

**BAD GENIUS: AN ANALYSIS OF FILMIC  
REPRESENTATIONS OF THAILAND'S SOCIAL ISSUES  
AND CHINESE VIEWERS' PERSPECTIVES**



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ฉลาดเกมส์โกง: การวิเคราะห์การนำเสนอปัญหาสังคมไทยในภาพยนตร์และมุมมองของผู้ชมชาว  
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CHINESE VIEWERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Field of Study                      Southeast Asian Studies

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Accepted by the GRADUATE SCHOOL, Chulalongkorn  
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ชูเหวิน ชุน : ฉลาดเกมส์โกง: การวิเคราะห์การนำเสนอปัญหาสังคมไทยในภาพยนตร์และ  
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ฉลาดเกมส์โกงเป็นภาพยนตร์ไทยที่กระตุ้นความคิดซึ่งสะท้อนสังคมยุคใหม่อย่างลึกซึ้ง โดยบอก  
เล่าเกี่ยวกับการฉ้อโกงในการสอบและประเด็นชนชั้นทางสังคม บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์  
ประเด็นทางสังคมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับภาพยนตร์ และสำรวจคำวิจารณ์เกี่ยวกับระบบการศึกษาและความไม่ยุติธรรม  
ทางสังคม ในเวลาเดียวกัน บทความนี้จะแนะนำการประเมินภาพยนตร์โดยผู้ชมชาวจีน เพื่อวิเคราะห์สาเหตุที่  
ทำให้ภาพยนตร์ทำรายได้ทะลุบ็อกซ์ออฟฟิศสูงในตลาดจีน ด้วยการเปรียบเทียบภูมิหลังทางการศึกษาและ  
ค่านิยมทางสังคมของประเทศไทยและจีน เราจะเข้าใจได้ดียิ่งขึ้นว่าทำไมฉลาดเกมส์โกงจึงได้รับความนิยมใน  
ประเทศจีน และด้วยเหตุนี้จึงได้เห็นภาพสะท้อนของภาพยนตร์กับผู้ชมที่มีภูมิหลังทางวัฒนธรรมที่แตกต่างกัน



สาขาวิชา	เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา (สห สาขาวิชา)	ลายมือชื่อนิติ .....
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Shuwen Sun : BAD GENIUS: AN ANALYSIS OF FILMIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THAILAND'S SOCIAL ISSUES AND CHINESE VIEWERS' PERSPECTIVES. Advisor: CHAIRAT POLMUK, Ph.D.

Bad Genius is a thought-provoking Thai movie that profoundly reflects the modern side of society by telling the story of examination malpractice and social class issues. The purpose of this article is to analyze the social issues involved in the film and explore the criticism of the education system and social injustice. At the same time, the article will introduce the Chinese audience's evaluation of the movie in order to analyze the reasons for its high box office in the Chinese market. By comparing the educational background and social values of Thailand and China, we can better understand why Bad Genius was well received in China, and thus get a glimpse of the resonance of the movie with audiences from different cultural backgrounds.



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## 1. Introduction

As one of the effective ways of cultural communication, movies contain rich cultural information, and each movie can reflect the cultural characteristics of a specific region. These cultural characteristics include the values, ways of thinking, religious beliefs, customs, and habits of the people in the region. The audience's increasing demand for foreign films reflects the audience's need to learn about different cultures abroad through the lens of movies. In this process of cross-cultural communication, based on its ideological function effect, movies help the audience recognize the social reality and find out the meaning conveyed in it. Therefore, in the process of film creation, fully exploring and utilizing the unique national culture of the country can not only obtain the psychological recognition of the domestic audience but also satisfy the foreign audience's demand for foreign culture.

In recent years, the Thai movie market has shown a trend of diversification and integration of genres. Among them, *Bad Genius* (dir. Nattawut Poonpiriya, 2017) incorporates highly recognizable elements of Thai culture to deliver a masterpiece that feels like an espionage movie (AllRovi, 2012). The human nature, destiny, ideals, and self-realization involved in the movie make it go beyond the scope of a simple campus youth movie. *Bad Genius* not only became the champion of Thailand's local box office in 2017, but also gained a lot of praise in overseas markets, and was released in Southeast Asian countries, as well as China, South Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries.

*Bad Genius*, a movie based on the 2014 SAT Asian test cheating incident, is the story of a talented high school student who helps others cheat and thus make a huge profit through a unique method she devised, but eventually turns herself into the



police and reforms her ways. In this movie, we can see that the final social trajectory of adolescents is influenced by the family, the school, and society. The movie also reflects various aspects of Thai cultural characteristics, such as class differences, the influence of family and social environment on human nature, religious beliefs, etc. It touches deeply on the deep-rooted ideological problems in Thailand's social classes and makes realistic observations on the unshakable institutional problems in the educational tradition. Although it is a youth movie, it is rare to present a strong spirit of social critique.

In China, *Bad Genius* has received a lot of positive reviews, with nearly 1.5 million viewers rating it 8.2 on Douban (China's premier movie rating forum), and the film has been included in the forum's lists of "Top Movies of 2017" and "Top Rated Foreign Language Movies of 2017" (Douban, 2023), which shows the popularity of *Bad Genius* in China and five days after its release in China, Thailand's hottest movie of the year has earned almost seven times its previous box office revenue (Thairakulpanich, 2017). Although the film was also very popular in Asia, I think that perhaps the interpretation of the content of the movie by international audiences is more complex in different countries, as audiences are influenced by the cultural and educational issues of the societies in which they live, as well as by issues of class conflict. Studying the reasons why Chinese audiences love *Bad Genius* will not only help to better understand Chinese audiences' acceptance of foreign films, but also help to better understand how audiences in different ethnic and cultural contexts interpret foreign cultures, and whether there are possibilities for new perspectives that help audiences understand the content of the movie.

At the same time, some social problems are reflected in *Bad Genius*, which triggers the audience to think about the social system, school education, and family education. I plan to analyze the phenomena of social inequality, academic pressure, academic injustice, and lack of family education revealed in the film and dig deeper into the essence of these problems through plot analysis. Through this analysis, I will try to better understand the root causes of these social problems and try to stimulate readers to think about how to improve them. Meanwhile, in my analysis, I will focus on themes such as the gap between the rich and the poor, the stress caused by fierce academic competition, and the injustice in education, because Chinese society is facing similar problems, and Chinese viewers may find resonance in the movie, mapping the scenario in Thailand to their own life experiences, and thinking about and discussing similar social issues through this movie. This resonance may lead viewers to think more deeply about the problems in their own environments, leading to more discussion and change.

