could be a hard decision for distributors to release Asian films nationwide and put a lot of money into promotion; consequently, the possibility of commercial success also becomes lower. This is the vicious business spiral of Asian films in the U.S. market. Zuckerman and Kim (2003) argue that the difference between independent films and blockbusters is not whether they are produced by major film producers or independent filmmakers, but whether they are made by major U.S. film producers or by the others, including Asian majors.

*Theoretical Framework: Taking the audiences into consideration*

*Uses and Gratifications.* Herta Herzog is often credited as the originator of the uses and gratifications discussion. According to Baran and Davis (2000), her 1944 article “*Motivations and Gratifications of Daily Serial Listeners*” is considered the seminal research in this discussion. Through in-depth interviews with radio listeners, she assessed their reasons for using media and experiences with it. In Wilbur Schram’s book “*The process and Effects of Mass Communication,*” he also asked the question, “What determines which offerings of mass communication will be selected by a given individual?” (1954, as cited in Baran & Davis, 2000, p. 19). Schram’s answer for this question was fraction of selection. When people choose what to see, hear, or consume, their choices are based on their own expectations of their rewards from consuming media products.

Blumer and Katz are considered the main theorists of uses and gratifications. In their book *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research* (1974), they argued that media users play an active role in choosing and using the media based on their expectations of rewards. Audiences or media users are seeking media sources that can better meet their needs when they have alternative choices to satisfy their needs. The researchers said consumers have a free will to decide how they use the media and how it would affect them (Baran & Davis, 2000).

This theory suggests that media are trying to achieve their goal to attract audiences; on the other hand, audiences also are trying to increase the effects, rewards, or

gratifications that they can earn from consuming that media product. This argument supports the idea that the process of media flow is not the one-way flow from media to audiences, but is the multi-directional process between media and audiences.

According to McQuail (2000), the basic assumptions of this active audience approach are as follows:

1. Media and content choice is generally rational and directed toward specific goals and satisfactions (thus the audience is active and audience formation can be logically explained).
2. Audience members are conscious of the media-related needs that arise in personal (individual) and social (shared) circumstances and can voice these in terms of motivations.
3. Broadly speaking, personal utility is a more significant determinant of audience formation than aesthetic or cultural factors.
4. All or most of the relevant factors for audience formation (motives, perceived or obtained satisfactions, media choices, background variables) can, in theory, be measured. (pp. 387-388)

In sum, as also shown in McQuail's (2000) argument, uses and gratifications theory assumes that the audiences are active and choose and consume media in order to achieve their goals. It is also assumed that these goals are linked to the audiences' own cultures or characters. Uses and gratifications theory provides mass communication scholars insight into how people experience media content. Because this theory allows

multi-directional information exchanges between media and users, it is thought to provide useful insights into the adoption of new media (Baran & Davis, 2000). The uses and gratifications approach brought audiences to a more central position in thinking about media.

*Reception theory.* While uses and gratifications theory tries to assess audiences' rewards from media consumption, many researcher have focused on the way that audiences resist the constructions of reality preferred by the mass media and construct their own, often oppositional, meaning for media texts. Since much of this work is concerned with detailed investigation of audiences' reception of media messages; it is generally known as reception study. Different from uses and gratifications research, reception study generally uses qualitative methods to discover the meanings which groups of readers generate for media texts, focusing on the audiences' particular situations. In sum, reception theory concentrates on how audiences interpret media.

For the purpose of understanding the viewers' attitudes and impressions of a certain film, reception theory could be the main and one most important theoretical framework for this study. Limited effects paradigm, which was developed in the 1950s, is the view that media reinforce and enhance existing social trends rather than challenging the status quo. A school of social theory, widely known as British cultural studies, emerged among Neo-Marxists in Britain in the 1960s to challenge the limited effects paradigm. British cultural studies scholars asserted that people may resist hegemonic ideas and propagated interpretations of the world. Starting with the deterministic

assumptions about the influence of media, their work focused on audiences' reception of media content (Watson & Hill, 2000).

British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall applied French semiotic theory to argue that every media product is a text that is made up of signs, which are related to one another in specific ways. To make sense of a text, or to read the text, audiences have to be able to interpret the signs and their structures. Hall argued that when making media messages, producers generally intend for audiences to read their messages according to the producers' original aims; however, their messages can be interpreted in other ways. Popular media have a preferred meaning that can agree with and enhance the status quo, but audiences also can make alternative interpretations.

Hall (1980)'s idea is that media messages are interpreted in various ways because they are open and polysemic and are interpreted according to the context and the culture of receivers. This discussion can be connected to Hall's own model of encoding and decoding. Codes are systems of meaning whose rules and conventions are shared by members of a culture or an interpretive community (for instance, fans of the same media program, genre, author or performer) (Hall, 1980). People make sense of the world by drawing on their understanding of communicative codes and conventions. Particular gestures, expressions, forms of dress, and images carry more or less unambiguous meanings that have been established by usage and familiarity within particular cultures.

In his model of the process of encoding and decoding, Hall (1980) portrays the television program as a meaningful discourse. This is encoded according to the meaning

structure of the mass media production organization or the producer, but decoded according to the different experiences and frameworks of knowledge of differently situated audiences. Receivers can read between the lines and even reverse the intended direction of the messages. It is clear that this model and the associated theory embody several key principles: the multiplicity of meanings of media content, the existence of varied interpretive communities, and the primacy of the receiver in determining the meaning.

The central idea of this approach focuses on how different audience members make sense of specific forms of content. Reception theory focuses on people's ability to make sense of specific forms of content. Readers of media texts often apply their own negotiated and oppositional meanings to the preferred readings intended by content producers. In other words, audiences can be considered as the active producers of meaning, not only the consumers of media meanings. Audiences decode media texts in ways which are related to their social and cultural circumstances and the ways that they individually experience those circumstances.

Similarly, reception study argues that audiences do not perfectly take the view of the message producers; rather they try to find their own meanings and interpret the message according to their own perceptions and background. To support this, Fish (1980) suggested the notion of interpretive community. According to Fish (1980), there is not objective knowledge, but rather, the knowledge is always socially conditioned. His argument is that the knowledge and thoughts one has are constructed by the community



that he or she belongs to, and one cannot think beyond the limits imposed by culture.

Fish (1980) argues that because the community members are inside the interpretive community itself, it is difficult for them to think outside the consensus boundaries of their own community:

How can any one of us know whether or not he is a member of the same interpretive community as any other of us? The answer is that he can't, since any evidence brought forward to support the claim would itself be an interpretation (especially if the "other" were an author long dead.) The only "proof" of membership is fellowship, the end of recognition from someone in the same community (Fiske, 1980, p. 173).

#### *Possible barriers*

*Linguistic Barriers / Subtitle versus dubbing debate.* Watching foreign films means that audiences are encountering foreign cultures, which are less familiar than their own, and audiences also are not familiar with the foreign language. Therefore, films must be translated into the language being used by the target audiences. Nowadays, two frequently used methods for film translation are dubbing and subtitling. Dubbing is the re-recording of actors' lines while preserving the original soundtrack as much as possible. Subtitling displays translated phrases on the screen to help audiences understand the film (Szarkowska, 2005).

Serban (2004) analyzes the debate between source-oriented translations versus target-oriented translations. Source-oriented translation stresses presentation of the

original; target-oriented translation aims to help audiences easily follow and understand the story despite some loss of the original production. Serban (2004) divides the approaches into “domesticating versus foreignising” (p.3) methods. Dubbing would be a domesticating method, and subtitling could be categorized as a means of foreignising. In this respect, the translation mode that the country chooses shows the country’s attitude toward foreign films and culture (Szarkowska, 2005).

Subtitling has many advantages. For instance, its costs in budget and time are not high. Furthermore, the original soundtrack can be preserved perfectly. However, it also has many disadvantages. Subtitles contaminate films’ visual images, and audiences’ attention can be split between the images and subtitles. In addition, subtitling often reduces the original dialogue in order to guarantee enough time for reading the subtitles. Usually, dialogue must be reduced to one-third of original (Serban, 2004).

Although longer subtitles lower the possibility of harming the content and allow audiences to understand more details of that film, fewer subtitles allow the audiences to take less time reading and focus more on enjoying the film. The alternative, dubbing, also has drawbacks. It is more expensive and time consuming; in addition to the cost, dubbing’s serious disadvantage is in losing the original soundtrack. The dubbing process loses the original actors’ voices, and can change the balance of the film, which was carefully mixed according to the directors’ intention (Mera, 1991). In this sense, as Danan (1991) writes, “Dubbing is an attempt to hide the foreign nature of a film by creating the illusion that actors are speaking the viewer’s language” (p. 606), dubbing is the more

target-oriented translation mode.

Subtitling is an example of source-oriented translation. While dubbing aims to improve audiences' understanding but sacrifices originality, subtitling preserves that film's foreignness. Continuous exposure to an original soundtrack constantly reminds the audiences of the origin of the film. Danan (1991) says subtitles also cultivate audiences' interest in that source culture.

Subtitling and dubbing are located at opposite ends of the translation spectrum. Danan says, "Subtitling corresponds to a weaker system open to foreign influences. Dubbing results from a dominant nationalistic system in which a nationalistic film rhetoric and language policy are promoted equally" (1991, p. 613). Among European countries, dubbing is usually applied in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, while many other countries favor subtitles. Danan argues that this difference is derived from commercial and historic causes (Danan, 1991).

Because dubbing needs more resources to be used in production, it is favored by countries that have big economic markets and high possible box office revenue. On the other hand, for same reason, smaller countries usually accept subtitling for foreign films.

However, the cases of Germany, Italy, and Spain should be approached from a different angle. Each country experienced fascist government. Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and Spain under Franco were aware of the importance and impact of film propaganda on national unity; consequently, film industries fell under government control. Moreover, strong nationalism tends to restrict outside influences resisting its

superior tradition. As a result, translation in a nationalistic environment must be more target-oriented than source-oriented. In these environments, foreign material in films is localized to make sure the foreign language cannot reach the masses easily and compete with the national language (Dana, 1991). The nationalistic countries did not allow subtitled foreign films on their domestic screens. In addition, they all considered the use of the national language to be essential for national unity, so they prohibited dialects or minority languages. France's dubbing preference history has a similar rationale but different root. Historically, France has displayed a strong preference for cultural centralization. The country required the use of proper French, and this policy has made dubbing common (Danan, 1991).

Szarkowska (2005) classified countries into four categories according to the translation modes they employ. There are "source-language countries" (Para. 6), "dubbing countries" (Para. 7), "subtitling countries" (Para. 8), and "voice-over countries" (Para. 9). She categorizes major English-speaking countries such as the United States and United Kingdom as source-language countries. They are strong film exporters and hardly import foreign films. In these countries, foreign films tend to be subtitled rather than dubbed. Foreign films are considered minority and independent films in these countries. Because of these commercial reasons, foreign films highly tend to be subtitled in these countries.

According to The Institute of Communication Studies at The University of Leeds (2003) and Danan (1991), some scholars argue that most viewers would prefer dubbing if

they have choices between subtitled and dubbed versions. They assert that dubbing foreign films can appeal to larger masses because people dislike reading subtitles while watching films. However, some studies about television viewers strongly refute the notion that audiences reject watching foreign films with subtitles. According to these studies, audiences in countries where subtitled television programs are dominant prefer subtitles and do not feel uncomfortable with that translation method. In contrast, in countries where dubbing is dominant, audiences prefer dubbing. As shown in research by Luyken (1987; see Danan, 1991, and The Institute of Communication Studies at The University of Leeds, 2003), it can be concluded that audiences tend to be accustomed to the translation mode they have experienced and favor that tradition.

However, research by the Institute of Communications Studies at The University of Leeds shows a somewhat different view from previous results. The institute performed a study with 48 students watching dubbed and subtitled films. Most of the students were anti-dubbing. Although they disliked subtitles, they hated dubbing much more. Researchers concluded that there was no enthusiasm for a specific translation method, but that most prefer subtitling.

However, another study by the institute provides a different view about the audiences' preference toward subtitles. The institute did the same research, but this time, it did not tell the students that they would watch a dubbed version. In just minutes, students noticed that the film was dubbed, and they said they were disappointed. However, over the course of the film, they got used to the dubbing, and their attitudes

toward dubbing changed. They admitted that dubbing was also suitable.

As seen in those studies, audiences may have preferences toward the means of translation, but the preference is hard to measure under experimental situations. In fact, the preference can change, such as the case of Luyken (1987), an Italian student whose preference toward translation method changed after living in a foreign country (see Danan, 1991, and The Institute of Communication Studies at The University of Leeds, 2003). This case study will not carelessly attempt to identify which translation mode is favored by foreign films in the United States. Rather the approach will be to define the feelings of foreign films toward the language differences and the problems or barriers they experience from the linguistic differences and translation methods.

