

Original Research Article

Transnational Reception of Korean TV Dramas among Chinese Audiences: Topic Modelling Analysis of Douban Reviews

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Abstract. The growing circulation of transnational television content has reshaped how audiences engage with media texts across digital platforms. Within this context, South Korean television dramas (K-dramas) have gained sustained popularity among Chinese viewers. This study examines how Chinese audiences receive and interpret K-dramas by analysing online discussions of *Reply 1988* on Douban, one of China's most influential social platforms. The study aims to identify dominant thematic patterns in audience discourse and to explore how these themes are interpreted and articulated within platform-based environments. Methodologically, this study employs a computational text analysis approach based on topic modelling. A large corpus of user-generated reviews was collected and analysed using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify recurring themes, which were then illustrated through representative audience comments. Four dominant themes are identified. They are romantic and interpersonal relationships, evaluative engagement with production and narrative construction, emotional viewing experiences, and family life embedded in everyday contexts. The findings show that Chinese audiences' reception of *Reply 1988* is strongly emotion-orientated. In addition, the reception extends beyond emotional expression to include evaluative judgements with production practices. Moreover, the reception is frequently integrated into familiar family and everyday life experiences. This study contributes to research on transnational television reception and offers empirical insight into how global media texts are locally interpreted in contemporary platform-mediated environments.

Keywords K-dramas; audience reception; Douban review; topic modelling analysis

Introduction

Transnational media content has become increasingly prominent in the contemporary global media landscape. This shift has been intensified by the rise of video and social media platforms, which have reorganised the ways television content is produced, circulated, and accessed by audiences (Jin, 2024). Within this context, South Korean television dramas (hereafter referred to as K-dramas) have established a significant global presence. The distribution of K-dramas has been facilitated by government-supported cultural policies and the growth of digital media industries. In the recent years, K-dramas have extended their popularity from the pan-Asian region to the global world. As an important genre of Korean wave, recent studies suggest that the current phase of the Korean Wave is increasingly shaped by platform logics (Sarkar & Yang, 2024). Transnational circulation of K-dramas is influenced not only by textual and genre-based appeal but also by the growing power of streaming platforms.

In China, K-dramas have continued to attract audience attention despite ongoing political constraints on foreign media content. Because audience reception today no longer depends solely on traditional broadcasting. Instead, it increasingly takes place across multiple channels, including online streaming platforms such as iQiyi and Youku. Moreover, social media spaces further make cross-border discussion and interpretation possible. These developments are often understood through the concept of platformisation,

which draws attention to the growing influence of platform logics on cultural production, distribution, and consumption (Nieborg & Poell, 2025). Notably, the digital traces generated by audiences on the social platforms offer a useful basis for examining the reception of K-dramas.

Although existing scholarship has examined the dissemination of K-dramas in China, much of this research has focused on viewing motivations and audience effects among specific groups, such as fans, students, or female viewers (Jiang & Leung, 2012; Wu et al., 2021). Comparatively less attention has been paid to how Chinese audiences engage with K-dramas through social media and online review platforms. Apart from that, existing studies have often relied on qualitative approaches, including case studies and textual analysis, to account for the popularity of K-dramas in China (Shao, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). The present studies provide valuable insights. However, these approaches are limited in their ability to capture large-scale emotional responses. This limitation is particularly evident given the small samples.

With the development of social media and online film review platforms, scholars have begun to utilise topic models such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to semantically mine large-scale user comments (Blei et al., 2003). Recent methodological studies have further validated the effectiveness of such approaches for the short-text data typical of online reviews (Albalawi et al., 2020). Applied research has also successfully combined topic modeling with sentiment analysis to extract meaningful patterns from user-generated content across various domains (Mujahid et al., 2021). Therefore, this technique demonstrates the focus and evaluative characteristics of viewers' attention to television and movie texts. For instance, studies have shown that topic models can extract stable thematic structures from online comments (Xu et al., 2020), which offers a new empirical path for understanding audience viewing needs and the construction of meaning.

The study addresses two research questions: (1) What dominant thematic patterns structure Chinese viewers' online discussions of *Reply 1988*? and (2) How are these themes interpreted by Chinese audience? To address these questions, the study adopts a computational text analysis approach. This method allows for the systematic examination of large volumes of user-generated reviews. Topic modelling is used to identify recurring thematic patterns in audience discourse. This study makes two main contributions. First, it proposes a clear analytical approach to examining audience reception of K-dramas using online review data. It extends existing reception research beyond small-scale qualitative studies. Second, it sheds light on the recurring thematic concerns that shape Chinese viewers' discussions of *Reply 1988*. These findings contribute to broader debates on transnational television circulation and audience reception.