## 2. Objectives

- 1) To analyze social issues represented in the film *Bad Genius*
- 2) To study Chinese viewers' perspectives on *Bad Genius*

## 3. Hypotheses

*Bad Genius* represents several social issues in Thailand such as social inequality, educational problems, and ethical issues. Chinese viewers may have different interpretations of *Bad Genius* due to their respective regional cultures as well as social and educational situations.

## 4. Methodology

- 1) *Content* analysis of the film's narrative elements such as plot, characters, and themes
- 2) Collection of data and analysis of online discussion

The data provided in this paper are the results of my research on the reception of *Bad Genius* in the Chinese region. I posted a series of questions about *Bad Genius* on Douban and obtained answers and analysis from a portion of the Chinese audience, through these answers I tried to explore the reasons for the popularity of *Bad Genius* in the Chinese region as well as how the Chinese audience interprets Thai culture.

## 5. Literature Review

*Bad Genius* is one of the most representative Thai movies in recent years. It tells the story of a group of high school students who cheat on exams through skillful means.

The film has a tense and exciting plot and audio-visual language which creates a unique style different from other youth movies. *Bad Genius* has received critical acclaim in Thailand and internationally, especially in China. With the trend of local films going international, it is worthwhile to explore the realities of what made *Bad Genius* so well-received in China. Therefore, the reception of *Bad Genius* by the Chinese audience needs to be further explored and researched, which will have certain practical significance for how a movie goes to the international market.

In Chinese and overseas academic databases, there are many analytical studies on *Bad Genius*, especially the relatively well-developed articles that analyze the behavior of the characters in the film through various semiotic theories, the theory of the principle of cooperation, etc., which have been thoroughly researched by many scholars. For example, in the paper *The Violation of Grice's Maxim In Bad*

*Genius* (Putri & Apsari, 2020), scholars Dinda Ayuna Putri and Yanuarti Apsari analyze the violations in the characters' communication in *Bad Genius* based on Grice Maxim's Cooperative Principle theory. The results of identification showed that violations maximize Quantity, Quality, Relations, and Manner. In *Analysis Semiotika Pesan Moral Kejujuran Film Bad Genius* (Putri, 2019), Redita Prawidya Putri, an Indonesian scholar, analyzes the moral information about honesty in *Bad Genius* based on semiotic theories. Redita Prawidya argues that cinema is one of the effective mediums for conveying the message, suggesting that there is a need to explore how signs appearing in *Bad Genius* can become iconography, indexes, and symbols.

At the same time, the current academic articles on the real problems and educational significance of the film are comparatively well analyzed. Scholars Inero V. Ancho, Genevie-Abi M. Calimbahin, Margie Mae E. Basal, and Windy Rose M. Dela Rosa in *Education Fever and Other Academic-Related Illnesses as Diagnosed by the Thai Movie* (Ancho et al., 2020) scrutinized the educational problems present in *Bad Genius* and identified five major educational problems, namely: corruption, high stakes testing, academic pressure, educational equity, and academic dishonesty. These scholars believe *Bad Genius* conveys a gentle reminder that school curricula and academic programs should be revisited, and student values rekindled. In the article *An Analysis of Educational Value in Bad Genius Movie* (Tri Romadhoni, Puspitasari Mulyadi, & Setiawati, 2021), scholars Devi Tri Romadhoni, Fiona Puspitasari Mulyadi, and Beta Setiawati studied the educational value of *Bad Genius* through a qualitative descriptive approach and concluded that the values of moral teaching in *Bad Genius* can have a positive impact on the field of education, and this has provoked reflection in the educational community. Chinese scholar Tang Lin explores

the harsh reality behind the movie in her article, *Reality Questioning Under Suspenseful Plot - Nata'ou Pempiria's Cinematic Reflections* (Lin, 2018) in which Tang argues that the movie presents a reflection and critique of the modern education system through its presentation of the examination system and the distribution of educational resources. It is worth noting that scholars Laili and Nurul in *Cheating Behaviors on a Film entitled Bad Genius in Hetherington and Feldman's Perspective* (Laili & Nurul, 2023) explored the presence of cheating behaviors in *Bad Genius*, the researchers used the qualitative research method of content analysis to classify cheating behaviors into four categories: giving an answer on eraser, giving piano code, giving answer through smartphone as social passive; individualistic opportunistic that involves taking answer on eraser and switch answer sheet; making note that belongs to independent planned; as well as looking at piano code as social active type. Laili and Nurul propose corresponding ways to avoid cheating behavior, provoking the reader to reflect on the problem of cheating. In *Representation of Academic Anxiety and Crime through Mise En Scene Analysis in Bad Genius Film* (Tarmawan & Gustari, 2021), scholars I Tarmawan and Gustari. R H studied academic anxiety expressed through scene arrangement. Through qualitative descriptive analysis, the researcher concluded that the behavioral manifestations of academic anxiety as well as criminal behavior can be described by the "six elements of the scenario", and that the study aims to have a good impact on people with learning anxiety.

Only one article written by scholar Wang Yueting, *The Impact of Exposure to Storytelling Elements of Bad Genius on Chinese Young Adults Movie Viewing Motives and Their Perceived Reality* (Wang, 2018) mentions the Chinese audience. Her article

aims to explore the relationship between Chinese young people's exposure to narrative elements, their motivations for watching films, and their perception of reality. Wang Yueting conducted interviews with Chinese young people through a sampling method and based on this exploration she concluded that (1) visual story elements were significant predictors of Chinese adolescents' motivation to watch movies. Other story elements were not significant predictors of Chinese youth's motivation to view movies; (2) story elements were not significant predictors of Chinese youth's perception of reality; (3) motivation to view movies was not a significant predictor of Chinese youth's perception of reality.

To summarize, according to the articles related to *Bad Genius* in academic databases, the film has aroused scholars' in-depth thoughts and discussions on education, cheating behavior, and morality and ethics. These studies have analyzed the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions presented in the film from different perspectives, providing some useful insights for educational reform and moral education. At the same time, there are also articles mentioning the Chinese audience, but the focus of the research is not on the reception of *Bad Genius* by the Chinese audience. Therefore, from the existing literature on the film, there is a lack of an exploration of why *Bad Genius* gained a lot of favorable comments in China. This is an important gap to consider when reflecting on the success of the film internationally. The reasons why Chinese audiences love *Bad Genius* will not only help to better understand Chinese audiences' acceptance of foreign films but will also help to better understand how audiences in different ethnic and cultural backgrounds interpret foreign cultures, and whether there are new possibilities to help audiences understand the content of the film.