*Cultural Barrier/Ethnocentrism.* Another barrier that U.S. audiences might face while watching foreign films is the effects from stereotypes and impressions of foreign culture. Because of the long consumption of Hollywood films and spread of Western culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Asians experience few barriers toward Hollywood heroes. On the contrary, Asian heroes are not easily acceptable to U.S. viewers. With the exception of some cases like Jet Li and Jackie Chan's martial arts action films, U.S. audiences are much more accustomed to European or African-American actors in their films. That is one of the most important reasons that Hollywood prefers to remake rather than release original Asian films (Major, 2004).

Japanese animations disguise their cultural origins to overcome this problem. They have hidden their cultural characters instead of expressing cultural uniqueness

(Chen, 2004). Animation heroes' hair is dyed red, brown, green, or blue, and their faces are not ethnically distinctive. This allows audiences to identify with the characters.

Through this process, Japanimation has been successful not only in the U.S. market but all over the world, including European countries with less cultural resistance.

Scholars like Haubl (1996) and Chen and Chang (2003) suggest that there can be a positive causal relationship between the impressions of a country and the preference of products from that country. In other words, a consumer who has a good impression of a country favors the country's products too. Haubl (1996) called that the "halo effect" (p. 80). In Taiwan, naming new products in English was commercially more successful than naming them in Chinese (Warden, Lai, & Wu, 2002), and French speakers in Canada evaluate French products more favorably than English speakers do (Wall & Heslop, 1986).

Another notable point is that language can bring individuals with various backgrounds into one group. On the basis of the argument above, people call themselves group members who share culture and identity (Anderson, 1991). In this context, one assumption arises. U.S. citizens may tend to feel some superiority about their culture and country because of the power of English and the United States in the world. If so, that would be one reason that Asian films cannot easily arouse sympathy among the U.S. audiences.

Ethnocentrism helps explain this relationship and provides a helpful theoretical basis for this study. Ethnocentrism is to regard one's own group or culture supreme to

others. According to Dennen (1986), ethnocentrism can be considered “a different way of thinking between the in-group/out-group. In addition, ethnocentrism can be defined to regard the culture of one’s own race is superior to others” (p.1). Dunbar (1986) defined ethnocentrism as “a belief in the superiority of one’s own group or race” (p. 54). In short, ethnocentrism can lead group members to think outsiders and their cultures are basically inferior to their own group. The blind patriotism toward their own group makes members feel superiority to others (Stein, 1986).

Dennen (1986) argues that adopting one certain ethnic group’s norms and values makes people reject other ethnic groups and cultures. For example, Nazis used anti-Semitism to promote the unity of Aryans and control people. Flohr (1986) argues that if someone does not like specific group, the person will try to avoid contact with it and will not behave or think according to any concept of those people and their culture. Flohr (1986) also mentions that distancing oneself from strange things and people is a natural behavior and a basic instinct of all living things, including human beings. Xenophobia is the term for the human fear of strangers. Infants tend to turn away from strangers, avoid eye contact with them and start to cry when they are touched by strangers (Flohr, 1986).

In this respect, exclusive to other ethnic groups and other cultures is a common behaviors of human beings. Every group regards others as possible enemies, and group members share suspicion and distrust of other groups (Nuenke, 2003). According to Ike’s (1986) explanation, the group identity that individuals identify with is the motive for xenophobia. This kind of hostility works effectively to unite the group because hostility



toward the out-group makes the group members depend on and trust each other.

Historically, political leaders who feel threatened politically also tend to commit wars or support discrimination against weaker and smaller groups in order to unify in-group members.

Dennen (1986) also points that leading people to discriminate and hate outsiders can make group members easily follow the control of hierarchy, enforce the principles of the society, and conclusively unite group members. In this process of uniting people in groups and against others, group members develop stereotypes about others, whether manipulated or self-built. Flohr (1986) argues that individuals can develop stereotypes in two ways. People can build their own views with the help of biasing mechanisms that constructed earlier, or they can adopt opinions from their social environment without consideration. As Demers (1999) writes, mass media and society influence and reflect each other regarding ethnic problems in society. Media producers watch things through their own viewpoints shaped by the standards of their own cultures. The stereotypes that they have been built are at work during media production.

In a different view, most of the leaders of global media are based in developed countries. The content of major global media has continued to generate strong support for Western values, lifestyle, and culture. Alternative social systems, cultures, behavioral patterns, or ideas have been marginalized. Although some unique aspects of Asian culture have been welcomed in the U.S., Asian cultural products are not widespread. It has been difficult to achieve long-term box-office hits in mainstream U.S. audiences, who share

cultural ties to Europe and have considered European culture as the only foreign import for decades.

The concept of ethnocentrism is also important in the foreign marketing process. Usually, when the companies based outside western countries try to advance to a western market for the first time, they hide their countries of origin and pretend to be domestic suppliers. In the same situation, companies from advanced countries emphasize that they are from developed and advanced western countries. Sony, now one of the world's biggest and most famous electronic companies, also accepted the origin-hiding policy in its first foray in the U.S. market so that U.S. consumers did not connect the company with Japan whenever they used Sony products. Because the national image of Japan until the 1970s, specifically before the Tokyo Olympics, was not positive, U.S. consumers did not give credibility to products originating there. Sony adapted this strategy to break into the U.S. market. It worked successfully for the company (Matsumoto, 1997). Brand image and country image are closely related to each other. Through the 1970s and 1980s, success stories of Japanese brands made U.S. consumers believe that the Japanese make durable and good products. The good reputation of Japanese products has spread to all products from Japan.

Fernandez (1993) gives a clue as to why this difference exists among companies based in the West and others. According to this research, many U.S. citizens like the sound of French, German, or British accents in English, but they complain that South Americans do not speak English in nice tones, and that Asian accents are too rough and

hard to understand. Although such stereotypes are not universal, in many U.S. films, intelligent characters tend to have British accents, rigid grocery store owners tend to have strong Asian accents, and audiences tend to associate illegal immigrants with strong Spanish accents.

As previously mentioned in discussing linguistic barriers, strong nationalism causes people to reject outside influences and gives people pride and self-confidence in their own language, ethnic group, and culture. Although the environment of the United States cannot easily be explained with this concept, there is the possibility that long-lasting one-way flow of cultural products contributes to American ethnocentrism.

### Object of Case Study: *OldBoy*

Oh Daesu was just a mediocre man who had a wife and a daughter. One night, he was abducted on the way home. When he woke up, he found that he was imprisoned in a small sealed room, where he had to survive for fifteen years without knowing why he was imprisoned. One day Daesu saw TV news that said his wife was murdered, and he, who had been missing one year, was suspected of the crime. At that time, he determined to seek to revenge on the person who imprisoned him.

In his fifteenth year of captivity, he was released at the place he was abducted fifteen years before. At a Japanese restaurant, Daesu met Mido, a sushi cook. Daesu, who had eaten only fried dumplings, delivered from the same Chinese restaurant for fifteen years, asked Mido for something fresh to eat. This live octopus eating scene has been criticized by audiences for its brutality. On the other hand, that scene also has been complimented by others for showing Daesu's vengeance, rage, and grief very dramatically and very successfully.

With a small piece of paper, which he found in a dumpling when he was imprisoned, as a clue, he visited every Chinese restaurant named Blue Dragon, which was printed on that paper, and to try their dumplings to find the taste he ate for fifteen years. Finally, he found the restaurant. He found the hidden private prison between the seventh

floor and eighth floor in a building by following a deliveryman. At that time, Woojin, who imprisoned Daesu, appeared by himself in front of Daesu. Woojin suggested a game to Daesu: if Daesu can find the reason he was imprisoned, Woojin will kill himself in front of Daesu. While following the clues that Woojin intentionally left, Daesu discovered the answer.

Woojin and Daesu were in the same high school in a small town. One day, Daesu happened to see Woojin and his sister Sooah making love in a vacant classroom. Daesu told his friend Joowhan what he saw and asked him not to tell anybody else, but Joowhan told his girlfriend what he heard from Daesu. That rumor became widespread in that town while Daesu had already moved to another city. Sooah suffered from that rumor; furthermore, she developed a pseudo-pregnancy. Finally, she jumped from a dam in front of her brother, Woojin.

Because Woojin thought that his sister died because of Daesu's rumor, he imprisoned Daesu to give him more pain than his sister experienced. However, Woojin's plan was not that simple. Daesu felt isolation and loneliness for years, and it also gave Woojin time to hatch an elaborate plan of revenge. Mido, Daesu's new lover, was Daesu's daughter. Woojin killed Daesu's wife and had been secretly watching Mido for fifteen years. When Mido grew up, he released Daesu. Before releasing him, Woojin hypnotized both of them to fall in love easily, Daesu and Mido fell in love without knowing their relationship. After knowing that, Daesu was shocked, but he begged Woojin not to tell Mido about the truth. Finally, Daesu cut out his own tongue with scissors, which was the

beginning of this revenge game. Woojin finally got his revenge, but because his life was only for the revenge of his sister, finally, he shot himself in the head. Daesu let the hypnotist erase the part that he heard about Mido from his memory and meets Mido again.

Above is the plot of *OldBoy*. This film is based on a Japanese comic book of the same title. Japanese mystery story writer Garon Tsuchiya wrote and Nobuaki Minegishi drew the cartoon. *OldBoy* was published in 1997 by Hutabasha in Japan (Hutabasha, 2005). The incest theme, which was missing in the original comic, was put in by the film's director, Chanwook Park, and screen writers Joyun Hwang and Chunhyeong Lim. With this choice, they provided a clearer motive for the revenge game and improved the plot of film, although this film has been criticized for this sensational choice.

Director Chanwook Park majored in philosophy in college and released his first full length film, *Moon is the Sun's Dream*, in 1992. In 2000, with *JSA-Join Security Area*, a film that was about a tragic story between North and South Korean soldiers in the demilitarized zone of national border, he achieved commercial success and critical acclaim (Cine21, 2005). *Boksuneun Naui Geot – Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* went into limited release in U.S. theaters in 2005 after *OldBoy*. However, it already was widely known to Asian film fans in the United States, and also had drawn U.S. film critics' attention to Park even before *OldBoy*. On the other hand, Park also has been criticized for his style of shocking and sensational scenes daringly (Cine21, 2005).

*OldBoy* was first released in Korea 2003 in joint production and distribution by Show East and Egg Films and has been seen by more than three million viewers in Korea

alone. In 2004, it won the Cannes Grandprix prize. *OldBoy* is the first Korean film and seventeenth Asian film to win the Cannes Grandprix; Teinosuke Kinugasa's Japanese film *Gate of Hell* was the first Asian film to win that prize. Including Nagisa Ohshima's *Empire of the Passions* (1978), Akira Kurosawa's *Shadow Warrior* (1980), and Shohei Imamura's *The Eel – Unagi* (1997), Japanese films have been the only Asian films in Cannes. Furthermore, pan-Chinese films were introduced to Cannes in the 1990s, starting with Kaige Chen's *Ba Wang Bie Ji - Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Edward Yang's *Yi Yi - A One and A Two* (2000). The only Asian film in Cannes Grandprix, that was not Chinese or Japanese was Samira Makhmalbaf's *Panj E Asr – At five in the Afternoon* from Iran (Cannes, 2005).

Following its success in Cannes, *OldBoy* has been released in 29 countries worldwide: four Asian countries (Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Korea), five American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, and the United States), 19 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom), and Australia (IMDb, 2005). In the United States, *OldBoy* was released on March 25 2004 by Tartan Films USA. Starting in New York and Los Angeles, it has been shown on 26 screens in Chicago, San Francisco, San Diego, Seattle, Portland, Houston, Austin, Atlanta, and St. Louis for six months until the end of August 2005 (Tartan Films USA, 2005).

According to IMDb (2005), it has earned \$ 703,000 U.S. box office gross (Aug

26, 2005) in U.S. release, \$ 272,509 U.S. in Germany, and \$ 579,447 U.S. in the United Kingdom (Cine21, 2005). Comparing the market size of those countries, the U.S. release does not seem so successful. It is even smaller than the film's box office gross in Japan, \$ 816,865 U.S. (Nov 19, 2005) (IMDb, 2005). According to IMDb (2005), following the tradition of U.S. studios remaking successful Asian films, *OldBoy* is also planned to be remade in the United States in 2006.



## Methodology

Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Qualitative research attempts to understand the broad picture of a phenomenon. Creswell (1998) states that qualitative research aims to get an expansive idea of the research subject and to create an understanding of the complexity of that case. This is accomplished by providing thick and various descriptions (Creswell, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) also explain qualitative study in a similar way. They write, “Qualitative research is multi method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2).

In this respect, qualitative research requires an extensive commitment to studying research questions, and demands time and resources. Basically, through the data gathering process, qualitative research demands that the investigators spend a large amount of time in the field. Later, while engaging in the complex and time-consuming

process of data analysis, qualitative researchers strive to sort the large amounts of data and reduce them into several themes and categories. In this process, qualitative researchers must interpret subtle ideas and images, which are different from quantitative data that consist of numbers and can be interpreted much more clearly.