Historical circulation of K-Dramas in China

The regional circulation of K-dramas in East Asia during the early 1990s marked the first wave of Hallyu (Lee & Zhang, 2020). During this period, Chinese audiences were initially introduced to K-dramas. Notably, *What Is Love All About*, broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV) in 1997, became the first K-drama to achieve widespread popularity in China (Shim, 2006). Its success illustrates the central role played by national and regional television networks in introducing and popularising K-dramas during this period. In the years that followed, romantic melodramas further consolidated K-dramas as a distinctive cultural form within the Chinese media landscape (Jin, 2024).

In 2006, the presence of K-dramas in China started to decline due to a combination of political factors and growing audience fatigue with repetitive narrative patterns. More recently, however, the expansion of digital platforms and social media has reshaped the circulation of K-dramas in China. Online streaming services have enabled audiences to access Korean content beyond traditional broadcasting channels (Jin, 2018). Meanwhile, social media has facilitated renewed engagement and discussion around K-dramas in the digital era.

Audience characteristics of K-dramas in China

In the contemporary context, audiences engage more actively in choosing media content and analysing television programmes. According to Hall (1980), audiences have diversified interpretations of the media content and may decode any given message in a way which complies with or contradicts the producers'

intentions. The processes of interpretation and meaning making are influenced by the audiences' ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds (Athique, 2014).

Existing research suggests that Chinese audiences of K-dramas display unique demographic patterns. Female viewers show a stronger preference for K-dramas than male audiences, a tendency often linked to the genre's emphasis on romantic narratives (Zhang, 2019). In addition, younger viewers, particularly those under the age of 30, tend to engage more actively with K-dramas than older generations, reflecting greater openness to transnational popular culture. Studies further indicate that K-drama audiences in China are predominantly urban, well educated, and middle class (Shao, 2020). These audience characteristics not only shape viewing preferences but also contribute to the genre's cultural resonance and sustained circulation within China's urban media environment.

Reception of K-dramas by audiences in China

The reception of K-dramas among Chinese audiences is a complex process shaped by cultural, social, and media influences. From a macro perspective, the global reach and success of K-dramas depend on factors such as streaming platform strategies, the geopolitical context, governmental support, and industry partnerships (Sarkar & Yang, 2024). Within China, this infrastructure supports a distinct distribution model, involving formal cooperation with local video platforms and targeted social media promotion. These efforts foster cultural familiarity and emotional connection with viewers, which can lead to real-world effects like increased tourism, thereby enhancing South Korea's soft power (Sun, 2025).

At the level of audience engagement, this mediated access produces specific viewing patterns. Chinese urban middle-class audiences are drawn to *My Love from the Star* for its romantic narratives and depictions of contemporary love and professional achievement. Nevertheless, this attraction is frequently combined with a critical awareness of the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideals by the same narratives (Shao, 2020). Audiences thus negotiate this conflict, a process further shaped by digital practices. The proliferation of user-generated review videos on platforms like Douyin shows a form of localisation. By using local internet idioms and focusing analysis on character psychology rather than broader cultural differences, these practices render K-dramas more approachable (Lin, 2025).

In addition, the reception of K-dramas in China reflects a nuanced negotiation between cultural proximity and distance shaped by content themes and platform mediation, and socio-political contexts. Cultural proximity plays a significant role in how Chinese audiences engage with K-dramas, influencing their involvement more than their enjoyment. Chinese viewers tend to connect with K-dramas through character involvement rather than narrative engagement, which contrasts with their reception of American dramas (Lu et al., 2019). Because K-dramas resonate with Chinese audiences by harmonizing traditional and modern values such as family, love, and perseverance, evoking familiarity and nostalgia that transcend regional boundaries (Ariffin et al., 2025; Jiang & Leung, 2012). However, cultural distance is still perceived in certain thematic elements like moral complexity and tragic endings, which can create barriers influenced by China's official censorship and audience expectations for entertainment (Gao et al., 2024).