## 6. Findings

*Bad Genius* reveals Thailand's social inequality and education problems through the cheating schemes of a group of high school students. As the story progresses, it delves deep into the transformation of the two main characters, providing a profound exploration of how individuals, when faced with pressure and adversity, choose, change, and ultimately find the right path, or end up completely corrupted.

*Bad Genius* is a big hit in the Chinese market. Apart from the compelling plot of the movie itself, it seems that there are other factors that are influencing the choices of the Chinese audience. The portrayal of the real society and the education issues in the movie has made it successful in breaking the regional boundaries and has caused deep resonance with the Chinese audience.

### 6.1 Social Inequality

#### 6.1.1 Content analysis

Rooted in the soil of social reality, *Bad Genius* exposes deep social conflicts and problems, showing the insignificance and powerlessness of human beings in the cruel social inequality.

First, there seems to be a relationship between the fox and the hunter among these bad geni and the invigilator in the examination, but from a larger social level, under Thailand's stubborn social stratification and deformed education system, the interaction between "man and society" implies a metaphor for the relationship between "prisoners and cages". It means that in Thailand, the rigid social hierarchy and distorted education system form a solid barrier that prevents close interaction between the individual and society. In this context, we can see a profound metaphor of people caught in a "prisoner-cage" relationship, seemingly trapped in some

insurmountable constraints on each other. In this meaning, *Bad Genius* is no longer satisfied with the flirting of traditional youth films, nor is it limited to the subtle portrayal of the process of self-identification "misrecognition" in the growth of adolescents. Instead, the film presents a larger creative mind, that is, it pays attention to the resistance of the underclass to the mainstream values of Thai society, and ultimately, the process of "tamed", which shows the helplessness and even despair of the people who have been "regimented" in the society.

Secondly, the four main characters in the movie: Lynn (Chutimon Chuengcharoensukying), Bank (Chanon Santinatornkul), Grace (Eisaya Hosuwan), and Pat (Teeradon Supapunpinyol), represent different classes and social values in Thailand. Pat and Grace represent the upper class of Thailand, a class that includes bureaucrats and wealthy businessmen in addition to the royal family and aristocrats. Since this class holds the major political and economic power in the country, they are used to using money to measure the pros and cons and to solve all the problems. In the movie, Pat finds business opportunities from Lynn's cheating incident, by asking Lynn to help them cheat in the final exam, and even seeks benefits from it, showing strong economic acumen and realistic social values that take money as a benefit. Lynn represents the Thai middle class, which includes intellectuals and white-collar workers. This class is generally well educated, and outside of the influence of traditional Thai culture, they also advocate the concept of Western democracy, characterized by a combination of ideal democracy and material reality. Lynn found that the school needs to pay 200,000 baht as a sponsorship fee and believed that the principal had unreasonably canceled his chance to obtain a Singapore scholarship. These made Lynn suspicious of ideals and democracy and turned to the road of



pursuing material hedonism. This also exposed the real problems of many middle classes in Thailand. Bank represents the lower classes of peasants and workers. Due to poverty, low education, low income, unstable work, lack of democratic sense of responsibility, and worrying about food and clothing, they are easily driven by rights and money interests. Bank came from a poor family, and his mother raised Bank alone in a laundry shop. Originally, Bank was excellent in character and learning and had the opportunity to go abroad to continue his studies and change his destiny. However, he was violently and forcibly interfered with by the upper-class Pat, which broke his original beautiful life, shattering his original expectation of a better life, which to some extent reveals the obscure factors in Thai society and the inevitability of the social environment.

There are three important details full of irony in the film. One, Bank's mother worked hard to wash clothes for others, working from day to night, until her back was bent, and her hands were rotten, just to earn a meager income. The shirts she washed as a member of the bottom of the society were gifts from the daughter of Lynn's father who was a salaryman. This gift was bought with the money Lynn earned from cheating on the children of the rich.

Secondly, when the audience sees the title that Lynn and Bank encountered when they cheated – Lighting Your Way to a Better Future - that great irony implied by the creators of the movie about social realities and solidified systems is already self-evident.

Third, after Bank was framed by Pat, he was thrown into a deserted giant garbage, so he missed the scholarship exam; and the purpose of Pat framing Bank is only to make this genius lose his only hope of getting a scholarship, to ensure that he

can willingly serve "high-class people" like himself and continue to do his "duty" in his class.

In the film, the director's narrative on Thai social topics such as high tuition fees, rigid examination patterns, the difference between the rich and the poor, and unequal opportunities all reflect his concern for social class differences. It is worth mentioning that this film is especially good at dealing with the causality of the male protagonist Bank's final participation in the transnational cheating case. On the one hand, it was because Pat asked somebody to beat him up and threw him into the garbage dump, making him lose the chance to win a scholarship in the competition. On the other hand, because of the huge profit drive, Bank had to succumb to reality and take the risk of cheating with his skills. There is a line in the movie, " Even if you're honest, life is still cheating you." which stretches the poor in the face of opportunity. The ending of the character of Bank contrasts with that of Lynn. The dramatized plot shows the influence of the social environment on the fate of the characters, causing the audience to strongly reflect on the social injustice brought about by the differences in social classes. When the rich and the poor are polarized, class differences are obvious and social mobility is poor, especially for the youth group, it will provide individuals with a breeding ground for the sprouting of crime, and excessive class differences will surely give rise to reflection on the social structure and social system.

### *6.1.2 Audience's discussion*

Considering how social inequality drives the storyline, these audience members gave their own answers in the forum about whether social inequality is the main cause of all the irrational events that happen.

Shu: Social inequality is a part of the reason for the irrational events, but at the same time the gap between the rich and the poor, corruption in education, and collusion between money and education are equally important, the director has made the exams process full of suspense and at the same time hidden the intrigue and confrontation of one class against the other, which makes the movie very enjoyable to watch.