Creswell (1998) suggests five major traditions of qualitative research: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Biography is the story of a single individual. When an individual can illuminate a specific issue, biography is applied. Phenomenology is used when investigators need to understand the meaning of experiences of individuals who share a phenomenon worth studying. The purpose of grounded theory is to generate a theory. Ethnography's purpose is to study the behaviors of a culture-sharing group, and define the character and culture of the group through observation and interview.

This research is a case study, which is “an exploration of a bounded system or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). Specifically, this is an intrinsic case study, discussed fully in the following paragraph. Case studies can use various sources together. Data includes observations, interview, audio-visual material, and documents. The multiple sources allow the researchers to approach a case from various directions and diverse aspects so researchers can look at the case in various perspectives.

According to Stake (2000), there are three types of case studies. Instrumental case studies are done when the purpose of the research is to gain a wide understanding of

a certain phenomenon through examining a specific case and if the researcher aims to generalize those findings. In other words, in instrumental case studies, the case is not the main interest of the researcher, but rather, “it facilitates our understanding of something else” (Stake, 2000, p. 437). A collective case study can be considered the extension of an instrumental case study for enhancing the generality of the case. If the researcher wants better understanding of a specific case, that could be called an intrinsic case study.

This study can be categorized as an intrinsic case study because understanding the viewers of a specific Korean film cannot be easily generalized and cannot be directly applied to all Asian film viewers in the United States. However, Stake (2000) argues that even if intrinsic case studies concentrate on a specific case, every case study should have a clear expectation of potential generalizability to other cases (Stake, 2000). In this context, this study can be seen as an important first step to understanding how some viewers in the United States characterize Korean films.

Like any case study, the main purpose of case study is at least to contribute to “generalization-producing” (Stake, 2000, p. 439) and to become “an occasional early step in theory building” (Stake, 2000, p. 439). Therefore, it can be said that the more specific and unique the object of study, the greater the usefulness of that study. In other words, to become a valuable case study, selecting the case and clarifying the boundary of that bounded system is most important (Stake, 2000).

This qualitative case study examines the characteristics of U.S. audiences who watch Asian film products and defines the barriers or problems they face when watching

Asian films by studying the viewers of one specific Korean film: *OldBoy*. U.S. audiences who watched *OldBoy*, and posted their opinions and participated in the message board discussions at the *OldBoy* exclusive board in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) website are considered the in-group members of the case. People who watched *OldBoy* and voluntarily suggested their opinions on *OldBoy* through the IMDb opinion section and depth interviews with U.S. respondents create the case that is studied in this research.

A content analysis was conducted on viewer opinions and postings from a message board and user comments at the IMDb website. In addition, in-depth interviews with selected users were conducted. IMDb has exclusive boards to target every single film on its database. That database was used in this study, as well as multiple users interviewed through e-mail communications. These interviews were performed to get wider and deeper understandings of the users.

IMDb, a family company of *Amazon.com*, is a free public website about films. Once a film is placed in its database, IMDb makes a board exclusive to that film, and posts overall profiles about the film. Information can be omitted, added, and edited by IMDb editors and even by IMDb users' suggestions and reports. Each exclusive board for every film has detailed information about the film including business facts. The main research subject for this qualitative case study is the opinion section, consisting of user comments, external reviews, newsgroup reviews, awards and nominations, user ratings, and recommendations. Among them, this study mainly analyzed user comments and message board discussions. Up to December 20, 2005, 296 user comments had been

posted on the *OldBoy* board, and over 200 discussion topics had been suggested by users on the message board. The user comments section is individual users' opinions and reviews on this film. The message board section was operated by topic leaders and repliers. Once an individual suggests a topic, other users voluntarily continue the discussion. According to the IMDb (2005) website homepage, it has more than 420,000 films and entertainment titles and 1.8 million cast and crew member profiles. IMDb was chosen for this abundant database and its vigorous discussions by users.

The global quality of the Internet allows suggestions and opinions from film viewers in countries around the world to be found in the IMDb opinion section; however, all user names in user comments include nationality information of the person posting comments. Because this study aims to define U.S. film viewers' attitudes toward Asian film, opinions from the audiences of other countries are not considered in this study. Rather, only U.S. viewers' opinions are used. The investigator sent e-mails to multiple board users in order to get their permission to participate in an e-mail interview.

This study asks the following research questions :

- R-1. What impressions of Korean life and culture were evident to *OldBoy* viewers?
- R-2. How were those impressions expressed?
- R-3. What technical problems did viewers encounter when viewing *OldBoy*?
- R-4. What aspects of this Korean film and potentially other such

films attract U.S. audiences?

As previously mentioned, the information was gathered by two sources. The opinion section discussions were the first data collected for this study. In addition, the investigator conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with multiple message board participants through e-mail. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, as cited in Creswell, 1998), this approach can be categorized as an opportunistic sampling, which is “following new leads; taking advantage of the unexpected” (Creswell, 1998, p. 119).

The investigator sent e-mails to all 375 U.S. users who posted their opinions on the website from August 6, 2005 to February 5, 2006. The investigator initially contacted them to ask whether they had interest in participating in this research. Moreover, in the initial contact, the investigator asked their nationality for a double check. Twenty-three of those U.S. American users agreed to participate in interviews via e-mail.

Because this study is a questionnaire through e-mail communication, the investigator could not get respondents actual signatures. Therefore, the investigator used a cover letter to get their agreement on this human subject research, rather than using the informed consent form. The cover letter, which was delivered via e-mail before sending the questionnaires, contains language showing their rights and privacy information protection. The investigator used the contents of informed consent form < IRB Form: ICadult-LR-SBv17>, which was recommended by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board. Only the signature section of this form was omitted for electronic communications.

Sixteen of twenty-three individuals, who agreed in initial contact process, agreed upon this consent. Electronic versions of the actual questionnaire were then distributed to those 16 individuals. It was a qualitative questionnaire on the impressions and opinions the web participants have on *OldBoy*. All of those 16 users responded to the questionnaire. The investigator contacted some of them two or three more times for clarification or expansion on the initial information they provided.

The data gathered then were ordered by open coding. Asking questions in the interviews and analyzing the responses allowed various categories and themes to emerge. Every detail of data gathered was analyzed in order to understand the meaning and context behind the responses given by participants. When a user participated in a certain discussion topic, or the participant emphasized a particular question, it showed that she or he wanted to argue a certain point and that this topic was important to her or him. However, some answers that were only casually mentioned also proved to be important. Every comment and response was analyzed to construct the themes and categories presented in discussion section.

In this study, the investigator attempted to draw from interviews and web postings the nature of the realities created by these subjects through their viewing of *OldBoy*. It was expected that the themes and sub-themes that emerge from this material would create a sense of a “constructed” reality around which these participants view the Korean culture in general. This constructivist approach (Creswell, 1998, pp. 74-76; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 165) is necessary in this particular study because of the nature of the

contacts with the subjects through online “conversation.” Guba & Lincoln (2000) report that applying the constructivist ontological paradigm is one where the “researcher uses quotes and themes in words of participants and provides evidence of different perspectives” (p. 75).



## Results

The content analysis of the IMDB message board and e-mail in-depth interviews with participants among the board users provided a wide array of data. Ideas from the data can be categorized into six major themes: 1) searching for alternatives, 2) discovery of *OldBoy*, 3) foreign films as prestige agents, 4) barriers, 5) cultural difference/cultural agreement, and 6) criticism of the Asian film boom. Analyzing the web posts of *OldBoy* in IMDB was helpful in understanding the overall character of the people in this case. According to the data, it was found that the majority of board users can be described as film-goers who share a cynical view of Hollywood's major production system and enjoy experiencing foreign cultures. Through sharing their opinions in the IMDB website, users are discovering Korean films as well as other foreign films. As shown in *OldBoy*'s example, users consider those films as good alternatives to Hollywood films. Furthermore, through analyzing respondents' interviews and their postings, it was also shown that the board users build prestige as serious film goers through their regular foreign film viewing. Some board users differentiate themselves from mainstream U.S. film viewers and enhance their pride as trend leaders. The investigator previously suggested two major problems that foreign film viewers may face, linguistic and cultural barriers. Interestingly, the majority of respondents insist that they did not feel any

linguistic or cultural barriers while watching *OldBoy*. It was also shown that some viewers are viewing the recent Asian film boom negatively. These viewers point out that, including Korean films, the quality of Asian films is overestimated and are complimented too highly. These six themes also include various sub-categories. The following results examine each theme in depth.

### *Searching for alternatives*

The “Searching for alternative” theme identifies the members of this case who have a cynical view of Hollywood’s major production system. They have become disenchanted. The majority of respondents claimed that Hollywood’s Asian film remaking boom shows how well this system works in hiding the original and trying not to lose its dominant power in the market. Eventually, the respondents are disappointed and demand alternatives. In that process, *OldBoy* was captured in their radar. The “searching for alternative” theme has three sub categories. They are:

- Cynical toward Hollywood system
- High dislike of Hollywood’s Asian film remaking
- Searching for alternatives – Independent films, foreign films

By concentrating only on profits, Hollywood has become focused on creating blockbuster giant films aiming to make money, rather than creating art. This cynical viewpoint of Hollywood is well shown in the debates on U.S. film industry’s Asian film remaking boom. This negative reaction to Hollywood makes the viewers seek alternatives such as independent films and minority films that can cover the niche. By categorizing

themselves as film enthusiasts, respondents tend to search for uncommon and unique films that are rarely seen in U.S. theaters. Asian films like *OldBoy* are attracting these viewers because of their scarcity in U.S. film market.

#### *Cynical toward Hollywood system*

Users of *OldBoy* board share a cynical view of Hollywood. In order to lower the risk, Hollywood is making similar style films; in other words, market tested ones. Because Hollywood is inclined to reproduce previously successful models to guarantee profits, the products become more similar and lose their diversity. One of the most strongly suggested reasons for viewers praising *OldBoy* was because of its creativity.

“I’ll just say that I’m completely sick and tired of typical Hollywood movies...same plots, same action, same dialog, same endings, same twist” (P-36).

“Across the world, people are staying away from U.S. films. Their home box office is dropping. Why because they turn everything into one style of ‘beige’ cinema.”

“To the point that everything that they make is market tested and focus grouped to death.”

“It’s fair to argue that after almost a century of making films, original ideas are few and far between, but that still doesn’t justify the actions of the American film industry.”

“This is a movie that American studios are simply incapable of making (I should state the fact that I am an American from New Jersey.) So while I do love American movies more than most patronizing foreigners think I should, I also concede the *OldBoy* is just of a different breed of film.”

### *High dislike of Hollywood's Asian film remaking*

To understand the character of U.S. *OldBoy* board users, it was useful to analyze their reactions to and opinions on recent U.S. film makers' Asian film remakes. *OldBoy* also is planning to be remade in 2006 in the United States. The majority of respondents expressed a high degree of disgust to the remaking of *OldBoy*. Respondents voiced similar postings to other Asian film remakes. Board users share the view that those remakes are Hollywood's attempt to eliminate foreign films from its domestic market and monopolize the market. Users pointed out the phenomenon that Hollywood films are spending great amounts of money on the promotion process. They see if Hollywood majors invest big budgets to promote foreign films, those films also could be commercially successful in the U.S. market. However, by remaking those films rather than promoting the original, Hollywood majors are separating U.S. viewers from foreign originals. Respondents also see that these remakes are being done without any respect to the original and source culture. Without careful consideration, foreign films are being Americanized according to American standard.

“...So Hollywood studios go for a safe bet, a plot that already had success in other countries, even if it doesn't make a killing, as long as it makes some money. They prefer this instead of taking a “risk” with a totally original script. In that same way it can be applied to best-selling books adaptations, comic book adaptations, sequels and so on.”

“Why can't the U.S. distributor pick up the original and release it to the masses? Hell, if it's the old “subtitles” chestnut, well dub the bloody thing... We'll see the usual American Cinematography and quick rush action editing for sure.”

“Apparently, the U.S. studios are focusing on the Asian cinema boom as a threat. They will remake everything to keep the foreign market out. Just another sign of the evil U.S. machine trying to control everything.”

“...but every film that Hollywood puts out is backed by a marketing campaign that is often more expensive than the film itself. If they did this with foreign films, I guarantee people would go and see them. Over time they’d stop asking, ‘Is this subtitled’ or ‘Is this foreign,’ they’d just go and see it for the same reasons that they’d go to any other film...”

“Any cultural reference gets chopped off into this big recycling-cannibalistic machine. The original movies get limited releases, or none at all, while the remake gets a wide-open release with lots of publicity.”

“What really gets me about these things is that the remakes are often done with little respect for the source material and are sanitized and Americanized till they little resemble the original.”

“...more formulaic, mildly ‘popcorned’ version of one of the best foreign films I’ve ever seen, coming off an assembly line of more of the same.”