Approaches regarding K-drama research

Qualitative research methods, including textual analysis, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and ethnography, have been widely employed in studies of K-drama reception. Among these approaches, textual analysis has been particularly prominent, often combined with audience-based methods to examine how viewers engage with narrative and emotional elements in specific dramas (Ju, 2020).

In recent years, interview-based and ethnographic approaches have gained greater visibility in reception research. Studies using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews have explored how K-dramas circulate within social networks and how audiences interpret Korean television content across different cultural contexts (Park & Hong, 2023). Online ethnography has further contributed to understanding fan cultures and identity formation surrounding K-dramas beyond East Asia (Lee, 2020).

At the same time, transnational media reception research has increasingly incorporated mixed-method and quantitative approaches to examine audience behaviour at scale. For example, comparative and corpus-

based studies have analysed large datasets of online reviews to capture cross-cultural viewing patterns and interpretive differences (Lu et al., 2019). While these approaches expand the scope of reception research, they also highlight the methodological shift towards large-scale, platform-based audience analysis.

Topic analysis and audience reception

In the contemporary digital media environment, researchers increasingly encounter large volumes of user-generated textual data. Computational text analysis offers a practical means of identifying patterns in such material that are difficult to capture through manual approaches. Within this context, topic modelling has become a widely used method for examining recurring themes in online reviews and social media discussions. Existing research has noted that short-text environments pose methodological challenges, including data sparsity and reduced topic coherence, which require careful model selection and data preprocessing, especially when analysing platform-based content such as Douban (Murshed et al., 2022).

Among topic modelling techniques, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) is one of the most adopted approaches. As an unsupervised probabilistic model, LDA allows individual texts to be associated with multiple topics to varying degrees, making it well suited to the analysis of large, heterogeneous corpora. Previous studies have demonstrated its usefulness in contexts where texts lack predefined categories and where manual coding is difficult to sustain at scale (Jelodar et al., 2020).

Current research on K-dramas in China has evolved through various connected dimensions, including historical dissemination, audience characteristics and present reception studies focused on Chinese audience. This body of work offers meaningful insight into the consumption and interpretation of K-dramas within the Chinese context. At the same time, it reveals a notable methodological gap: the potential for a more systematic integration of qualitative audience reception research with computational text analysis.

Methodology

This study adopts a computational text analysis approach to examine Chinese audiences' reception of K-dramas through user-generated reviews on Douban. All data processing and analysis were conducted using Python. Figure 1 shows the research approach of this study.

Data Source: Douban

Douban is a major online platform in China for rating, reviewing, and discussing films and television dramas. In addition to numerical ratings, it allows users to post extended textual reviews and to engage in discussion around shared interests. Owing to its reputation for engagement and its concentration of active users, Douban has been widely used in academic research as a source for examining audience reception in the Chinese context. Although detailed users' demographics are not publicly available, prior studies suggest that Douban users are predominantly urban and well educated and tend to participate actively in cultural discussion (Qian, 2022). These characteristics make the platform particularly suitable for analysing the reception of cultural contents.

Case Selection: Reply 1988

Reply 1988 was selected as the case study for three main reasons. First, since its original broadcast on tvN in South Korea in 2015, the series has achieved lasting popularity and critical recognition and is widely regarded as one of the channel's most successful dramas. Second, *Reply 1988* has maintained a high level of audience engagement. After its introduction to the Chinese audience via iQiyi, the series quickly attracted substantial viewership and has continued to generate discussion across online platforms. Third, on Douban, *Reply 1988* consistently receives high ratings and has accumulated a large volume of user reviews over time. Its sustained popularity and extensive audience commentary make it a suitable case for examining how reception develops among Chinese audiences.

