

CULTURE SCREEN TV SQUID GAME

One-Inch Barrier

How Americans Watch Netflix's "Squid Game" Matters

by [Donald Collins](#)

Published on October 11, 2021 at 12:33pm



Contestants play "Red Light, Green Light" in Squid Game (Photo credit: Netflix)

Last week, [Netflix announced](#) that Hwang Dong-hyuk's *Squid Game* is on track to become the streaming platform's most-watched original series ever. It will be the first time a South Korean TV show takes the number one slot globally—and it premiered just three weeks ago. *Squid Game* follows financially desperate characters as they are trafficked to a mysterious island to compete in children's games in a bid to win 45.6 billion won (roughly 38 million dollars). The diabolical twist, of course, is that if you lose, you die.

The series quickly accumulated a [devoted international fanbase](#), drawn in by its extreme premise, astonishing visuals, and heart-wrenching performances. Alongside praise and [infinite memes](#), an impassioned debate about the merits of subtitles versus audio dubbing took shape online, as well as a torrent of commentary about the show's translation quality. Fans [became divided](#) when it was apparent that many American viewers were watching it with English-language audio dubs instead of English subtitles with the original Korean audio. At the same time, Korean language speakers began providing breakdowns of what was lost in translation.

In a [recent viral Tik-Tok](#), comedian Youngmi Mayer laid out her critique of *Squid Game*'s English translations, pointing out how even small differences in subtitles or closed captions can drastically change a viewer's understanding of a character or scene. Others soon backed her up, calling out Netflix for inconsistent translations and a confusing interface that made it hard to select the subtitle options. [Mayer later tweeted](#) that “the reason this happens is because translation work is not respected...translators are underpaid and overworked and it's not their fault.” Experts have since weighed in on this issue, arguing that the show's English subtitles [are pretty on point](#), while the dub and closed captions do often miss the mark. This isn't entirely uncommon, as dubs typically have a shorter window to appear while a character's mouth is moving compared to subs.

Culturally specific references are often purged in English translations to make media more accessible to Western audiences, a practice that is coming under increased scrutiny as fans crave every possible detail from the content they love. For example, another recent breakthrough piece of class-conscious Korean media, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, changed references of Korea's top university “Yonsei” to “Oxford” in its English subtitles. And in *Squid Game*, “Red Light, Green Light” is actually a traditional Korean game called “The Rose of Sharon is Blooming,” referring to Korea's national flower “mugunghwa.”

Yet despite the active discourse online right now, English-speaking Americans' interest in reading subtitles and engaging with other cultures (both domestically and abroad) remains frustratingly niche on the whole.

FROM OUR SPONSORS

The debate over subtitles versus audio dubbing isn't new. Those who prefer subtitles argue that they allow for the most nuanced translation of the original dialogue, that they best preserve the actors' performances and narrative tone, and that after a few minutes, viewers barely register reading them at all. Meanwhile, those who prefer audio

dubs claim that it's just...easier. They assert that listening to an English dub allows one to multitask and look away from the screen without missing much. They also say that "reading" movies is too tiresome. Ultimately, *both* subs and dubs are equally important in allowing those with disabilities to access content. Not everyone gets to "choose" how they consume a particular piece of media, but audio dubbing is overwhelmingly the most popular option for those who do.

Because Americans really, really don't like subtitles.

[Netflix claims](#) Americans are much more likely to finish a "foreign" series if they use an English audio dub. Accordingly, the platform almost always sets the English dub as the default, and most viewers don't change it. [Morning Consult's 2020 National Tracking Poll](#) (NTP) surveyed 2,200 Americans, investigating their consumption of and attitudes toward non-English-language films, and subtitles. Only 10 percent of respondents reported seeing *Parasite*, with numbers for other international films trailing far behind. Seventy-five percent expressed that a dislike of subtitles was a contributing factor to their unfavorable opinion of "foreign language films" overall. Almost 60 percent of respondents concretely preferred dubs.