Some users argue that the remaking of foreign films can lead the audiences to the original, so U.S. remaking also has a certain positive role for foreign films in the U.S. market. However, negative views toward this idea were also shown by some other users, and this negative view is the majority in this case. They argue that the U.S. public is not accustomed to enjoying foreign materials with foreign language, foreign settings, and foreign faces. In these circumstances, if the U.S. audiences have two choices between the original and remake, they tend to choose the remade version.

“Was the idiot audience really going to see *OldBoy* in Korean anyways? No Way! But, there is one thing to remember: I may inspire people to check out the original. And this is gold. For any

of those middle-of-the-road film goers or budding true film lovers, a bad remake may guide them to the original, a damn fine film.”

“...if there had never been an American version fewer people would have enjoyed it. And yes. I concede that many people have shallow taste in film, but there are also people who have other hobbies and can't go search out every obscure foreign/indie film they may like, then watch all those and enjoy a subset.”

“You think that after seeing the Brad Pitt-ish Americanized version, all those who enjoyed it are going to seek out the original Korean version? Bullsh\*\*. They've already “seen” the film – why would they want to watch it again? With subtitles?”

“It's great when it makes people look for the original. But the fact of the matter is that Hollywood does not have this intention. They bury the fact that the film is a remake in among the end credits where only a very select few (probably the ones who already know it's a remake) end up looking. It's great if it gets people to look for the original but that usually doesn't happen. I know someone who saw Verbinski's The Ring and when I suggested they see the original said, 'But I've already seen the film now' Would it not be better if Hollywood companies would use their vast financial resources to just release the films as one of their own.”

#### *Searching for alternatives –Independent films, foreign films*

Out of disenchantment with Hollywood, board users tend to devote themselves to searching for new and uncommon films. Users share the view that Hollywood is not the only source of film, and there are far more films that are new and available outside of Hollywood majors, including U.S. independent films. Users say they want more unusual and unconventional films with new and challenging themes. They insist that Hollywood seems not to have any intention to make these films. Disappointment with Hollywood

makes people seek alternatives – independent films and minority films that can cover the niche. In the context that Asian films are also characterized as independent films in the United States because of their promotion process, (Zuckerman & Kim, 2003) Asian films can also be attractive alternatives to them.

“I am willing to watch more daring or unconventional films, as well as subtitled films, but since Hollywood doesn’t create that kind of cinema there isn’t a niche for it, at least in mainstream context.”

“They don’t seem to have the balls to take a challenging theme/subject and make a film about it.”

“America has a fine independent film scene that deserves better than to be lumped in with Hollywood.”

“Having said this, there are good U.S. films, but it’s mostly independents.”

“There are still good American directors, like Todd Solonds or Jim Jarmush; they just usually work outside of the big studios.”

### *Discovery of OldBoy*

Asian films are considered a good source of refreshing entertainment by this group of viewers. It seems that *OldBoy* was discovered by these viewers in the process of Asian film viewing and discussions rather than from their interest in the films from a certain country, such as Korea. Even though the majority of respondents recognize themselves as Asian film lovers, rather than Korean film enthusiasts, they claim that they also have become interested in Korean films and culture. The theme “discovery of *OldBoy*” includes these sub categories.

- Asian films: a good source of refreshing entertainment
- Asian/Korean films can be the alternative
- Interests in Korean films

By sharing their Asian film viewing experiences with other IMDb users, board users are searching for other films according to their national interest, style, and sometimes even by the directors or actors as links. Even the distributors and production companies are being used as links for users to find other Asian films. Interest in Asian films eventually led the users to discover Korean films as a subset of Asian films. Many respondents said that they could not pick up any scenes or settings that depict peculiar aspects of Korean life. It seems that they do not differentiate Korean films from other Asian films. On the other hand, being introduced to *OldBoy*, some respondents also say that their interests have expanded to enjoy other Korean films.

*Asian films: a good source of refreshing entertainment*

Asian films are considered a refreshing film. They view Asian films that are unique and different from Hollywood major films that they have been watching. Board users say discovering Asian films is like encountering a different breed of film because of their stylistic differences. In this sense, users assert that Asian films would be one important step for people starting to become film connoisseurs.

“Exactly, when I first got caught up in the whole “Asian Scene” (Thnx “ASiamania!”) It was like finding a whole new genre of movies. Horror, Action, Asian etc. Why? Cause most of them are unique ways of showing “ordinary” films.”

“...film and cinema from Asia is much more pleasing than most



from America. It tries many new things and leans towards pleasing its audience aesthetically as well as emotionally.”

“Eastern cinema is often the most refreshing and often the first step for people who truly begin to realize there is more than Hollywood (please everyone) films.”

“Asian culture is very vibrant and interesting, and I predict 10-20 years from now, we are going to be watching more Asian (or their Hollywood reincarnates) than Hollywood movies.”

### *Asian/Korean films can be the alternative*

Respondents say Korean films provide them a different paradigm that is missing in today’s Hollywood films. In this sense, it can be said that the respondents share the view that Korean films can be an alternative to Hollywood. However, here is one notable point. When this group of viewers expresses its opinions or impressions about *OldBoy*, they tend to use the words “Asian film in general”, or “Asian films, especially Korean films.” It seems that they do not differentiate Korean films from other Asian films. More specifically, they are interested in experiencing unconventional Asian films, and as one new Asian film, *OldBoy* was found. Thus, although this one film from Korea possibly influenced their impressions on Korea and might help them to be interested in Korean culture, it also might influence on viewers’ impressions about Asian films and culture in general.

“The difference, and indeed the main reason that Korean film or Asian film seems legitimate to single out Hollywood is because of the creative environment that it has surrounded itself with.”

“It gives us something American action movies seem helpless to provide (notwithstanding the overly-didactic efforts of the

Matrix series), a film that allows us to gorge ourselves on thrilling images while inviting us to ponder, should we choose, the nature of our existence.”

“Korean films, or rather Asian movies in general, are only popular amongst hardcore movie buffs like Quentin Tarantino, which is a shame because they are a much superior to the crap fest Hollywood keeps shoving down our throats lately.”

“I watch and own many Asian films (Korean, Thai, Japanese, Chinese) and I don’t generally pay a lot of attention to a lot of the differences. I used to, but I don’t find that in general things seem that much different.”

“I definitely enjoy decent foreign films over any type of Hollywood BS, but I have an observation. In *OldBoy*, similar to other Asian films I’ve watched in the past, the romantic relationships tend to be greatly over-dramatized.”

“I am a big fan of Asian cinema and have seen many different films from many different directors. *OldBoy* is by far the best Asian film I have seen to date. Chanwook Park is an amazing director and I can’t wait to see his next project *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*.”

“... There were two other poignant aspects of the film for me. One, I almost thought we were going to have a fully formed human female character in the film, when Daesu goes to the sushi restaurant and Mido starts talking with him. Oh, yes – real adult male-female interaction. But no. Mido and the sister of Woojin, the two main females are only objects of contention and possessions for the men. “You did not protect her.” Women are manipulated or controlled, protected or used. I cannot find any Asian movie or work of art fully complete or accomplished when it embraces such full frontal sexism, even if inherent in a culture.”

### *Interests in Korean films*

Even after this one film, some viewers say they have become interested in other Korean films. Using director, actor, brand as clues, they search other Korean films and widen their gaze toward whole aspects of this country. The Korean film list in one post is a good example :

“Well thus far I’ve seen *OldBoy*, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *JSA*, *Spring Summer Winter...etc*, *Memories of Murder*, *A Tale of Two Sisters* and I’m ordering *Failan* and *Friend* very soon.. I liked all of them...anyway, what other ones can you recommend (I’m not interested in stuff like *Volcano High*).”

These films have high correlations among each other. For instance, *OldBoy*, *JSA*, and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* are directed by same director, Chanwook Park. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*’s hero also acted the leading role both in *JSA* and *Memories of Murder*. Moreover, *Failan*’s hero is Minsik Choi, who acted Oh Daesu in *OldBoy*, and *The Tale of Two Sisters* is released by Tartan USA, which is the U.S. distribution company of *OldBoy* and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*.

“I would certainly consider this a serious film... But like a lot of other Korean films, they inject moments of Black Comedy effectively and naturally. *Memories of murder* is another great example of this.”

“As far as I can tell, Korea is by a distance the most creative Asian country..... Korea is propping up Asian cinema as a whole and giving it more credibility than it perhaps deserves.”

“Like *OldBoy*, Korean films don’t hesitate to portray people

realistically, unlike Hollywood movies where the MR characters are like big cute kids who are only here to help others learn valuable life lessons (See *House of D* or *The Other Sister*).”

“There is no Kung FU style kind of unrealistic actions Korean movies. You would see realistic fighting scenes of the kind you saw in *OldBoy*... well of course in a very Korean style.”

“In fact, Korea is the only country I can think of in which their domestic cinematic output outperforms Hollywood imports consistently.”

“The only draw back is that I wish I knew Korean such that I could understand the making of feature and get a better understanding of the movie.”

“I was puzzled when I finished this movie the first time though, don’t get me wrong, I loved it, because of this movie, I’m going to learn as much as possible about Korean cinema.”

“I just rented *OldBoy* and found it fascinating. Can anyone recommend any other Park films that are available on DVD in the States.”

“If I rent a DVD, I always look for the TARTAN releases.”

### *Foreign films as prestige agents*

The “foreign films as prestige agents” theme provides this study with a turning point, and it is important because the following discussion should be read in consideration of this theme. Building prestige and pride as serious film goers is motivated by sharing their disenchantment with Hollywood films, and the prestige influences their views on Asian film viewing. “Foreign films as prestige agents” theme includes two sub categories.

- The league of film connoisseurs
- Prestige as trend leaders

Through the discussions and opinion sharing with other film viewers in IMDb, some viewers seem to build prestige as film connoisseurs. In addition to their prestige as film connoisseurs, they also seem to build their prestige as trend leaders who are watching unconventional Asian films and foreign films that the U.S. public has not seen in U.S. theaters. Even some of these trend leaders are inclined to consider themselves different from mainstream U.S. film viewers; furthermore, they separate themselves from the American population. This differentiation is important background for understanding following themes.

#### *The league of film connoisseurs*

*OldBoy* board users find Asian films are attractive because they are different from Hollywood major films. Whatever the board users' views, Asian films are not be welcomed by the majority of U.S. audiences, who are accustomed only to Hollywood style. This argument is created because the users differentiate themselves from mainstream U.S. film audiences. Here is one more notable point. While some board users complain that this film is too difficult, and even some respondents criticize the director is nihilistic, many other users observe that the vagueness of the film attracts them. They assert that they like this film because it is difficult, and it forces them think. In this manner, it seems that these respondents are feeling prestigious as film connoisseurs watching Asian films that are not popular to mainstream audiences.

“A major problem with the movie is that they don’t explain the history of the villain.”

“...perhaps the main problem with the film is the severe lack of information given to both Daesu and the viewer.”

“The only reason I didn’t give it a 10 is that there was a couple of moments which were hard to follow, but it could be something with the translation.”

“Some films just do not allow themselves to fall into generalizations and these films pose conundrums when one tries to explain them.”

“After I saw this, I read some interview with the cast and crew, and apparently some of this vagueness is intentional – we’re supposed to be left unsure. Well, the movie is successful in that, but I think it’s an unworthy goal, an abdication of the artist’s responsibility. People have bristled at the charge that this movie is nihilistic, but if that really is the point, that the movie’s supposed to throw up it’s hands and say, “hey, I dunno, you figure it out,” then that truly is nihilism.”

“For one thing, there’s the mature content. It may simply be a differing viewpoint on how a “good film” is narrated, but this trend is not present in *OldBoy*: logical leaps are made, and it’s your job to keep up with them. I personally like the challenge a lot: it’s refreshing for a film to require something from its viewers once in a while.”

“Just sit, and watch, and take in the full experience. If you can appreciate an original movie, despite some unpleasant or even disturbing elements, then this movie will likely hit you like a sledgehammer.”

“Remakes are useless. They are like translations of a foreign or older film that the average dumb audience wouldn’t appreciate otherwise, because it is “too strange,” “too arty,” “too slow”, or “too foreign,” which are exactly the same reasons I prefer them.”

“The entire creative process doesn’t have to be based on

satisfying the average consumer (not that *OldBoy* doesn't satisfy)."

"No doubt lots of people would find this work distasteful, and I understand why they would think in such fashion, one of the reasons has been the high level of violence...Personally, I put *OldBoy* among the ranks of *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Godfather*, and *Forest Gump* as my favorites. Though they all have distinctive themes and different ways of expression, there's one common thing between them...they all make me think, and think hard."

### *Prestige as a trend leader*

After sharing their opinions with other board users, respondents began to recognize themselves as film connoisseurs who were different from U.S. audiences. In this process, eventually they shared their prestige as film connoisseurs with other users. Watching uncommon foreign films was a matter of pride, and they also were proud to become new trend leaders or early adaptors who watch uncommon Asian films that most people have not experienced yet.