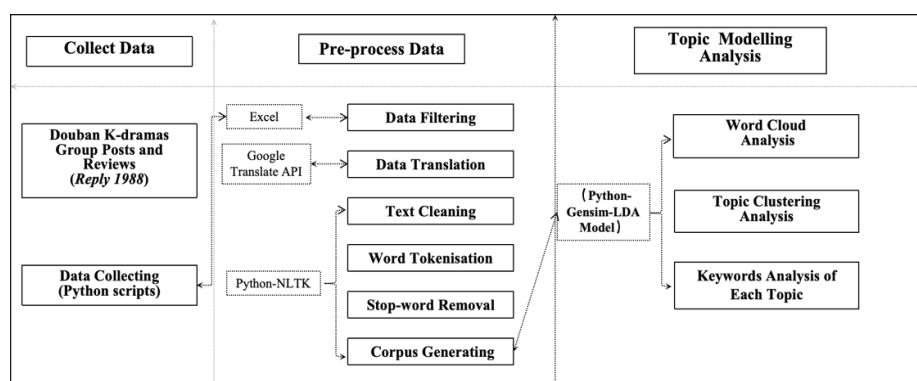


Figure 1. Research approach of this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a Python-based web-crawling script that retrieved posts and comments from the *Reply 1988* discussion group on Douban. The crawling process began on 2 October 2024. To ensure that the data reflected active audience participation, only discussion threads with more than 100 user interactions were selected. This resulted in an initial sample of 55 discussion post, which were subsequently exported as an Excel spreadsheet for further processing.

Importantly, during this crawling phase, no specific search terms or thematic filters were applied to constrain the data collection. As all posts within this dedicated discussion group were relevant to the target drama, this unfiltered approach ensured that the dataset captured a holistic and unbiased representation of audience discourse.

All comments associated with these posts were subsequently collected, yielding 14,067 individual items. The dataset spans from November 2015, when the drama was first released, to August 2024. This allows for an examination of both immediate and long-term reception. For each item, the extracted data included the textual content of the review, posting date, user rating, and anonymised user identifiers.

Data Cleaning and Filtering

Several filtering procedures were applied to improve data quality. First, comments unrelated to the drama's content—such as technical remarks about video sources or brief fan slogans—were removed. This step reduced the dataset to 4,893 comments across 41 discussion posts. Second, some short comments (fewer than 25 words), spam content, and items lacking useful meaning were excluded. The final corpus consisted of 4,639 reviews. These criteria were designed to balance inclusiveness with analytical clarity. They ensure the retained texts reflected meaningful audience engagement rather than peripheral interaction.

Translation and Text Preprocessing

As the original reviews were written in Chinese, all texts were translated into English using the Google Translate API. To reduce potential translation bias, the translated texts were manually checked on a sentence-by-sentence basis and subsequently proofread by an English-language specialist. This procedure follows common practices in cross-linguistic text analysis and helps ensure the reliability of the translated corpus.

Prior to topic modelling, the corpus was subjected to standard text preprocessing. Non-semantic elements, including HTML tags, punctuation, and special characters, were removed. Tokenisation and stop-word removal were performed using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK), supplemented by a manually refined list of low-information terms specific to the dataset (Sarica & Luo, 2021).

Topic Modelling Procedure

The analysis was implemented using Gensim (version 3.4.0). Reviews were represented as a document-term matrix, allowing each text to be modelled as a probabilistic distribution across multiple topics. The optimal number of topics was determined through iterative testing combined with coherence score evaluation. Topic

coherence was used as a diagnostic measure to balance interpretability and thematic differentiation. Subsequently, pyLDAvis was employed to visually inspect topic separation and relevance.

Validity and Ethical Considerations

Several measures were taken to enhance the validity of the research. First, data selection and filtering criteria were applied to minimise noise and ensure that the analysed texts reflected substantive audience engagement. Second, although machine translation inevitably introduces some degree of semantic smoothing, multiple layers of verification were employed to mitigate translation bias. An English major scholar specializing in intercultural studies was invited to examine the translation. Third, the use of topic coherence scores and visual inspection reduced the risk of overfitting or underfitting the model. These approaches allow researchers to address both scale and cultural meaning, supporting the validity of the study.

In addition, the data collection process did not involve any identifiable personal information. All comments analysed were publicly available, and the data were accessed through Douban's publicly accessible API. As a result, the study does not raise ethical concerns related to personal privacy or platform rights.

The Findings

This section presents the results of the word cloud and topic modelling analyses of audience reviews of *Reply 1988* collected from Douban. The word cloud offers a descriptive overview of prominent lexical patterns in the corpus, while topic modelling identifies four recurring thematic clusters.

Word Cloud Analysis Results

A word cloud visually represents frequently occurring keywords in textual data (Ren et al., 2024). Creating a word cloud provides a basic understanding of the central concepts within the text. The pre-processed word segmentation data undergoes frequency counting and is sorted in descending order. Based on experience, the frequency threshold for inclusion in the word cloud is set at 100; only words with a frequency exceeding this are used. The word cloud's content is rich and diverse, presenting information on a specific topic from multiple perspectives.