Gui Yao: I don't think social inequality is the root cause. Everyone in the movie's ultimate purpose in life is for money: Lynn cheats to earn money to relieve her father's pressure, Bank cheats to earn money to make her mother's life less difficult, Pat cheats to buy a car and to fulfill her father's request to study abroad, and Grace cheats to satisfy her own desire to perform and her wish to continue her life with Pat in the future. All people are driven by the desire to live a good life, but the existence of class differences leads to the fact that not all people will be able to get what they want. However, this is only the external cause of irrationality, the root cause is still the control of people over their own internal desires. Because of the poor control of desires, irrational things also arise as a result. The choices in the movie are ultimately in the hands of each character. The essence of all irrationality is still due to the lack of control over one's inner desires. At the end of the movie, Lynn doesn't succumb to Bank, but bravely

reveals everything. In my opinion is a kind of success, she finally controls her desires and really becomes her own master.

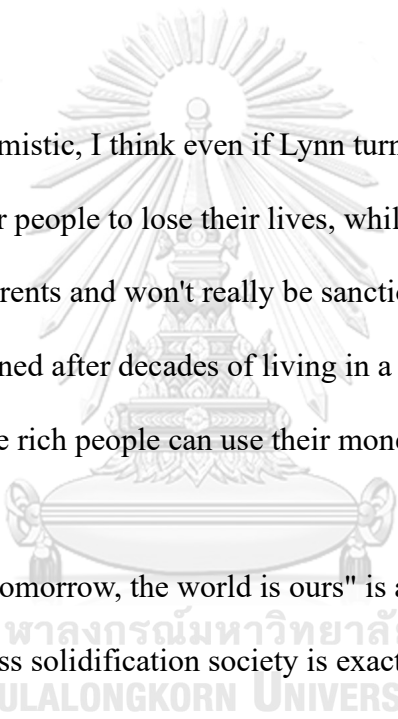
Perry Long: I think part of it is due to social inequality, but not all of this irrationality is due to class differences, and a lot of it is due to the fact that they chose to do this to satisfy their own selfish desires, except for Lynn and Bank who may be partly due to the fact that they want to get back at the cheating education system or unfair society. For everyone else, including Bank as well, their own materialistic desires are the main reason.

Shirley Zhang: I think that to a certain extent, social inequality cause unreasonable events to happen, but in addition to this, the loopholes in education and the pursuit of each character's desires are also important factors that can't be ignored except for the beginning when Grace just wants to be able to continue to participate in the club, the other moments I feel that each character makes the wrong choices over and over again because of their desire for money.

From the above answers, we can see that Chinese viewers generally believe that social inequality is part of the reason for all irrational events, but the main reason is the pursuit of each character's own inner desires. From an objective point of view, class differences and education problems do exist, but in real life, there is no shortage of stories like "poor families educate rich children" such *Flying Colors* (dir. Nobuhiro Doi, 2015). In *Bad Genius*, every character has the chance to make the right choice, but they still choose the wrong path to fulfill their desires faster. The root cause of all

the irrational events still comes from people's own unsatisfied desires or material things.

*Bad Genius* presents the student years in a way that is very relevant to the educational realities of Chinese society, and I have tried to explore from these audience answers how *Bad Genius* relates to the realities of Chinese society, and in the context of social injustice, why this connection resonates so strongly with Chinese audiences.



Yu: I'm more pessimistic, I think even if Lynn turns herself in at the end, it will only cause the poor people to lose their lives, while the rich kids will only be scolded by their parents and won't really be sanctioned by the law. That's the experience I've gained after decades of living in a socially unequal country such as China, where the rich people can use their money to smooth things over.

Huo Xiao: "From tomorrow, the world is ours" is a scene that really makes my heart ache. The class solidification society is exactly the same as the one I live in, where the rich have a hundred ways out, while the poor only have one wall in front of them forever.

Gui Yao: The scenes in the movie look like my own experience, I realized that Thai schools also need to pay extra fees, Thai students also cheat with erasers, and Thai people also take exams so seriously. However, everything looks a little bit strange: Chinese high school students don't have so much free time after school. We don't put on theater plays, and we don't drive limousines to school.

From this point of view, our school environment is still very different from that of Thailand in the movie. Chinese high school students also don't have the concept of GPA. The materialistic aspirations of the characters in *Bad Genius* are like those of the Chinese. Students cheat and people pay for shortcuts in all kinds of exams. With the unfairness of education, one exam is enough to set you up for life, and the differences in class, the story of *Bad Genius* is like a projection of Chinese life in Thailand. The high IQ cheating experiences of the movie's protagonists provide a rare aesthetic spectacle for China's long-suffering youngsters and give them the pleasure of imagining that the queen of the exam room in the movie could also be themselves. The torture of exams, class differences, the fact that more than a decade of hard study may not change one's fate, or the fact that one cannot get what the rich can easily get, these problems common to both China and Thailand are enough to resonate with the majority of Chinese viewers. This kind of problem can't be solved by the power of ordinary people. Lynn's surrender at the end of the movie gives the story and even such a social phenomenon a rather imaginative solution. In the movie, those in the upper class of society are about to be punished by karmic punishment, which at least slightly soothes those who have been ravaged by them in reality.

Perry Long: The scene depicted in *Bad Genius* is very similar to China, where the upper class can get what they want through money even if they have bad grades. The cost of trial and error is very low, whereas if a lower-class student takes one wrong step, the next step will be wrong, and there is almost no chance

for a do-over. This is very similar to the class status today in China, and Chinese audiences can find themselves in the movie. *Bad Genius* is like a movie made by a Thai director for Chinese people.

Shirley Zhang: The unfairness of social inequality in the movie is a reflection of the social reality in China. The gap between the rich and the poor makes a world of difference in the distribution of resources, and most Chinese people are at the bottom of the ladder, which is why it resonates with the Chinese audience.

From the above responses, it is clear that the social inequality portrayed in *Bad Genius* is also very common in China. This similar social environment allows Chinese viewers to empathize with the movie and directly put themselves into the movie. As Gui Yao said, the movie presents an ending in which the upper-class people are about to be punished, which can appease those who have been destroyed by them. In real life, the upper-class people can get away with almost anything with money, and it is very difficult for them to be truly punished. So, the ending of the movie is like a beautiful dream. What can't be accomplished in the real world is left to the movie to accomplish. This ending not only relieved the Thai audience but also appeased the Chinese audience, who shared the same social environment. For this reason, the movie gained a lot of positive comments in China as well.