"If you are more into main stream film then you might not like this, but if you are a film buff and know more about movies than the average moviegoer, then you will not be disappointed."

"One of the few good things about living in NYC is being able to know and see more things that you wouldn't otherwise see in Smalltownsville, USA."

"For me there was nothing of the settings or scenes or plots that were difficult for me to understand. I guess I have seen many foreign films to have a viewing grasp of respecting other cultures and their beliefs."

"Mass American audiences will never find this film through as

there are few distributors that have the courage to stand behind a film this risky and adventurous as far as the subject matter goes, i.e. the final reveal and the choices that it brings. The final two minutes alone will have most American audiences gasping in PC shock and most likely offended.”

“I like they remake foreign films...cuz then I can be all pretentious and go “psh...I’ve had the original of this on DVD for ages – that makes me unique and cooler than everyone else.”

### *Barriers*

Because the majority of these trend leaders insist that they are regular foreign film viewers, they advocate for subtitles to keep the originality of films and claim open-minded attitudes in experiencing foreign cultures. This type of open-minded attitude toward experiencing foreign culture is also well illustrated by their antipathy toward ethnocentric views. This theme “barriers” closely connects to “foreign films as prestige agents” theme. The majority of respondents say that it is important to have an open-minded attitude as serious film goers. The “Barriers” theme has three sub-categories:

- The dubbed versus subtitled battle
- Ethnocentric view? Nope, I am an open-minded film connoisseur
- I am not ethnocentric. Rather I just want everything to be standardized.

Some viewers see that watching foreign films with subtitles would be prestigious because mainstream U.S. audiences have difficulties with subtitled films. Most respondents said that they did not experience difficulties or feel barriers while watching *OldBoy* with subtitles because of their regular exposures to foreign films. However, respondents also see the mainstream U.S. viewers as ethnocentric toward foreign cultures,



but they argue that the U.S. market environment made the American public ethnocentric and that American ethnocentrism is not inherent.

### *The dubbed versus subtitled battle*

“The dubbed versus subtitled battle” is the first sub-category under the “barriers” theme. As previously mentioned, most of respondents said that they do not experience difficulties or feel barriers to enjoying foreign films with subtitles because of their regular exposures to foreign films compared to mainstream U.S. film viewers. This notion also supports the idea in the literature review that tradition and custom are important facets that influence audiences’ preferences toward the translation method (The Institute of Communication Studies at The University of Leeds, 2003). It was also significant that respondents hold stereotypes that mainstream U.S. film viewers hate to watch films with subtitles and prefer dubbing. Respondents see the scarcity of foreign films in U.S. theaters as the reason why U.S. viewers feel uncomfortable watching films with subtitles. In sum, users’ preferences toward the subtitles closely connect to their prestige as film connoisseurs. The majority of *OldBoy* board users, who consider themselves film connoisseurs, see that watching foreign films with subtitles would enhance their prestige because most U.S. viewers has difficulties with subtitled films.

“I just wish I understood Korean because the English subtitles and (worse) dubbing are clearly sophomoric. You miss a lot either way, but I still prefer to hear the actual actor and read subtitles.”

“People don’t go to a cinema to sit for two hours of reading. Hollywood understands this.”

“What the hell is wrong with people having problem to read subtitles?”

“Asian films will almost certainly become more popular but I don’t see them overcoming the language barrier.”

“The majority of Americans have little patience and little interest for things outside their sphere and Hollywood knows that. Note. Hero & House of Flying Daggers were dubbed...”

“I plunked my \$8 down at the film festival counter and watched the movie with snotty film fest crowd who didn’t bother to read about the film that they were going to watch. And yes, I chuckled to myself as they gasped and said, “Oh...it’s subtitled...” And I chuckled when they squirmed during the more intense scenes.”

“Nothing was difficult to understand. As long as the subtitles were there. Many in the USA don’t speak Korean.”

“I would never watch a film dubbed if there were subtitles and the original audio available.”

“It really blew me away. I tried to watch it in English and that lasted about a minute. I mean you have to watch it in its original language in order to grasp the power and ferocity of the actual character of Oh Daesu and his enemy.”

“I DETEST dubbing! I only go to subtitled non-English films BUT subtitles have not improved in decades, except in Hollywood films like *Munich*. The technology and means do exist for better subtitles.”

Users also have a high level of dissatisfaction regarding the quality of dubbing in *OldBoy* DVD copies. This dubbing dissatisfaction may be derived from the fact that the majority of them prefer subtitles. However, this antipathy toward the dubbing of foreign films also closely connects to their poor impression of dubbing quality on DVD copies.

“I usually watch the dubbed version second to see what I’ve missed of the visuals while reading. WHY CAN’T THEY GET BETTER ACTORS TO DUB? Daesu’s dubber’s voice was so much higher than Choi, Minsik’s growl. Same with Woojin’s dubber. You CAN’T find some actor with the same vocal range? Since it’s just a voice substitute, you can’t find someone to mimic the original actor’s inflection, etc. I could care less about the dubber’s artistic goals – he’s a stand-in, no creative latitude please. Sorry.”

“When you dub a movie you’re cutting out half of the performance and replacing it with two or three English voices that just don’t care.”

“That dubbing is so funny! It sounds like Peter Griffin. Hey Joowhan! Hey Joowhan get ova hia! Ehhheheheheheheheh. More Family Guy coming up!”

“Oh well, it has the Korean track and that’s all that matters. Don’t watch this in the English dub unless you want to cut yourself.”

*Ethnocentric view? Nope! I am an open-minded film connoisseur*

U.S. users of *OldBoy* board had looked cautiously for ethnocentric views and ideas, but the users then separated themselves from the mainstream U.S. audiences because users felt that most U.S. viewers are inclined to have ethnocentric views when they encounter foreign culture. However, board users also assert that this is not because U.S. Americans are inherently ethnocentric. Rather, by the elimination of foreign films from domestic market, Hollywood has made U.S. viewers narrow-minded and ethnocentric. Users claimed Asian film remakes also come from Hollywood’s ethnocentric strategy.

“I saw *Crouching Tiger* in rural Ohio with my girlfriend (and both of us are HICKS, FROM rural Ohio, so let’s not accuse me of hick-bashing here), and there were actually people yelling at the screen because they hadn’t been expecting they’d have to read subtitles. Same with *Life is Beautiful*, although it wasn’t quite as hostile there, because apparently Chinese sounds funny or something. Most of these people didn’t have any problem with *The Passion*, so I can only conclude that it’s xenophobia, and not subtitles themselves, that causes this phenomenon.”

“I believe that is not that the American audience is so small minded that it forces Hollywood to remake rather than to just re-market foreign language films; it is in fact the complete opposite. Hollywood keeps the market small minded by removing foreign from the equation.”

“The very notion of remaking a foreign film is racist and fascist to the extreme.”

“If I remember correctly the only mention that *Ring* wasn’t a Hollywood original was halfway down the end credits where they stuck in Koji Suzuki as the book author in the middle of a bunch of other random names.”

“About the dog thing. You just have to take into consideration of cultural differences. The way actors and people are in Korea are much different than that of America or anywhere else in the world. This applies to acting and movie making. Their methods are much different than ours. I can understand it being laughable. My friend laughed when he saw it. He thought it was so outrageous because you would never see anyone do that here in America or in an American movie.”

*I am not ethnocentric. Rather, I just want everything to be standardized*

Even if they are minority of this case, the posts below show how ethnocentric views work.

“I watched the movie and I don’t know what is going on. The subtitles are making me confused because I hate subtitles! By the year 2020, all movies must be spoken in English so that I will not have to look down at the bottom of the screen again.”

“I love the English dub. The acting is much better now. I just wished they changed the Korean names to regular names. Instead of Oh Daesu they should have called Jack. Mido could have been called Jennifer.”

### *Cultural differences/Cultural agreement*

To the people who are not familiar with a country, a film from that country may represent the culture of that country and provide a certain impression of that culture. In this context, by watching this film, *OldBoy*, users may develop specific ideas about Koreans. Many opinions and discussions on *OldBoy*’s live octopus-eating scene have been posted. By tracking those discussions, the investigator could gather helpful ideas about attitudes and impressions of Korean culture. It seems that the octopus-eating scene shocked U.S. viewers and possibly gave them certain impressions about Korean life. However, the majority of respondents insisted that *OldBoy* is just a film from Korea and did not reflect Korean life exactly. Sub-categories for this “cultural differences/cultural agreement” theme are:

- Koreans are eating live octopus?
- Not every film has to reflect the source culture exactly, but films cannot exist without influences from the source culture.

It was significant that, with watching *OldBoy*, this group of viewers built certain

impressions about Koreans' eating habits and food culture, and through sharing their opinions in the message board, these viewers enforce or sometimes change their impressions.

*Koreans are eating live octopus?*

It seems that the octopus eating scene shocked many users. The majority of posters and the respondents picked the octopus-eating scene as the most memorable, impressive, and shocking scene.

“The great concept soon disintegrates into a pathetic joke as Oh Daesu runs around beating people up, trying to have sex with a young girl who is attempting to use the toilet and eating a live, writhing squid.”

“This was such a horrifying scene for a lot of people. The idea of eating an octopus alive is craziness. The just idea of having tentacles clenching on your nose while you chew its brain had quite an impact on me.”

“The eating of the live octopus. Sickening! Raw? It is a custom in Korea but the thought of eating a slimy food like octopus is revolting.”

The worst scene for me is at the beginning when Oh Daesu goes for sushi and meets Mido and asks for something “live” to eat.”

“Anyway the film lost me when the guy bites into a live octopus and stuffs it in his mouth. I'm not interested in seeing this, but I guess with “reality” TV this is the kind of thing I have to expect.”

“I guess this thread relies on the impression that Koreans eat live, writhing octopus whole and that's not unusual. I can't tell you where I saw it, but some Korean chef said it's served fresh – live and chopped up for service. Never the way Oh Daesu ate it.”

“Eating live octopus is not at all common in Korea. Often a live octopus will be killed in front of the customer, prepared and then served to be eaten. Octopus is eaten raw often, sure, but not like that. Park intended on surprising all of his audiences with that scene. But you’re right in saying that just the placement of a live octopus is much more common in Korea. You would never see a Philly cheese steak joint carrying a bunch of live octopuses or anything.”

“I didn’t know that eating live octopuses was common in Korea. Now that I do know.”

“Some people were disgusted with the eating live squid scene. That’s a delicacy in Asia. Just because it’s not popular here doesn’t make it “disgusting or weird.” Everybody in the West is so ethnocentric. We are not the only culture, and we are not the most prevalent.”

Some users provide new information on Korean culture with their knowledge earned from their Korean relatives, and/or from their own experiences. One more notable point is because of the lack of Koreans on this English based web site, U.S. users can build stereotypes and correct the errors by themselves mostly with second hand information.

“I actually asked my mom about this scene. She’s from Korea and kind of explained it to me. She said, “Yeah, I can see how Americans can find this kind of strange and gross. In Korea, this is nothing. I’ve seen plenty of people eat octopus like that. Only guys eat it like that though. It isn’t all THAT common, but it is still not a surprising thing.” So the octopus scene just seems to be a conflict of culture. The torture scene is another cultural example too. I’ve heard Korean people are pretty much some of the most brutal when it comes to torturing.”

“When Daesu was acting like a dog, I thought it was a little odd and a little over the top, too. My friend, who is Korean, later explained to me that it wasn’t necessarily just out of desperation, insanity, etc. according to her, in Korean culture, dogs are held to

a lower standard than in the U.S. Koreans look at dogs as being far more inferior than Americans do. So, to act like dog, especially another man's dog, was a sign of totally bowing down.”

“Women were treated as prize, which men fight over, and while it is important to update these views for today, that is an important factor in the style of story. Also, it must be understood that the characters in this film in particular, are Koreans, thus they treat women the way Korean culture does.”

Debates on the newspaper article below show how U.S. board users viewed ethnocentrism. The majority of users warned others against falling into ethnocentrism. Viewers also strongly asserted that human opinions are formed according to the environment and one's education, so nobody can escape from educated ethnocentric viewpoints.

“When the hero swallows a live octopus, Chanwook exits Kafka and enters the schlocky twilight zone of geek TV. ”

– Thomas Delapa, *Boulder Weekly*

“I think the reviewer's comments are being taken out of context. Had he said, “These whacky Koreans don't just eat dog; they're crazy for jamming octopus in their faces too!!!” THAT would have been ethnocentric.”

“As a happy member of “the most ignorant race,” I consider my life to be relatively rich and happy, and while my experience is very America-centric....Everyone's experience is centered on where they've spent their life. It's unavoidable. Just being born outside the stifling confines of the U.S. doesn't endow you with the wisdom of the world and unassailable sense of perspective.”

“America is large enough and diverse enough that saying “Americans are this, Americans are that,” is a pointless exercise.