As shown in Figure 2, character names such as “Choi Taek”, “Sung Deok-sun,” and “Kim Jung-hwan” appear prominently. This prominence indicates that audience discussions are strongly oriented towards individual characters rather than abstract plot summaries. Reviews frequently reference characters by name when recounting emotional moments or evaluating narrative developments, suggesting that character-centered engagement constitutes a primary mode of reception.

In addition to character names, a range of production-related terms—such as “drama,” “episode,” “screenwriter,” “character,” and “plot”—also appear with high frequency. The co-presence of these terms indicates that viewers do not engage with *Reply 1988* solely as emotional storytelling but also pay attention to narrative structure and production processes. Emotion-related words, including “love,” “feel,” and “feeling”, are likewise prominent across the corpus. Their frequency reflects the affective intensity with which audiences recount their viewing experiences. Family-related terms—such as “family,” “mother,” “father,” “child,” and “brother”—further stand out, pointing to the salience of everyday domestic relationships in audience talk. Overall, the word cloud suggests that *Reply 1988* is commonly discussed through a combination of character attachment, emotional response, and familial experience.



Figure 2. Word cloud of the reviews including character names

Overall, Figure 2 suggests that *Reply 1988* is commonly discussed through a combination of character attachment, emotional response, and familial experience. Given these multi-faceted findings—which encompass both character-driven engagement and broader thematic concerns—the subsequent LDA topic modeling will further unpack these underlying structural dimensions.

Identification of Four Topics

The performance of an LDA topic model is closely tied to the number of topics selected. After comprehensive consideration and multiple trials across various values, this study uses the coherence score to determine the suitable number of topics. The coherence score is a standard metric for identifying the optimal number of topics (Polignano et al., 2020). The smoothed coherence score also helps pinpoint a balance point that avoids overfitting and underfitting (Choo & Kim, 2023). The ideal number of topics occurs when the coherence score either plateaus or reaches a critical peak. By computing the smoothed coherence score across different topic counts, we select the number of topics that yields the highest score (Blair et al., 2019).

Figure 3 illustrates the correlation between the LDA model’s coherence score and the number of topics. It features two curves: the blue solid line represents the smooth coherence score; the black dashed line indicates the original score. Both scores fluctuate as the number of topics ranges from 2 to 20. The smoothed coherence score reaches a notable peak of approximately 0.46 at four topics; the original coherence score shows significant variability across topic numbers. This finding indicates that four topics are the optimal number.

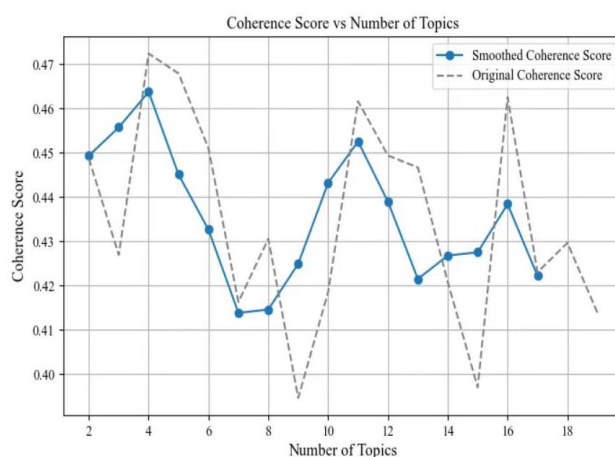


Figure 3. Coherence score and the optimal number of topics

To verify the validity of the number of topics chosen, this study further validated the model using pyLDAvis. The visualization results of the LDA topic model are shown in Figure 4. Each topic displays 30 words. The relevance of each word to the topic is calculated using the following equation shown in the right corner of Figure 4. This parameter controls the correlation between a word, w , and a topic, t . When λ approaches 1, frequent words are considered more relevant to the topic. In contrast, when λ approaches 0, more distinctive words gain greater relevance to the topic (Rishu & Kukreja, 2024). The optimal value is selected through iterative adjustment. In this study, λ is set to 1. Based on the ranking of words generated for each topic, the top 30 words from the four topics are extracted.