## **6.2 Educational problems**

### *6.2.1 Content analysis*

*Bad Genius*, as a movie with a realistic theme, not only criticizes the cheating behavior of the main characters but also reflects deeply on the corruption of education and other prominent social problems in real life. In *Synthesis, Rethinking Thai Education: Paradoxes, Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities*, Gerald W. Fry points out that the main problems of current education in Thailand are the quality of education, serious inequalities and regional disparities, leadership issues, and the problems of finance and how the money is spent (Fry, 2018). *Bad Genius* directly reflects the education problem through the whole narrative thread of cheating in the examination hall. In the education system, the examination is an important means to promote students to master knowledge, assist teachers to test the learning results and help the country to select talents. If the school takes the GPA as the absolute evaluation index, it will be easy to distort the students' values. If the school ignores or acquiesces to the interference of money in the examination, such as teachers will be driven by profit to make illegal acts such as leaking test questions and charging tuition fees, and students will also make truancy, cheating, and other undesirable behaviors, then it will surely lead to corruption and the education system will also be corrupted.

In the movie, the children of rich families can cheat to get into famous schools, while the children of poor families still have little hope even if they work a hundred times harder. It is this social environment of unfair education and the obvious gap between the rich and the poor that becomes one of the triggers for the main characters Lynn and Bank to commit crimes by cheating on their exams, both of whom come from single-parent families and are eager to change their destiny through hard work and study. However, when they see that the questions on the test paper are from the tutoring class of their schoolteacher, and the invigilator, who says "I hate cheating",



does not pay attention to the site of the exam, their hope for fairness in education is completely turned into nothing. As a result, the two of them take the risk of doing the same thing to the educational system, and they commit dangerous attempts of cheating for profit. The clever use of several lines in the movie reveals the falsehood and hopelessness of real life, such as Lynn's line "Even if you're honest, life is still cheating you" when she convinces Bank to join the cheating team. The principal who knows that Lynn has been charging cheating fees for her piano lessons, and then she asks Lynn's father, "Don't you ever pay attention to her moral education?" All of these are highly ironic and deeply expose the corruption in education as a social reality that poisons the spiritual growth of young people.

If the education system is not to make people become a better version of themselves, if the education system can only screen out the candidates it wants to screen out, then the distortion of human nature is inevitable. Through this movie, the director shows the flaws and corruption of the education system nakedly in front of the audience, which not only identify the problems in the education system of Thailand but also peep into the shackles of the education system in Asia as a whole. The movie's revelation of the flaws of the education system and the impact of the deformed education system on the mental health of young people deserves to be deeply explored and reflected by the society.

In addition to exposing the realities of school education, the director also focuses on the important role played by different families in a child's development. Lynn's father transfers her to a prestigious school, but despite the school's willingness to accept her, Lynn decides that the original school is a better fit for her and ends up transferring to another one at her father's insistence. Bank's mother, who works in a

small laundromat to earn money, is unable to pay attention to her child's development, which leads to him going down an unorthodox path. Pat, a rich kid, is controlled by his father in a money-oriented society, forcing Lynn and Bank to cheat to get good grades.

Makarenko has described the important role of the family in this way: "The family is a grass-roots cell of society. It is through the family that people gain a good life and strength; it is through the family that children grow." In family education, parents should correctly recognize their own responsibilities, and there is nothing wrong with planning for the future of their children, but the feelings of the children must be taken into full consideration, and the views of the children must be consulted and respected, and the love of the parents for their children must be controlled, and if their love for their children is not out of reason but blind indulgence, then Makarenko equates this way of love for the children of human beings with the maternal instincts of the animals(He & Yan, 1986).

The character defects and criminal behavior of the children in the film, though still essentially caused by the unfair environment of society, are at the same time related to the family education, and a variety of factors jointly contribute to the occurrence of all these unreasonable events.

### *6.2.2 Audience's discussion*

The problems of education in Thailand are very similar to the problems of education in China, and most Chinese viewers have experienced the same things that the different characters in *Bad Genius* have experienced, such as cheating, helping others to cheat, paying extra fees to the school, and the rich solving everything with

money. All these things are related to school education as well as family education. How does the Chinese audience perceive the causal relationship between these two types of education? I posted this question in the Douban forum and got several viewers' opinions on the issue.

Gui Yao: In my opinion, family education is more important. School education is public. It teaches the methodology of integrating into and transforming society, which is technical. Family education, which we have been exposed to since we were young, on the one hand, shapes the worldview of our behavior and conduct; on the other hand. It also becomes the guiding ideology of how we treat and accept the methodology of the school. With the right worldview, the methodology does not have to be learned in school. But if only the methodology, I am afraid that it will go on the wrong path of "high IQ crime". For example, Lynn and Bank are also the best in school, but Lynn has her father's guidance in home education, and eventually became a person who overcame the desires to master herself. Bank's home education has always been lacking, which is why he is still obsessed at the end of the story. One can be stupid, but one better be a good person. I think the best education is still a combination of school education and family education.

Perry Long: Family education is more important than school education, and a good family is quite important to the influence of a child's childhood and even his/her whole life. Although both Lynn and Bank are not from rich single-parent

families, and the school education has done the same thing for them and raised them both to be high achievers, they have different family education environments, which is an important factor in determining the final transformation of their human nature.

Shirley Zhang: I believe that family education is the foundation of a child's growth, and it is crucial to a child's life trajectory. Qualified parents will be the best teachers and friends of their children. School education only exists for the purpose of acquiring certain abilities or skills. Even if a child becomes a good student under the school's education, imperfections in family education will still make the good student make wrong choices, such as Bank in the movie is a good example.

From the above responses, Chinese viewers generally believe that family education is far more important than school education, and they agree that Bank and Lynn are the best examples of how different family education can lead to different changes in a student's personality, even though they are both the best results of their school education. The poor education environment in China also confirms this point of view. Chinese education, like Thai education, only teaches methodology and does not teach a student to have a correct worldview, which is why Chinese viewers resonate with the movie.

*Bad Genius* shows the relationship between students and their parents and teachers. Through these answers to the movie from Chinese viewers, I tried to

understand how the movie relates to the reality of Chinese society in terms of education and to find out why it resonates strongly with Chinese viewers.

Chuan: This is totally my youth! My youth didn't have abortions, didn't turn against my friends, didn't even have the so-called love to love, all I had was endless exams and cheating for good grades, that's what a youth movie should be like!