Take a lifelong Manhattan resident, sit them in a room with a Nebraska farmer, a Utahian and, a Californian or two, and see how much they have in common. They all speak English, but apart from that, their realities are hardly similar.”

“That is a very inappropriate, sweeping statement. What is an American, fat gav? Americans are black, white, Asian, Latino, poor, middle class, rich, informed, uniformed, depressed, ebullient, polite, dismissive, and caring. Those characteristics, with a few exceptions, can be used to describe virtually any developed nation, NOT JUST AMERICA. What the hell is ethnocentric?”

*Not every film has to reflect the source culture exactly, but films cannot exist without the influences from the source culture.*

Films cannot exist without the influence of their source culture. On the other hand, a film does not always represent the source culture exactly. There is no argument on the thesis that films are influenced by the source culture, and some respondents pointed out Korean culture’s influences on this film. However, they tend to see this film as either great or disgusting film, rather than seeing it as a Korean film that represents Korean culture. In other words, they do not see *OldBoy* as a prototype of Korean culture or cinema; rather they tend to see *OldBoy* just as a film.

“Because I interpreted that the film was an updated, re-contextualized version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, I figured it reflected Korean life about as much as the original Dumas novel reflected French life in its period...”

“My father fought in the Vietnam War and was teamed up on patrol with a group of South Koreans. He had this to say: “I’m glad those guys were on our side because those Koreans were some ruthless, bloodthirsty mother f---. I think they actually

enjoyed torturing the Vietnamese. Many of them could not speak English; all they could say was, "We kill many Cong for you." They used to keep rats in cages, starving and tormenting them. When they found some Vietnamese families hiding in holes in the ground, they would unleash the rats into the holes and wait for the people to come out flailing and screaming. Then they would execute them. They also seemed to enjoy burning people alive." The point of my reply to you was that I believe it is this type of culture that creates a movie like *OldBoy*, a very bizarre and sadistic film."

"I have only noticed that the Korean films that I have seen generally have been a bit violent...I am certain that this film was not representative of Korean life. Probably the most glaring example was when the live sea creature was consumed. One can only hope that this film had NOTHING to do with Korean life in general."

"I recently watched a Korean film festival on cable TV (<http://www.cuny.tv/series/citycine/index.lasso>) but those films seemed obsessed too with issues around the former dictatorship. One problem for American viewers is knowing so little about Korean history in the twentieth century so those references go right by me and other American viewers. I think this film had more to do with the genre of Hong Kong cop and criminal thrillers than it had to do with Korean life styles. It's an art house chopsocky film, not a societal revelation."

"The movie is told mainly from Oh Daesu's point of view, and Daesu's life does not exactly qualify as the life of your everyday Korean man; now, does it? In short, the movie does not give much insight into how an average Korean lives his or her life, so I am not sure if I can answer this question. There was one scene that made me scratch my head though. It was the beginning sequence when Daesu was arrested and drunk and started attacking the police officer. In America, attacking a man would hardly be tolerated let alone attacking a law enforcement officer, yet Daesu got off the hook without as much as a fine. Another odd thing noticed was that the officer did little to try and stop Daesu other than verbal warnings. I found this quite odd."

"I don't think there is a movie on this Earth powerful or shocking enough to change the way I look at a certain culture. Especially

not a fictional movie. I have watched *Irreversible* and *Ichii the Killer* several times, but neither movie has yet to make me change the way I look at the French people nor the people of Japan.”

“I don't think that you need to understand any certain aspect of the Korean culture to fully enjoy the movie really. That's another thing I liked about *OldBoy*: you don't need to be a Korean culture wiz or a Korean born citizen to enjoy the movie. Anybody can watch it and be impressed.”

“When I watched this flick I was not all thinking about “Korean life,” I was thinking about the scenery, the cinematography, and the fantastic plot; – not about why my life as an American is different than the lives I was watching on film as Koreans.”

“Films show what they want to show, so I don't base my views on other societies or people based on the films they make. I lived in California for 23 years, and I knew people from other countries. I would not say that I understood another country's lifestyle based on the films they make because I would have to say I understand American lifestyle by the films that are made here, wherein everyone is “pretty” and every other person is a hip-hop tattooed gangster rap hoodlum, or religious fanatic. I'm sure other countries have a different approach to the films they make than here, but I watch films for entertainment value and do not base my opinions of other societies and what they're life on what I see in films.”

### *Criticism of the Asian film boom*

Some users suggested problems with the Asian film boom. Those users argued, in many cases, that Asian films are being applauded only because they are from Asia. They argue Asian films are being accepted and applauded only because they are made in Asia, a relatively unknown part of world to the U.S. viewers. These viewers assert that classifying the nationality of films is useless, and film viewers should evaluate a film by itself.

This idea mostly comes from reflection and antipathy toward people who unconditionally compliment Asian films. Although it is a minority, some users highly criticize the trend that Asian films are always applauded by Asian film enthusiasts in any circumstance. Those users argue that many film goers become zealots for violent acting, brutal expressions, unconventional narratives, unusual materials, and shocking styles in order to follow the most important and essential path to becoming film connoisseurs. Users felt that this distorted idea keeps viewers from judging Asian films clear-headedly and makes them blindly applaud Asian films.

“I don’t consider myself a pretentious film lover who only appreciates foreign films and “art” pictures – but damn it, why can’t people appreciate movies foreign and domestic?”

“Lately I’ve felt that many Asian films get an automatic “pass” from the internet community. Throw an Asian director at something, make sure it’s got a good helping of blood, torture, and sadism and you’ve got a guaranteed internet darling. I find this troubling because I’ve been watching Asian films for many years now, long before the advent of DVD and the popularization of the internet. People have gotten so fanboyish over any new director from Asia that they are ignoring the actual quality of the film. Place this film in the U.S. give it a gun-toting hero instead of a knife/hammer wielding one, and people would be complaining about the massive plot holes.”

“They simply claim that the unbelievable is believable, that confusion is artful, that violence is creativity, that criticism is “racist,” that calling a spade a spade denotes lack of comprehension, that cheap acting is good acting and that childish, elementary-school-like catch-phrases somehow contain an infinite “wisdom” which would be, to aptly quote the title of another movie, *Lost in Translation*.”

“You’re just the kind of narrow-minded “everything Asian is

cool” cinemagoer that this movie is targeting. Why don’t you try moving beyond the “Oh my God, Asians are making cinema too” perspective, and try analyzing this film for its real merits—which, if I may say, are very few.”

There are both positive and negative opinions toward *OldBoy*. However, some board users do not consider the “flaw” as a “flaw.” Criticism of the Asian film boom emerges here. Their main idea is that Hollywood is being criticized because its films are exposed to all over the world and because they are the most famous and widespread ones. Eventually, because of the frequency of exposure, U.S. films are frequently criticized. In contrast, because the majority of U.S. film viewers are not familiar with Asian culture and the conventions or innovations of Asian film makers and actors, flaws are not easily spotted by U.S. audiences. Moreover, Asian films are highly complimented more than they deserve because only a selected few are exported.

“It felt like a two-hour endurance test... Overly stylized visuals of this film focus on distracting the audience’s attention from its weak storyline. Let Tarantino keep this amateurish Asian hyper-pulp crap of a movie. I personally don’t care for it.”

“I am a novice when it comes to South-Korean cinema, but if this is the best of the best, sorry. I just want you to know that I am not at all narrow-minded when it comes to appreciating foreign movies, and I do not fit the stereotype of the “dumb American”...well, not perfectly. I cannot believe the high praise this piece of nothing is bestowed upon. This is a disgusting \*and\* ludicrous movie. Hammy acting – everything is badly done and overdone, like begging for the uneducated viewer’s attention... This story of an unbelievably intricate and contrite act of revenge is worse than the worst tabloid story one can read in a line at the supermarket.”

“I totally disagree with most people on this board. *OldBoy* was

nothing special. If this film had been made America with American actors, it would have bombed horribly.”

“I’m sure that if American films were as rare as Asian films are over here in the U.S.: Korea, China, Japan would remake some American movies too. You guys are giving the Asian community a bit too much credit.”

“Every country has its talents and its fakes. Hollywood being more popular; it is much easier to see its failures and more subject to critique. This does not mean that Europeans or Asians don’t produce crap. Crap is everywhere.”

“In general, only good foreign films have a chance to be seen outside their own country. For example, you will never see an extremely bad Korean gangster comedy. You can see only the masterpiece. That’s why so many foreign films seem so good.”

“The only stereotypes I read were the anti-American ones comparing *OldBoy* in the silliest manner to “Hollywood.” What is “Hollywood”? As if all the movies coming from Hollywood would be the same or all bad – most not all of them, may be bad, but that’s another topic. On the other hand, some “Hollywooders” make dozens of movies by far better than this joke. So do Japanese directors. And Chinese directors. Most probably Korean too. What a pity this particular pathetic pitiful piece of junk is the one so rabidly promoted.”

## Discussion

Results from the analysis of the message board discussions in IMDB website's *OldBoy* exclusive board and e-mail in-depth interviews with participants helped answer the research questions. Suggested research questions of this study were:

- R-1. What impressions of Korean life and culture were evident to *OldBoy* viewers?
- R-2. How were those impressions expressed?
- R-3. What technical problems did viewers encounter when viewing *OldBoy*?
- R-4. What aspects of this Korean film and potentially other such films attract U.S. audiences?

First, the majority of respondents could not find any peculiar settings or scenes that represent the originality of Korean culture except the abundant opinions on the live octopus eating scene. This may be because, for the most part, *OldBoy*'s scenes and settings are not exclusive to Korea but could have been filmed anywhere in the world. This seems one of the reasons that many of respondents could not point any cultural influences. Furthermore, because this film was driven by the revenge theme, which might be a universal theme, and was mainly narrated in two protagonists' viewpoints, it might

not give the viewers enough opportunities to experience the source culture's influences. However, the one most important issue that the investigator suggests is the relationship with prestige as film connoisseurs. It can be assumed that the respondents are cautious to point out these kinds of opinions as film connoisseurs.

One of the most significant impressions regarding Korean culture suggested by respondents was that Koreans eat whole live octopus. Most of the users' comments involving this scene contained the words "shocking," or "disgusting." Some respondents even asserted that they disliked this film for this brutal scene, or that this disgusting scene ruined the whole film.

Other than the octopus-eating scene, respondents offered little evidence of having constructed Korean stereotypes from viewing *OldBoy*. Nevertheless, these users' provide some insight and impetus for future research.

"Thinking about the film, I'd say that the most different aspect of Korean life, to me, was how close everything seemed to be to each other. There was little use of cars and more scenes involving walking" (R-13).

"It was the beginning sequence when Daesu was arrested and drunk and started attacking the police officer. In America, attacking a man would hardly be tolerated let alone attacking a law enforcement officer yet Daesu got off the hook without as much as a fine. Another odd thing noticed was that the officer did little to try and stop Daesu other than verbal warnings. I found this quite odd" (R-1).

"About the dog thing. You just have to take into consideration of cultural differences. The way actors and people are in Korea are much different than that of America or anywhere else in the world. This applies to acting and movie making. Their methods



are much different than ours. I can understand it being laughable. My friend laughed when he saw it. He thought it was so outrageous because you would never see anyone do that here in America or in an American movie” (P-37).

“.....There were two other poignant aspects of the film for me. One, I almost thought we were going to have a fully formed human female character in the film, when Daesu goes to the sushi restaurant and Mido starts talking with him. Oh, yes – real adult male-female interaction. But no. Mido and the sister of Woojin, the two main females are only objects of contention and possessions for the men. “You did not protect her.” Women are manipulated or controlled, protected or used. I cannot find any Asian movie or work of art fully complete or accomplished when it embraces such full frontal sexism, even if inherent in a culture” (R-5).

I am not sure if I can answer this question. There was one scene that made me scratch my head though. It was the beginning sequence when Daesu was arrested and drunk and started attacking the police officer. In America, attacking a man would hardly be tolerated let alone attacking a law enforcement officer, yet Daesu got off the hook without as much as a fine. Another odd thing noticed was that the officer did little to try and stop Daesu other than verbal warnings. I found this quite odd” (R-1).

Willnat, L., Zhou, H., and Hao, X.’s (1997) research is worth adding for explaining the influences or roles of the viewers’ impressions of Korean culture. Through the surveys about foreign media content and stereotype building, they could not find any strong relationship between quantity of foreign media content exposure and specific stereotype building about that origin country. Their study examined 625 respondents from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shenzhen, one of the special economic zones in China. According to results from that research, more exposure to U.S. media products does not guarantee that audiences have significantly positive or negative impressions and images

of U.S. Americans and the United States. Hong Kong respondents enjoyed more U.S. media products than those of Shenzhen, but Hong Kong respondents have more negative impressions about America than Shenzhen respondents do (Willnat, et al., 1997). However, researchers could not find any significant evidence that more exposure increases the negative impressions either. Although individuals' impressions about a specific country may be influenced by more than mere exposure to media products, their research provides one of the most important points for this discussion. The *OldBoy* posts below can be said to provide some limited evidence supporting this notion.