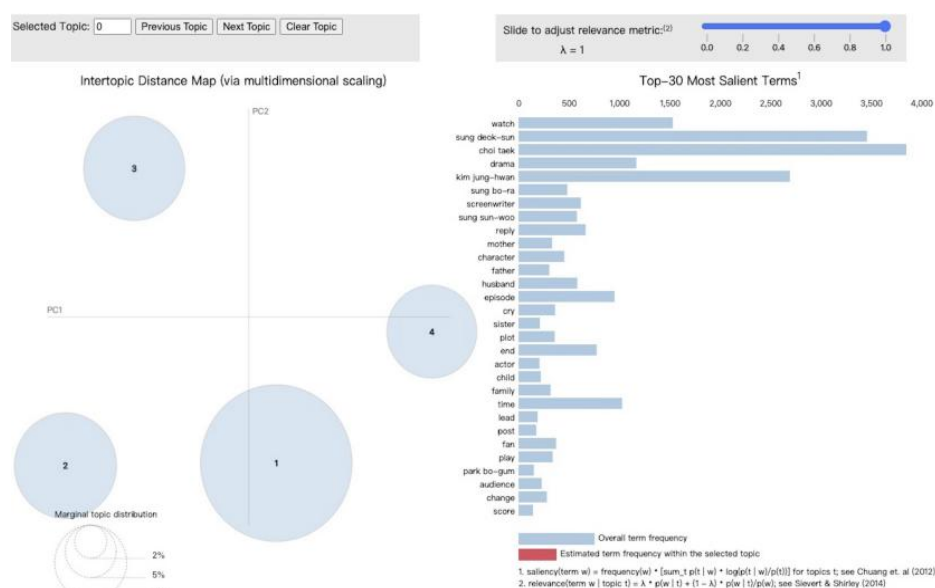


Figure 4. Topics clustering visualization graph

Keyword Analysis of Each Topic

Table 1 presents the most representative keywords associated with each topic. Taken together, the four topics correspond to (1) romantic and interpersonal relationships, (2) production and plot construction, (3) emotional experiences and numerical ratings, and (4) family life and everyday experience.

Table 1. Keywords of each topic

Topics	Keywords
1 Romantic and interpersonal relationships	Chai Taek, Sung Deok-sun, Kim Jung-hwan, love, like, feel, look, care, life, end, heart, friend, smile, feeling, boy, girl, Sung Sun-woo, choose, express, support, confess, Dong-ryong
2 Production and plot construction	screenwriter, husband, character, end, plot, actor, play, lead, change, audience, fan, beginning, scene, role, director, line, protagonist
3 Emotional experiences and numerical ratings	watch, drama, reply, episode, feel, end, post, fan, love, like, score, read, understand, cry, star, series, plot, comment, life
4 Family life and everyday experience	Sung Bo-ra, Sung Sun-woo, mother, father, cry, Sung Deok-sun, sister, family, time, child, parent, love, like, life, tear, brother, home, kind, eat, scene

The first topic centres on romantic and interpersonal relationships among the main characters. Keywords such as “love,” “like,” and “confess” appear frequently in the reviews, alongside repeated references to character names. These terms point to sustained attention to emotional development and relational dynamics within the narrative. Audience comments within this topic often focus on personal preferences for specific characters and on detailed interpretations of romantic interactions. For example,

Cherry Fairy expressed strong affection for the character Choi Taek. She describes him as an “ideal type” and emphasises his gentleness, loyalty, and devotion to Deok-sun. She described how she felt about this:

“Choi Taek is probably my favorite character. He is totally my ideal type! ... I like his gentleness. I remember a scene where Deok-sun went to Choi Taek’s room first, and the rest of the people entered in turn. Deok-sun greeted them one by one. When it came to Choi Taek, Choi Taek looked at Deok-sun with love slowly overflowing from his eyes. That kind of gentle and doting look, I like it so much! ... “Choi Taek is so cute, loyal, kind, good to Deok-sun and only to her. ... This character is so charming!”

(Posted by Cherry Fairy, 16 May, 2018)

In contrast, Bill articulated a preference for Jung-hwan. She expresses dissatisfaction with Choi Taek’s portrayal and questions whether he treats Deok-sun as attentively as expected. She explained how she understood this character:

“Because I like Jung-hwan in real life, so I chose Jung-hwan. In fact, I don’t like both the young Choi Taek and the middle-aged Choi Taek. I feel that they don’t treat Deok-sun as well as I imagined. I think this is also the reason why Deok-sun wants to go back to her youth. ... There are really many things that cannot be hidden, and I feel very relieved.”