Gui Yao: *Bad Genius* is like a projection of Chinese life in Thailand, both in terms of class and education. Chinese students also must take exams constantly, they also help their classmates cheat, and they also desire the rewards that come with a successful exam. The exam has become a chain that connects Chinese and Thai audiences so that everyone who has taken the exam can see their shadow in the movie. Both Thai and Chinese schools require extra fees, parents must nod and bow to teachers, students will do anything for a grade, exams are a way to determine the lives of students in both countries, and both Chinese and Thai students suffer from this. Therefore, opposing the unfairness of education and the fact that one exam determines a lifetime is the common voice of both Chinese and Thai audiences, and that's why it resonates so strongly with the Chinese audience!

Perry Long: Thailand and China have very similar educational environments, and I often unconsciously put myself into this movie, so I can guarantee that 99 percent of Chinese viewers, especially 21st-century Chinese students, will feel as

if they are watching their own youth when they watch *Bad Genius*, and thus feel a strong sense of empathy.

Shirley Zhang: The social reality shown in the movie is the same as that of modern China. The Thai students in the movie lack communication with their parents, they are not good at expressing their emotions, and the atmosphere in the family is depressing, which is the same as that of a Chinese family. In the movie, Thai students and teachers are more like a relationship of interest, with teachers receiving money to do their work and students spending money to buy knowledge, which is the same as in Chinese schools. Both family education and school education are lacking in positive guidance, which I think is a common problem in education in East Asian countries, so naturally, this is the reason why it resonates so strongly with Chinese viewers, who are one of East Asian countries.

From the above answers, we can see that Chinese viewers believe that in terms of education, whether it's the educational environment or educational issues, the situation in China and Thailand are the same. Both countries regard exams as very important, and exams can be used to determine the candidate's life, which makes students in both countries suffer. So, when a youth movie like *Bad Genius* focuses on exams and cheating, it easily evokes the Chinese audience's memories of student life, thus causing strong resonance.

## 6.3 Ethical issues

### 6.3.1 Content analysis

Ethical issues in *Bad Genius* are portrayed through the self-realization and transformation of the main characters, Bank and Lynn. Bank's transformation in the movie takes place in the school, family, and social environment. Bank, at the beginning, is a good student with a sense of justice, refusing to provide answers to exams and helping his mother with her laundry showing a hardworking and diligent side. However, after being involved in the cheating incident, Bank experiences a brutal beating by the mob and the loss of an important opportunity and initially agrees to work with Lynn in order to earn a living. With the revelation that Pat is the culprit, Bank's mind gradually changes to become calm and calculating, and shows his scheming to obtain money when dealing with Pat. Despite the eventual failure of the invigilator's search, Bank still chooses to keep his secret during the torture, perhaps because of friendship, perhaps because of monetary benefits, but in any case, he ultimately goes to the opposite side of the righteousness that bends over for money and knows how to bully and seduce. When Bank says to Lynn, "Even if we get caught, we won't go to jail," the deep-rooted class concepts that drove an innocent teenager to become the dregs of a society that worships money and power are presented to the audience. When a rigid and indifferent social system treats the efforts of an underclass person as trash to be discarded, it becomes a necessary end for that person to be forced to become evil.

Lynn's transformation or her final surrender is because she understands the unspoken rules of education and the examination room, and knows that " Even if you're honest, life is still cheating you ". She is aware that she is in the midst of the unspoken rules and is being exploited by the rules and at the same time taking advantage of the rules.

The first time she cheats, Lynn feels cheated when she discovers that the exam paper is the same as Grace's, while the math teacher says that anyone who hasn't come to him for tutoring can't pass. Then Pat tells her that everyone needs to pay extra fees, which makes her even more frustrated with the school, and she starts cheating to make money.

Bank's appearance is a surprise, he believes in education and Lynn fell in love with his simplicity. But then Lynn mistakenly thinks that Bank is reporting her for a scholarship, and she becomes frustrated with Bank as well. She wants Bank to participate in the cheating scheme in order to pull him down and make him become like her. After realizing that Pat was the one who got someone to beat him up, Bank became suspicious of the world. Lynn wanted to cancel the plan, but Bank needed the money so they went ahead with the cheating plan anyway. In the cheating, Bank raises the price temporarily and Lynn confronts him, but Bank just wants to make money. Lynn blames herself for ruining Bank and cries out in pain. Since then, Lynn cuts off contact with Grace, and Bank offers to continue to cheat to make money, which breaks Lynn down and makes her realize she's ruined him. To make matters worse, Bank uses Grace and Pat as an excuse to threaten her, which completely wakes Lynn up to the fact that the simple Bank has changed forever.

Lynn's feelings for Bank are completely gone and she chooses to turn herself in. Believing in her own set of dark rules, she turns the hopes her father gave her on Bank. When Bank is destroyed by her hand, she's finally willing to admit she was wrong. This set of dark rules would destroy the dreams of too many simple teenagers and would make the world more unfair. It wasn't the shortcut she thought it would be to save poor teenagers, it was just an aid to protecting the privileges of the rich.



Regarding the moral transformation of the two protagonists, I think the reasons go beyond what I have analyzed above. As a country where Buddhism is prevalent, Buddhism has also brought a deep impact on the concept of education in Thailand, in which the concepts of virtue, kindness, and charity have become the educational system that fosters students' adherence to good social morals and social behavioral norms. Schools often use Buddhism to inculcate tolerance, kindness, and self-discipline in students, so that they can develop the right moral values.

The ending of the movie, in which the two protagonists' moral condition changes, also shows the great influence of the Buddhist philosophy on the Thai character. Lynn's repentance embodies the return from a sense of non-mainstream rebellion to mainstream moral values, which is also the ideology that the movie wants to convey to the audience. Buddhism also has a subtle influence on people's perceptions, especially of the underclass. For example, Buddhism counsels' people to respect authority and to be satisfied with the present situation. Bank, who is at the bottom of the social ladder, started out as a top student in school, abiding by school discipline, studying every day in a routine manner, hoping to get the valuable opportunity to go abroad, and being submissive to the school and the education system. However, later, after being involved in the cheating incident, Bank's original life and plans were disrupted, his ideals shattered, and his spiritual beliefs completely collapsed, so in the end, Bank's ending was somewhat unexpected but also it is reasonable.

### *6.3.2 Audience's discussion*

Both protagonists in the movie end up undergoing a moral transformation, and as Thailand is a Buddhist country, I also believe that there are religious factors that contribute to Lynn's change. I have explored here what these Chinese viewers perceive as the factors that contribute to the moral transformation of the two protagonists to find out alternative possibilities.