“I wouldn't say my impression of Korean life was changed too much. If anything, I was so impressed by the quality of *OldBoy* that I was more appreciative of Korean culture and what it produced” (R-8).

“I don't think there is a movie on this Earth powerful or shocking enough to change the way I look at a certain culture. Especially not a fictional movies. I have watched *Irreversible* and *Ichii the Killer* several times, but neither movie has yet to make me change the way I look at the French people nor the people of Japan” (R-1).

“*OldBoy* did not change my impressions of Korean life. They can make movies that have improbable, yet entertaining, story-lines as well as anyone else from another country can” (R-2).

I don't feel I have a clear understanding of Korean life from this film. I have no reality check (e.g. a good documentary) to compare it to. There were indications of powerful feelings of love and hate. Perhaps that exaggerated depth of feelings is what represents Korean life or Korean art form – I don't know. The Korean people I got to know superficially in NYC were very modest and polity. I cannot comment further on this (P-16).

When people encounter another culture that is not common or sometimes not acceptable to their own culture, people may experience cultural shock. Furthermore, if that cultural phenomenon maintains its primitive shape, sometimes the receivers even may feel upset. Ethnocentrism is the academic definition of this phenomenon. In this sense, ethnocentrism is a natural mental state of people who are encountering foreign cultures. Considering this concept, viewers' reactions to the live octopus eating scene seem reasonable.

The majority of respondents had positive opinions and expectations toward Asian films on the whole, not only about Korean films specifically. One of the main purposes of this study was to examine what kind of impressions U.S. board users come to have about Korean life through watching this film. However, reactions to Korean films and Asian films did not differ significantly. Although the majority of users differentiate Asian films and other, mostly European, foreign films, they did not subdivide Asian films according to genres or nationalities. It seems this phenomenon is mostly caused by the scarcity of Asian films in the U.S. market. Because there are not a large variety of Asian films shown in U.S. theaters, Asian films are recognized together as one genre by most of the case members. Films are usually subdivided according to their genres: thriller, action, comedy, etc., but Asian films are usually categorized by their source culture or regions such as East Asian, South Asian, or Middle Eastern. Subdividing Asian films according to the genres or specific countries is only performed by a select few Asian film fans. This may be one more reason why respondents could not pick up the cultural cues from *OldBoy*.

Through tracking the discussions on *OldBoy*, it also was found that the majority of respondents seem to be cautious about judging a film by relating it to the source culture. As suggested in the “foreign films as prestige agents” theme, this notion can be related to the idea that real film connoisseurs do not distinguish the nationality of the film, and do not judge the film by where it comes from. The majority of respondents claimed that even though films cannot exist without the influences of the source cultures, viewers who judge the film should be cautious about applying stereotypes toward the source culture. However, in some cases, bad impressions of Korean culture influence impressions of *OldBoy*, and vice versa. For example, one respondent who criticized this film seems to have been influenced by his prejudice toward Korea while watching this film, and this respondent emphasized his own prejudice toward Korean culture.

“My father fought in the Vietnam War and was teamed up on patrol with a group of South Koreans. He had this to say: “I’m glad those guys were on our side because those Koreans were some ruthless, bloodthirsty motherf---. I think they actually enjoyed torturing the Vietnamese. Many of them could not speak English; all they could say was “We kill many Cong for you.” They used to keep rats in cages, starving and tormenting them. When they found some Vietnamese families hiding in holes in the ground, they would unleash the rats into the holes and wait for the people to come out flailing and screaming. Then they would execute them. They also seemed to enjoy burning people alive.” The point of my reply to you was that I believe it is this type of culture that creates a movie like *OldBoy*, a very bizarre and sadistic film” (R-10).

The investigator previously suggested two possible barriers that viewers may

face while experiencing *OldBoy* as well as other foreign films. Those were linguistic and cultural barriers. To answer this question, the investigator examined the reactions of case group members *OldBoy*'s translation method. The answer to this question should start from following point. Many of the *OldBoy* viewers in the IMDb website have a stereotype that real film lovers tend to prefer subtitles over dubbing because they believe, subtitles preserve the film's originality. Eventually, because of their self-categorization as films connoisseurs, the majority of respondents strongly favored subtitles. In consideration of the "foreign films as prestige agents" theme, this preference is understandable. The term "prestige" provides one most important overarching idea emerging from this study: Their prestige as film connoisseurs emerged from watching unconventional foreign films and was enhanced through the social connections with other users. Conversely, this prestige worked while watching *OldBoy*.

In this context, it is possible to say that respondents recognize themselves as film-lovers, and eventually, they prefer subtitles for their prestige. However, one more reason that can be suggested is Asian films' limited releases. According to the board users, many of them say that they saw this film at a film festival. It seems that many viewers watch foreign films through non-commercial releases such as film festivals, film viewings in community member sharing, or the internet as much as through commercial, official routes including theaters, and DVD copies. As previously mentioned, dubbing requires more time and money than subtitles. Therefore, in the case of non-commercial limited releases, subtitles are more common than dubbing. Even in commercial releases,

because of the market size, Asian films' dubbing quality is criticized by the viewers. This also may be one of the reasons that regular foreign film viewers get used to watching films with subtitles. Consider that audiences tend to be accustomed to the translation mode they have experienced and favor that tradition (The Institute of Communication Studies at The University of Leeds, 2003).

The argument on cultural barriers can be connected closely to the first research question. It seems that the board users felt a strong cultural shock at the live octopus eating scene. However, most of users argued that they were open-minded film-goers, and they did not have ethnocentric views while watching a foreign film. Thus, because they consider themselves film lovers, they share certain views that film should be judged by the film itself and should not be judged by cultural differences or ethnocentric perspectives. Users believe that other U.S. film viewers have ethnocentric views and feel that ethnocentrism comes from one's lack of understanding of the source culture. Some users complained that the ethnocentrism of the American public comes from the scarcity of foreign film in the United States, not from the inherent arrogance of U.S. Americans.

“I saw *Crouching Tiger* in rural Ohio with my girlfriend (and both of us are HICKS, FROM rural Ohio, so let's not accuse me of hick-bashing here), and there were actually people yelling at the screen because they hadn't been expecting they'd have to read subtitles. Same with *Life is Beautiful*, although it wasn't quite as hostile there, because apparently Chinese sounds funny or something. Most of these people didn't have any problem with *The Passion*, so I can only conclude that it's xenophobia, and not subtitles themselves, that causes this phenomenon” (P-35).

The final research question asked what aspects of this Korean film and potentially other such films attract U.S. audiences. Basically, board users' impressions about today's Asian films seem mostly to be based on the scarcity of Asian films in the U.S. market. In the first theme "searching for alternatives," the investigator could get helpful ideas about the overall character of the case group members. They can be defined as the viewers who are not satisfied with domestic films, or who are interested in new and unconventional films. Considering that, two points are worth noting. One is that *OldBoy*, as well as other Korean films, have a unique style, and the other is that these films are hardly seen as big releases in U.S. theaters. Although the stylistic differences could not be defined in this study, the influences of the scarcity of Korean films in U.S. market can be understood when considering the theme "foreign films as prestige agents." It was significant that the scarcity of Korean films in the U.S. market worked as one of the most attractive aspects to promote.

By watching Asian films that are not common in the U.S. market, viewers can contribute to film viewing communities and other users with supplying information and participating in discussions. Viewers of new foreign film post their opinions and information on the message board and user comments, and share their opinions with other users. These posts help other users get information about that new foreign one, and the users would watch the film, and possibly look for other foreign films with using many clues, and again, their posts help others discover other films.

## Conclusions

This case study was designed to examine U.S. audiences' attitudes toward foreign films, specifically, a Korean film *OldBoy*. Through that, four research questions were raised. This research's purpose was to better understand how the members of this case group viewed the film to get a snapshot of their perceptions. However, we actually may have learned more about U.S. audiences. First, this study is important and meaningful in two aspects. This study can be the foundation for understanding U.S. audiences' perceptions of Korean films. Secondly, this study shows how this interpretive community of U.S. audiences view themselves as foreign film viewers.

Considering the theoretical framework previously suggested, this study observed that by contributing to and participating in message board discussions, the viewers built a film viewing community in the website. *OldBoy's* exclusive board also may represent a foreign film viewing community. However, users also are participating in other films' board discussions in IMDb website and also contributing to the discussions in other film viewing websites. Discussions with other film viewers in various film viewing communities helped them build and enhance their prestige as serious film-goers and build an interpretive community based on their own criteria. By tracking the posts and respondents' answers, at least, the investigator could predict that they are building



exchange networks in their foreign film viewing community, and this process may influence to their future foreign film viewing. Having considered the interpretive community concept and reception theory, the investigator can conclude that these respondents' foreign film viewing experiences and opinion-sharing on IMDb message board are closely connected.

In this interpretive community, we saw viewers who sought out films recommended by other users in the community. They then viewed those films. The interpretive community's own cultural cues may work while the users are watching and interpreting the films. After watching the films, viewers post their opinions on the community web site. Their opinions, which might be somewhat influenced by the community's own culture, also may influence community members, who may not have seen the film. Those new visitors get information related to those foreign films from message board: Users may ultimately be influenced by the shared views of that interpretive community.

In consideration of uses and gratifications theory, it also can be said that viewing foreign films like *OldBoy* and sharing their experiences with other board users is their efforts and rewards circle. Because of Hollywood majors' domestic film market domination, U.S. film viewers have relatively few chances to encounter foreign film products. The majority of respondents tend to have critical views about this U.S. market environment. Foreign films, such as Asian films like *OldBoy*, seem especially to satisfy users' needs for cinematic alternatives due to foreign films' scarcity in U.S. market.

Sharing their foreign film experiences with other users, viewers can enhance their understanding of foreign film viewing and get other ideas about foreign film viewing. The new information that they can get from the foreign film viewing communities helps them find other foreign films, including Asian films and also Korean films. Moreover, watching the films, which were introduced by the communities, also helps them contribute to the communities. In other words, participating in community discussion is a means of finding new foreign films, and watching new foreign films works as a way of contributing to their film viewing communities.

Also, contributing to the community enhances their prestige as film goers. Via message board discussions, users can develop a better understanding not only of a specific foreign film, but also of foreign films in general. New information and views received from the board discussions may lead them to search other foreign films. The users, who were helped by other community members, watch the films. They then post their opinions and participate in discussions using their new foreign film viewing experiences. In this process, they contribute to the community with their own experiences and also enhance their prestige. While participating in discussions, they may get other information and different views from other users. Again, new information and views may help and enhance the viewers' understandings of their new foreign films experiences. In this context, foreign film viewing and contributing to community discussions work as a means of enhancing one's prestige as a foreign film enthusiast.

As mentioned in the discussion section, one theme that emerges from this study

is “board users’ prestige as film connoisseurs.” First two themes, “searching for alternatives” and “discovery of *OldBoy*,” can be interpreted as users’ rationales for building this prestige. Finally, two themes of “barriers” and “cultural differences/cultural agreement” show how prestige as film enthusiasts worked when they watched *OldBoy*. In this context, this term “prestige” may be the key word to understanding this group of viewers, but this term also shows what the limitations of this study are.

In the results section, one more notable point was suggested. In the internet, people get information from a specific site, and the website has wide array of other information related. By clicking the hyperlinks, people can reach other related information about their interested subjects. With the information from outer sources, users encounter and discover other foreign films.

Through the *OldBoy* exclusive board, viewers get information relating to this film including its nationality, director, actors, and even the distribution company. Among those hyperlinks, users can make various choices. Users, who are interested in the director’s style, also would be interested in other films by the director. Some users who have an interest in the source country would find other films from that country. They may buy DVDs released by same brand or watch other films by the actors in that film. This is the connection that this study observed. That is the way recommendation and information sharing circle works. This in-community information sharing circle can have two major effects that enhances their prestige as serious film-goers and encourages them to seek other foreign films.

A film from a foreign country can be a very good text to experience that foreign culture. Moreover, because of the power of the film as a cultural product, even though it is second hand, it may be a helpful way for the viewers who are not familiar with that source culture to learn about it. Film viewers in the world have been accustomed to U.S. culture because of their continuous exposure to U.S. films. In comparison, because of U.S. films' domestic market domination, U.S. viewers may have different attitudes toward foreign films from viewers in other countries. This study's rationale was to get more information about U.S. audiences in terms of how they react to foreign films.