(Posted by Bill, 23 June, 2023)

The second topic focuses on the case drama as a media product and foregrounds audience attention to its production and narrative construction. Keywords related to creative roles—such as “screenwriter,” “director,” and “actor”—appear alongside structural terms including “episode,” “beginning,” and “end.” Together, these patterns indicate that viewers frequently adopt an evaluative stance. Audiences comment on narrative pacing, character development, and creative decisions across the series. For instance, A Douban user named We need Sherlock Holmes expressed her appreciation of Choi Taek to the screenwriter’s approach to character construction. According to her, the character is described as multifaceted and memorable when compared with those in other K-dramas. She described how she felt about this:

“... Maybe the screenwriter put too much effort into writing this character. I have watched hundreds of K-dramas, and I think Choi Taek is my favorite male character in my heart! He really has too many facets.”

(Posted by Sherlock Holmes, 24 May, 2018)

From the opposite perspective, another viewer Jin Qingkong explicitly challenges the screenwriter’s narrative logic. This viewer expresses dissatisfaction with the concentration of romantic development between Choi Taek and Deok-sun in the final episodes.

“... Choi Taek is the answer given by the screenwriter, and I don’t agree with the reasoning process of this answer. The real expression of Choi Taek and Deok-sun’s love is almost only in the last two to three episodes... and the screenwriter was reluctant to expand Deok-sun’s emotional changes towards Choi Taek in the previous large amount of space, which I think is not enough.”

(Posted by Jin Qingkong, 11 August, 2021)

The third topic captures emotional responses of the audience during the viewing process. Keywords such as “watch,” “cry,” and “feel” refer directly to affective reactions to specific scenes and moments in the drama. These terms indicate that emotional engagement is frequently articulated as an immediate and physical experience. For example, Zhou Fen described being moved to tears by the final episode and refers to a brief scene depicting the separation of neighbours. The comment emphasises the intensity and immediacy of the emotional response. She reflected on this as follows:

“... The part that made me cry the most was probably the last episode. When Sun-woo’s family left Ssangmun-dong, ... In the end, Sun-woo’s mother could only hold her sisters’ hands and cried so hard that she couldn’t speak. That scene was very short, but it made me cry instantly. ... The screenwriter really wrote these characters into our hearts. I don’t want them to separate. Most of them were very good tears, not the kind of tears that are deliberately sensational and force you to cry.”

(Posted by Zhou Fen, 12 March, 2020)

This topic also shows that emotional responses are frequently expressed through numerical ratings. Terms such as “score” indicate that viewers often translate emotional engagement into explicit assessment practices. One reviewer describes *Reply 1988* as “worth a 9.7 score,” emphasising its rewatchability and emotional resonance. However, another viewer questions the appropriateness of such a high rating and proposes a lower personal score. Together, these contrasting evaluations demonstrate how emotional responses are negotiated and formalised through rating practices.

The fourth topic foregrounds family relationships and everyday life. Keywords such as “mother,” “father,” “sister,” and “brother” recur alongside emotionally charged terms including “cry” and “tear.” These patterns indicate sustained audience attention to familial interactions and ordinary life experiences depicted throughout the series. Audience comments associated with this topic frequently connect on-screen family narratives with viewers’ personal memories and lived experiences. For example, Yuxue attributed the strong emotional attachment to the drama to its evocation of childhood memories, emphasising neighbourly support, everyday family tensions, and moments of warmth. The comment describes repeated emotional responses, particularly to scenes centred on family affection. Her comment is as follows:

“I like this drama very much because the sense of time in it reminds me of my childhood. The kind of mutual help between neighbors and the friction and warmth of the family made me empathize with it. I couldn’t help crying several times, because the TV movies about family affection touched me the most, and many things in this drama are the same as what I experienced when I was a child, so I like it very much.”

(Poster Yuxue, 9 December, 2016)

Overall, the four topics illustrate the multidimensional nature of audience reception of *Reply 1988*. Rather than centring on a single narrative element, audience discourse on Douban weaves together character relationships, production awareness, emotional response, and family life. These patterns provide an empirical basis for understanding how audience reception is articulated among Chinese audience.

Discussion

This study examines Chinese audiences’ reception of *Reply 1988* through large-scale, platform-based discourse on Douban. The discussion focuses on three interrelated dimensions of reception.