Gui Yao: Bank's transformation is an inevitable result, he is a man who lives on the outside. To maintain his dignity and image, and he dares not tell others about his beating. After angrily denouncing Pat, his values begin to distort and he starts to tie his dignity to money. If there is enough money, nothing is a problem. Bank who lacks the right values in his family, is unable to recognize his mistakes in time, the eventually consumed by his own desires; Lynn's surrender, in my opinion, was due to the right guidance from her family. At the same time, she also had certain requirements for herself. She sees money as a tool, not linked to her feelings, money is money, and people are people. To become a better person and uphold the justice of the heart, she can give up money, give up worldly success, and choose to turn herself in. At the same time, I believe that if this were a completely true story, Lynn making the choice to turn herself in would have been the result of religious influence. However, since there is almost no religious element present in the movie, I don't think it was influenced by a religious element, but more like a choice made from inner values.

Perry Long: On the one hand, the transformation of Bank's morality is due to his disillusionment after being expelled from school. His only way to change his life through the normal path is gone. On the other hand, he has recognized the huge gap between social classes in these events, and it was a gap that he could hardly fill through his own efforts, so he simply stood on the opposite side of justice and formally fought against it. Lynn's surrender was partly due to her guilt towards Bank and her father, and partly due to her remorse. She chose to turn herself in because she didn't want to make the same mistake repeatedly. In the movie, there is a scene of Lynn praying in the mirror before the STIC exam, which shows that she should also have religious beliefs. Her religious beliefs may also be one of the reasons for her to turn herself in, but the main reason is still because of her guilt towards the people around her.

Shirley Zhang: Bank's final change is the result of self-destruction caused by unfair treatment and the transformation of human nature caused by the temptation of profit. Lynn's surrender is a realization of human nature. She is not willing to be treated as a fish on the chopping board and be slaughtered by others. It is the best choice she can make in the face of Bank's threat. I think that the religious element had almost no influence because religion is not enough to change the life philosophy of the young materialistic generation, and I think that Lynn's surrender was also due to the pressure given by the law, and her choice to turn herself in after being reported by Bank are two different consequences.

The above answers show that selected Chinese viewers fully understand Bank's transformation. They all think that it is the external reason that makes an honest and good student become a person consumed by desires. On the issue of Lynn's surrender, the three viewers gave different answers. Gui Yao thought it was the consequence of her family's education and self-restraint. Perry Long believes it was guilt over Bank and his father, and also believes there was a religious factor that caused Lynn's human transformation. Shirley Zhang thought it was because she suddenly realized that she was no longer willing to be used by anyone or anything. Shirley also thought that it was possible that Lynn chose to give herself up because of the threat of Bank and the pressure of the law. All these factors are the reasons that may lead Lynn to turn herself in. In general, whether it is self-restraint, guilt, or awakening, which are from Lynn's own emotional changes, selected Chinese audience generally believe that it is due to Lynn's own inner power of the driving force to make her complete the sublimation of human nature. There are also religious and legal factors, but this is a secondary reason.

Lynn and Bank's moral transformation is obvious to all viewers. Through these answers from Chinese audiences, I tried to explore how Chinese viewers perceive the final change of the two protagonists, and whether there are any other ideas different from those of the screenwriters.

Yun Ding: The overly politically and morally correct outcome bored me a bit, and I still wanted to see the story of two highly intelligent students teaming up to make money!

Gui Yao: I think in order to convey a positive direction, Lynn should have turned herself in at the end. In terms of the movie's aesthetics and marketing revenue, I would have preferred Lynn and Bank to continue to be the Bonnie and Clyde of the exam room. With Lynn believing that even though Bank treats the world honestly, the world still chooses to cheat him. The two of them, who are suffering from the problems of social class and education, should join hands to challenge the world with their high IQs.

Perry Long: I think Bank's change makes sense and Lynn's change is a bit too politically correct, even though there is a good reason for it as well. If this wasn't a movie but a series of TV shows, I'd kind of like to see the two of them continue to cheat together to make money because they're not both bad people but poor people who are forced into a corner by their social circumstances, The two of them should just go together to fight against injustice even if what they're doing isn't the right thing to do.

Shirley Zhang: For a two-hour movie, Lynn's ending is more on the idealized side of the audience, and it's the best ending for both the audience and herself. I felt sorry for Bank, who deserved to have a smooth and successful life. When you think about it from a different perspective, he wanted to change his life by studying just to make money to ease his mother's burden. If he could have made a profit from his talent and ability, it wouldn't have been a bad outcome, even if it was an unorthodox and risky path of no return.

From the above responses, we can see that Chinese viewers do not condemn Bank's depravity but are interested to see him team up with Lynn again to make money through his high intelligence. I think the reason for this is that due to the similar social environment between China and Thailand, Chinese viewers can empathize with Bank's experience, so they can understand his depravity and put themselves into the situation in the hope of getting revenge for this unfair society. The Chinese audience also understands Lynn's sublimation of human nature and believes that for a movie, the positive direction designed by the director is indeed the best ending. However, if all the constraints of the external conditions are removed, the Chinese audience would prefer to see the two protagonists' team up to be the Bonnie and Clyde of the examination room, to challenge and take revenge on the unfair educational environment.

As I mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, fully exploring and utilizing the unique culture of one's own country in the process of creating a movie can not only gain the psychological recognition of the domestic audience but also satisfy the foreign audience's demand for exotic culture. I tried to find out the attraction of Thai cultural elements in *Bad Genius* to Chinese audiences by reading the answers from these Chinese audiences.

Gui Yao: To be honest, the Thai elements in this movie don't quite fit a foreign audience's image of Thailand. After all, everyone has their own stereotypes, and the elements that come to my mind in a Thai movie are Buddhist temples, Songkran, monks, colorful towns and cities. In this movie, there seem to be no

"Thai symbols" except for the language and school uniforms, and of course, I don't mean to say that all Thai movies should be about Songkran.

Perry Long: My first thought was that the uniforms of Thai students are very nice. In China, we must wear school uniforms too before we go to university, but they are usually sportswear with ugly colors. All students are not allowed to have their own personalities, and it is impossible for girls to wear skirts. So, when I see Thai students with the same educational environment but still look much better than us, I envy them for wearing such nice clothes to school, even though the educational environment is just as bad. Apart from that Grace's praying to the Buddha statue at school in the movie, reveals a very special element of Thai culture. In China, we don't meet religion in school until we go to university. This movie exposed me to a very special educational environment.