The investigator expected that *OldBoy* could achieve commercial success considering its mass appeal in world film markets, including Europe. However, *OldBoy* was released only on a limited number of screens; consequently, like other Asian films (except some Chinese martial arts action films), it did not reach the wide number of U.S. film audiences. Although the DVD was also released, *OldBoy* is not considered a commercially successful foreign film in the United States. Interestingly, this fact might make *OldBoy* a better text to understand U.S. film viewers' own characters. However, there is one weakness of the choice of *OldBoy*. That is the unique but universal theme and expressions of this film. *OldBoy* treats a universal theme, rather showing and expressing Korean culture. Therefore, it is hard to say that U.S. film viewers developed any major impressions of Korean culture through this film. Furthermore, the incest theme, scenes of brutal torture, and some scenes that few Koreans agree with, including the octopus eating scene were adapted for this film. These settings might deter viewers from experiencing

Korean culture, and move their gaze toward these conflicting aspects. In this context, this film might not be a perfect choice to achieve the goal of this study.

This study hoped to begin a discussion about U.S. audiences' attitudes toward Korean film products. However, because this is an intrinsic case study of a specific set of U.S. film viewers, the results of this study do not generalize to all of U.S. film audiences. Respondents in the present study separate themselves from their own perceptions of U.S. film viewers. Respondents enhance their prestige as serious film enthusiasts through this distinction. Among those new-film seeking users, viewing Asian films is considered an inescapable step to becoming a film connoisseur. In sum, this group of *OldBoy* viewers can be defined as film enthusiasts who want to be film connoisseurs through watching and understanding unconventional foreign films but do not wish to be categorized as ignorant U.S. film viewers.

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## APPENDIX

Oldboy (2003)

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technical specs  
laserdisc details

### Oldboy (2003)

Directed by [Chan-wook Park](#)

Writing credits  
[Jo-yun Hwang](#) (screenplay)  
[Chun-hyeong Lim](#) (screenplay)  
(more)

Genre: [Drama](#) / [Mystery](#) / [Thriller](#) (more)

Tagline: End of confrontation, one must die. (more)

Plot Outline: After being kidnapped and imprisoned for 15 years, Oh Dae-Su is released, only to find that he must find his captor in 5 days. (more) (view trailer)

User Comments: proving that style and sizzle does not a movie make (more)

User Rating: ★★★★★★☆☆ 8.3/10  
(21,677 votes) [vote here](#) [top 250: #117](#)

Cast overview, first billed only:  
[Min-sik Choi](#) .... Dae-su Oh  
[Ji-tae Yu](#) .... Woo-jin Lee  
[Hye-jeong Kang](#) .... Mi-do  
[Dae-han Ji](#) .... No Joo-hwan  
[Dal-su Oh](#) .... Park Cheol-woong  
[Byeong-ok Kim](#) .... Mr. Han  
[Seung-Shin Lee](#) .... Yoo Hyung-ja  
[Jin-seo Yun](#) .... Lee Soo-ah  
[Dae-yeon Lee](#) .... Beggar

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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/> (1 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:55:24]

## APPENDIX (continued)

Oldboy (2003)

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[Kwang-rok Oh](#) .... Suicidal Man  
[Tae-kyung Oh](#) .... Young Dae-su  
[Yeon-suk Ahn](#) .... Young Woo-jin  
[Il-han Oo](#) .... Young Joo-hwan  
[Su-hyeon Kim](#)  
[Seung-jin Lee](#)  
[\(more\)](#)

**MPAA:** Rated R for strong violence including scenes of torture, sexuality and pervasive language.

**Runtime:** 120 min

**Country:** [South Korea](#)

**Language:** [Korean](#)

**Color:** [Color](#)

**Sound Mix:** [Dolby Digital](#)

**Certification:** [New Zealand:R18](#) / [Portugal:M/18](#) / [Taiwan:R-18](#) / [Argentina:18](#) / [Australia:R](#) / [Brazil:16](#) / [Canada:16+](#) ([Quebec](#)) / [Canada:18A \(Ontario\)](#) / [Finland:K-15](#) / [France:-16](#) / [Germany:16](#) / [Hong Kong:III](#) / [Ireland:18](#) / [Italy:VM14](#) / [Japan:R-15](#) / [Netherlands:16](#) / [Norway:18](#) / [Singapore:R21](#) / [South Korea:18](#) / [Spain:18](#) / [Sweden:15](#) / [UK:18](#) / [USA:R](#)

**Trivia:** The famous one-take corridor scene was shot in three days. CGI was not used to cleverly edit the sequence as one take, it was actually done in one take. The only CGI used during the scene is where Oh Dae Su gets stabbed in the back with a knife. [\(more\)](#)

**Goofs:** Revealing mistakes: When Dae-su enters the room of one of his nemises, his computer screen shows information about the stock exchange. The internet address on the screen is:  
C:/DocumentsandSettings/[...]/#OldBoy#[...], thus a link to a folder on the computer, rather than an internet address [\(more\)](#)

**Quotes:**

**Mi-do:** What should I pray for?

**Dae-su Oh:** Dear Lord, next time let me meet a younger man.

[\(more\)](#)

**Awards:** 15 wins & 7 nominations [\(more\)](#)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/> (2 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:55:24]



## APPENDIX (continued)

Oldboy (2003)

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### User Comments:

72 out of 153 people found the following comment useful:-  
**proving that style and sizzle does not a movie make**, 4 March 2006

★★★★★

Author: [Jason Timothy Potter](#) from Boulder, CO

A movie without ideas or theme that is long on cinematic style (but then, so are MTV videos and most successful commercials) and short on recognizable human interest (unless you are a first-world adolescent, in which case you will idolize its sadomasochistic cool and eye candy, not to mention the fact that its emotional center appears to be high school). Let's not even talk about artistic merit. Quentin Tarantino (maker of one, perhaps two great movies and a couple of good entertainments) is the most obvious salesman for the view that pulp junk, polished up and translated by cinematic trickery and fascinated with its own pop cultural hipness, is valuable (and Tarantino was on the committee at Cannes that gave this film the Grand Jury Prize). Park steals here from some of the greats (film noir specialists like Hitchcock, absurdists like Bunuel, masters of cinema cool like Kubrick), but lacks any feeling for what made \*their\* movies worth seeing. Put simply, it lacks wit (unless by wit you only mean slapstick), and its ideas are like bad homilies no one understands. I keep encountering this in the newer Japanese and Korean and Hong Kong cinema that seems influenced by Tarantino: comic book themes and characters pass through high-polish celluloid/digital trickery and a ironic pop filter (all borrowed). I hear Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, which I have but still haven't been able to force myself to sit through, is much the same. Avoid.

Was the above comment useful to you?   [\(Report this\)](#)

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---

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<a href="#">question of a quote</a>	<a href="#">Mnice90</a>
<a href="#">Shocking scenes that make you feel the pain in you.</a>	<a href="#">deathatre</a>
<a href="#">Oh-Dae-Su looks like Gary Oldman</a>	<a href="#">kaiserblade</a>
<a href="#">What about the danish cookies and embassy</a>	<a href="#">aimfail</a>

[\(more\)](#)

---

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/> (3 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:55:24]

## APPENDIX (continued)

Oldboy (2003)

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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/> (4 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:55:24]

## APPENDIX (continued)

IMDb :: Boards :: Oldboy (2003)

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#### Board: [Oldboy \(2003\)](#)

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**Nasty Bits**

by - [RussianNick](#) (Mon Mar 27 2006 15:52:23) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

-Hm, you know I watched OldBoy and have to say it was an amazing film with one exception. -The Teeth Bit- If the koreans don't get off their ultra violent kick I'm going to really start getting upset. In my opinion after 'the isle' every Korean movie that has arty pretensions embarks on a gratuitous ultra violent kick just to get some fame. I'm serious. I watched the movie, and had no problem with anything except that bit. It was just so nasty. A human being should never be so desensitized that he can sit back and watch that. I admit it has an emotional impact, but like the fish hooks from Seom I don't want to vomit while watching a film.  
-If I hadn't been able to fast forward through that scene, I'd have been under the bed...

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [moviejudge](#) (Tue Mar 28 2006 09:21:32) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

It wasn't that bad. Well, depends on what you are used to watch. I think the needle scene in Audition (Odishon) is much harder to watch. I don't think it looked gratuit, but that's you're opinion, I can accept that. But I think there are worse things to watch in Asian movies, like Audition or the rape scenes in Bad Guy.

 [www.protectseals.org](http://www.protectseals.org), sign the petition, txx :-)

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [snowboardude126](#) 6 days ago (Wed Mar 29 2006 21:10:25) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

You thought that was harder to watch than the tongue part? Seems pretty tame in comparison.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/board/mest/39477369> (1 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:56:46]

## APPENDIX (continued)

IMDb :: Boards :: Oldboy (2003)

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [RussianNick](#) 6 days ago (Wed Mar 29 2006 21:43:09) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

Yes, but where as the tongue part wasn't torture. It was self inflicted, and not mean spirited. He was just crazy upset.  
-I know it may seem strange, but I find torture to be the most horrific thing you can portray. It's so dehumanizing that to watch it is to be either sickened, or else a sign that the viewer is deranged.

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [istareatthesun](#) 5 days ago (Fri Mar 31 2006 00:47:25) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

I spoil everything at the bottom of this post, so please don't read if you haven't seen this film. I promise you that this movie will glue you to your see and will make you feel things you didn't think were possible from cinema... BUT ONLY IF YOU DON'T READ THE BOTTOM OF THIS POST!!!

"It's so dehumanizing that to watch it is to be either sickened, or else a sign that the viewer is deranged."

Well I agree with you that torture is absolutely positively vile and dehumanizing, but I think you're applying rather black and white reasoning to a subject with a lot of gray area.

I don't think being able to stomach a torture scene in a film (even a well executed one) necessarily means that person is deranged. Personally, I don't tend to look away at movies because I know that the director ented every image to be seen by the audience. Now, I'm not deranged. I know you have no way of knowing that for sure being as I'm a complete stranger, but it is quite simply the truth. I am not deranged and I still don't blink during torture scenes.


Now, I still think its an awful thing to watch. As a matter of fact, doing so does cause me a great deal of pain. But to me that's part of the experience. If I feel it, I know it's been done right. Its been shown as the hideous and inhuman action that it is.

And on a side note: To me rippin' somebody's teeth out with the claw end of a hammer is no more painful than being imprisoned for 15 years and then hypnotized into falling in love and sleeping with your daughter by a man who murdered his own sister. Eh, but maybe that's me...

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [moviejudge](#) 6 days ago (Thu Mar 30 2006 01:53:12) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

The Odishon-scene with the needles is harder to me cause I just find it hard to watch needle scenes. But I think it's personal what you find harder to watch. The worst thing I've seen is Cannibal holocaust.

 [www.protectseals.org](http://www.protectseals.org), sign the petition, tnx :-)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/board/mest/39477369> (2 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:56:46]

## APPENDIX (continued)

IMDb :: Boards :: Oldboy (2003)

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [BobbleHat](#) 5 days ago (Fri Mar 31 2006 06:15:05 ) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

**UPDATED** Fri Mar 31 2006 06:15:36

It was a very nasty scene, which was the idea. It was also very darkly funny and the best use of The Four Seasons I think I've witnessed. If you were disturbed by it, then the director has succeeded, as it was supposed to be uncomfortable to watch. Whether it had a negative impact on your enjoyment of the film is just a matter of personal taste.

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [eightminutes6842](#) 4 days ago (Sat Apr 1 2006 07:51:48 ) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

)

You define this movie's point as "ultra violent kick" and you admit the "emotional impact"? I think you are too dumb to watch this movie; just sit down and watch CBS and feel "A human being" must be "desensitized".

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [vandepool35](#) 4 days ago (Sat Apr 1 2006 11:18:40 ) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

**UPDATED** Sat Apr 1 2006 11:22:25

After all the hype about this film,I watched it and I can honestly say I was dissapointed,I thought that this movie was supposed to be the MOST horrific,gory movie etc etc,its nowt I aint seen before,good storyline etc but I was expecting something more,I dunno,maybe it's me,seen a few sicko films in my time,after watching BANNED FROM TV,I find nothing repulses me anymore,I've seen Cannibal Holocaust,I spit on your grave,Hills have eyes,Oldboy,blah de blah,I watched Hostel last week,it didn't scare me at all, but just the thought of what the film was actually about,and apparently its based on true stories etc (I dunno if this is fact btw,I only read about it)freaked me out big time :(

I am a happily married man with 2 wonderful children and 2 wonderful cats,and I aint no sick weirdo,I just don't get all the fuss about these Japanese/Asian movies

I don't want to fall out with anyone on here btw,just my own opinions

Cheers  
Tony

**Re: Nasty Bits**

by - [BobbleHat](#) 3 days ago (Sun Apr 2 2006 10:53:20 ) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) [reply](#)

It wasn't really supposed to be infamous for sick violence, there's justy some fairly nasty scenes in it, especially for people who aren't 'gore-hounds' or whatever. I suppose it's a fact that getting your teeth pulled out with a clawhammer would be a pretty horrible thing to endure. Whether people are disturbed by it or not is a matter of taste.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/board/mest/39477369> (3 / 4) [2006-04-05 11:56:46]