Emotion-Orientated and Interpretive Reception

The results indicate that the reception of *Reply 1988* by Chinese audiences is generally emotion-driven. Romantic and interpersonal relationships occupy a central place in audience discourse. Viewers express affection for characters and respond closely to moments of intimacy and relational development. This pattern confirms the continuing importance of romance as a key appeal of K-dramas in the Chinese context (Shao, 2020). It is consistent with previous research showing that Chinese urban middle-class viewers are drawn to conservative romance, actor appeal, and narratives of individual success (Wen, 2024).

At the same time, emotional engagement goes beyond immediate affective expression. The results show that viewers interpret romantic narratives through reflections on intimacy, trust, and interpersonal ethics. Emotional responses are frequently accompanied by evaluation, comparison, and judgement. It allows audiences to make sense of broader emotional and relational meanings in transnational media reception.

Evaluative Reception of Production

The second finding suggests that audience reception of *Reply 1988* involves evaluative engagement with production practices. Although research has shown that Chinese audiences tend to enjoy K-dramas via character involvement (Lu et al., 2019), they also actively comment on narrative structure and character development. Such engagement indicates that reception operates at both an affective and an evaluative level.

This evaluative reception is closely tied to narrative construction and plot development. Online review spaces encourage audiences to express judgments, compare interpretations, and position their views in relation to the production. As a result, elements of production—such as plot construction and the creative choices of the screenwriter and director—become explicit objects of audience evaluation. In this sense, reception is not a passive response to media texts but an ongoing process. By taking part in the debates and comments on the production, viewers critically negotiate how K-dramas are produced, structured, and valued within a transnational media environment.

Everyday and Family-Based Reception

In addition, this study provides insight into how K-dramas are recontextualised within the Chinese cultural setting. The findings suggest that audience reception is not only shaped by cultural proximity but also by family-related meanings. Rather than being engaged with as foreign media products, K-dramas are frequently discussed in relation to ordinary life experiences. Viewers connect narratives to childhood memories, family relationships, and familiar emotional situations.

This pattern indicates that transnational media reception is not limited to simple cultural proximity or cultural difference. Instead, it involves processes through which global media texts are integrated into local routines and family life (Sun, 2025). Such everyday and familial integration helps explain the sustained resonance of K-dramas among Chinese audiences in contemporary media environments.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Chinese audiences' reception of *Reply 1988* is shaped by the interplay of emotional engagement, evaluative judgement, and everyday and family-based meaning-making. Audience responses move between affective attachment, critical assessment of production, and connections to personal and familial experience.

Conclusion

This study examined Chinese audiences' reception of K-dramas through a large-scale analysis of online discourse surrounding *Reply 1988* on Douban. By combining computational topic modelling with audience reception analysis, it offers a systematic account of how Chinese viewers interpret, evaluate, and emotionally engage with a widely circulated K-drama within a digitally mediated media environment.

Empirically, the analysis identified four recurring thematic dimensions in audience discourse: interpersonal relationships among characters, attention to narrative and production elements, affective viewing experiences, and the prominence of family life and everyday emotions. Together, these themes indicate that audience engagement with *Reply 1988* extends beyond narrative consumption. Viewers repeatedly frame the drama as a site for emotional reflection, cultural evaluation, and the articulation of shared memories rooted in ordinary social experience.

The findings show that audience reception extends beyond emotional identification with narrative content. Instead, it involves a combination of affective engagement, evaluative judgement, and everyday meaning-making. Romantic and interpersonal relationships provide an important emotional focus. At the same time, audiences engage with the drama as a media product, commenting on narrative structure, character development, and production choices. The series is also frequently interpreted in relation to viewers' own family experiences and everyday life, through which transnational media texts become culturally familiar and emotionally resonant.

By using computational topic modelling analysis, this study contributes to research on transnational reception of K-dramas by illustrating the analytical value of large-scale platform-based discourse. In a broad

sense, the study highlights the importance of platform-mediated audience discourse for understanding how global media content is interpreted and embedded within local cultural contexts.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the analysis centres on a single-case K-drama. The limitations in theme and subject matter restrict the generalisability of the findings to the broader reception of K-dramas in China. Second, the anonymous character of Douban reviews makes it difficult to assess how reception may differ across social groups.

These constraints present opportunities for further study. Examining a broader range of K-dramas across multiple platforms would help to capture greater variation in audience reception. In addition, integrating computational text analysis with qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus group discussions, could provide a more nuanced perspective on how audiences interpret and engage with K-dramas among different social groups. Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates the value of platform-based audience data and provides a starting point for further studies on global media reception in digital environments.

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