Shirley Zhang: I was interested in the unique Thai life shown in the movie, such as the high school clubs, the moto, and the nice school uniforms, which are things I didn't have when I was a student. They are all quite unique Thai elements. I think the reason may be that *Bad Genius* is about a real case adapted from a Chinese girl cheating. Hence it shows the real world that is so close to Chinese society. All those small, daily elements that are different from China are instantly noticeable to me, and they're very appealing to me, and I'm eager to experience them.

From the above responses, we can see that there are various Thai cultural elements in *Bad Genius* that appeal to Chinese audiences. Gui Yao, influenced by stereotypes, thinks that there are not many "Thai symbols" in the movie as he remembers them. Perry Long and Shirley Zhang both notice that the Thai students' uniforms are very beautiful in comparison to Chinese ones. They suggest that due to the high degree of similarity between the two countries' social environments, it's very simple to find something beautiful in the problematic realities of the two countries. When two environments are extremely similar, a person in one of them will easily notice a difference in the other. When that difference is an interesting presence that his or her own environment doesn't have, that presence will become a very attractive existence.

In the case of foreign films, how would international audiences perceive the inclusion of local regional factors in the films, such as religious culture and socio-political situations? This is also a major concern for the creators of the movie, as it has a direct impact on whether the movie will be able to cater to the tastes of foreign audiences and thus gain international acclaim. By reading answers from these Chinese audiences, I got a sense of what Chinese audiences think about this issue.

Gui Yao: It depends on the international audience's acceptance of regional elements, and the elements themselves need to be evaluated beforehand. The combination is beneficial if the elements are visually appealing, and the themes conveyed are easy to understand and resonate with the audience. For example, the use of elements based on the current state of education in Thailand in *Bad Genius*, coupled with the director's mastery of the audiovisual language,



resonated strongly with the Chinese audience and resulted in a lot of positive reviews for the movie in China. On the other hand, if the visual effect of the local region is mediocre and the theme is obscure, the audience will only feel strange and uninterested.

Perry Long: I think it depends on the individual, because there are many different types of movies, and adding local factors will affect the international audience's experience to a certain extent, and they sometimes need to search for related information to help them understand. I personally think this is a positive cultural dissemination. But at the same time, we can't rule out the possibility that some viewers may find other cultures too unfamiliar and difficult to understand, and find it troublesome to search for information. Hence they don't like to watch movies with too many local factors. The movie *Bad Genius* controls the addition of local factors very well, such as the current situation of education and social class in Thailand, which is extremely close to the current situation in China, and is not difficult to understand and feel, so the acceptance of the Chinese audience is particularly high.

Shirley Zhang: I think there are pros and cons to this approach. The pros are that it allows international viewers to learn more about Thai culture, but the cons are that uninformed viewers may be prone to stereotyping Thailand and its native people.

From the above answers, it can be seen that Chinese viewers consider the local regional factors of other countries as a positive cultural transmission. The degree of acceptance of local regional factors in foreign movies depends on how the movie analyzes it and presents it. If it is a common and easy-to-understand or even similar regional factor like *Bad Genius*, then Chinese viewers will easily accept it and even substituting themselves into it. If the movie presents an obscure and difficult-to-understand regional factor, then the degree of acceptance of the Chinese viewers may be reduced, all depends on the degree of understanding of the international audience of the regional factors of other countries and the effect of the movie crew's presentations. At the same time, local regional factors may also lead to stereotypical results, like Gui Yao's belief that only pagodas, monks, and Songkran are "Thai symbols."

## 7. Conclusion

*Bad Genius* presents several social issues in contemporary Thailand. In addition to revealing the corruption of Thailand's existing education system and the gap between the rich and the poor in the social class, *Bad Genius* also depicts the story of the rebellion and growth of a new generation of Thai teenagers under the joint discipline of the family, the school, the society, and the religion, implying that a child's developmental path has a great correlation with the family environment, the school education, the social background, and the mainstream values, and showing the different growth trajectories of the children under the influence of different disciplinary influences. The contrasting ending of the movie also reflects the mainstream ideology that "only by returning to the mainstream of the society can we

not be abandoned by the society and can we continue to go on". Except for the religious part, the rest of the content hits the painful point of the current situation of Chinese society. The education environment and similar experiences are like a knife into the memories of the Chinese audience about student life. Every viewer can find the character in the movie that is extremely similar to themselves, maybe Lynn, maybe Bank, or maybe those who are not good grades want to pass the exam by cheating. Of course, we can't rule out the fact that some people will see their own shadows in the teachers and schools in the movie. It seems that everyone is mistaken, and it also seems that everyone is forced by the environment to make wrong choices, which all stems from the problems of society and education that are so similar in the two countries, which has directly led to the high reception of *Bad Genius* by the Chinese audience, and the rating is extremely high as well. Meanwhile, relatability theory points out that viewers are always attracted to movies with relatability, maybe it is the storyline, the characters or the theme. Through the study, it is found that the audience emphasizes that the social problems presented in *Bad Genius* also exist in China, which makes the movie not only an entertainment work, but also a kind of sharing of emotion and cognition. The audience is attracted by the relatable plot, which increases the movie's acceptability.

Meanwhile, Thai movies, including *Bad Genius*, often target the Chinese market due to its large and growing audience. The Chinese film market is one of the world's largest, presenting a lucrative opportunity for international filmmakers. Thai movies may incorporate elements that resonate with Chinese audiences, such as cultural references, themes, or collaborations with Chinese production companies.

Additionally, successful films like *Bad Genius* can benefit from positive word-of-

mouth and cultural appeal, making them attractive to a broader international audience, including China.

This study reveals the reasons behind the high box office success of *Bad Genius* in China, emphasizing the resonance of Chinese audiences with the social issues reflected in the film. This provides an interesting case study for understanding the success of cross-cultural films in the global market, emphasizing the power of film as a cultural communication medium.

However, this study only focuses on the resonance between the films and the Chinese audience and does not explore the audience's attitudes towards social change, while the study does not address the performance of the films in other national markets, limiting itself to comparisons between China and Thailand.

From the data on the web, *Bad Genius* likewise received very good reviews in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries without any negative reviews(chinadaily.com.cn, 2017), so future research can expand to a broader cross-cultural comparison and deeply study the audience's understanding and feelings towards bad genius in different cultural contexts. At the same time, more detailed surveys and interviews can be conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the audience's attitudes and actions towards social issues after watching the movie, in order to grasp the influence of *Bad Genius* on society fully.

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