The phrasing of the survey questions may offer a hint about the root of these sobering results. The repeated and aggressive use of the phrase "foreign language" or "foreign language films" appears everywhere from mainstream journalism to award shows and market research. In an American context, this harmfully presumes that English is the only language of our country, and subsequently, that whiteness is the default. For example, Lee Isaac Chung's [Minari](#), a Korean-American immigrant story set in Arkansas and directed by an American, [was forbidden entry](#) to the Golden Globes "Best Picture" category because it didn't include enough English. Instead, they placed it in the running for "Best Foreign Language Film."

In the United States, English is directly conflated with being American, with being a *real* American, with *belonging*. Yet [per the 2020 Census](#), nearly 22 percent of Americans speak a language other than English, including Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Korean, and French, among many others. Ideas of America being an "English only" country come in part from white people's racist fears of losing the majority, and of an equally racist fantasy that a homogenous nation would somehow make us stronger (MAGA). And indeed, the obsession with a country having "one true language" has a rich, fascist history. Oppressive regimes and institutions—from Nazi Germany to Japan's occupation of Korea to Canada's residential schools—all employed language suppression as a tool of forced assimilation, or to purge those perceived to be outsiders. In [their fantastic piece](#) exploring the subtitle debate post-*Parasite*, Aja Romano summarizes that "disdain toward subtitles has been systematically, culturally ingrained in many moviegoers throughout the world by nationalist governments."

To put a fine point on it, literally erasing a film or TV series' native language washes out a key component of the cultural and national signature that is integral to identity. When we choose not to hear or accept the reality of someone's native language, we refuse to accept the full picture of their humanity.

Read This Next

[Bitch Comes to a Close](#)

April 12, 2022

[Knock It Down:](#)

by Jenna Wortham
April 11, 2022

["X" Is a Slasher Film with an Important Message about Sex Work and Pornography](#)

by Laura LeMoon
April 11, 2022

[10 Essential Books About Writing](#)

by Nylah Burton
April 6, 2022

While xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and fervent nationalism are usually condemned when they appear in our politics or social interactions, they escape accountability when it comes to our film and TV habits. Someone’s tendency to view only American or European films is seen as merely a personal choice taking place in a vacuum, as opposed to a learned pattern—a preference for English and, often, whiteness—with a deep historical context that must be interrogated and dismantled. A lifetime of Hollywood propaganda has biased us toward an American delusion of media supremacy. We expect the entire world to be obsessed with our pop culture, and for other countries to be grateful if we give one of their films a moment of our precious time. As sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen [pointedly tweeted](#) on the subject of *Squid Game*’s success in the States, “Asian Cinema and shows have and will continue to shine even without U.S. validation.”

When not avoiding overseas content, Americans have the tendency to judge it by two-dimensional Hollywood standards, acting like gatekeepers to artistic or technical quality. Reforming our media consumption practices requires accountability, and a healthy amount of ego death. This is exactly why director Bong Joon-ho’s [iconic acceptance speech](#) for *Parasite*’s “Best Motion Picture, Foreign Language” award at the Golden Globes remains so relevant. Bong, speaking through interpreter Sharon Choi, promised, “Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films.”

By playfully emphasizing how petty (and embarrassing) Americans’ aversion to subtitles is, he delivered both a call out and a call in. Rather than simply framing avoidance of subtitles as xenophobic and imperial—as us hurting *others*—Bong warned us that we’re also hurting *ourselves*.

When we choose not to hear or accept the reality of someone’s native language, we refuse to accept the full picture of their humanity.

 TWEET THIS

The America-first-America-best mentality keeps us devoted to viewing and promoting domestically produced media, allowing Hollywood to maintain its dominance at home and abroad. To use a pre-COVID example of the [box office haul](#), Hollywood made over 70 percent of its annual revenue in 2019 from international markets (not including Canada). That’s over 30 billion dollars. Like their longtime gaslighting about the lack of financial viability for Black, Asian American, and/or female leads in blockbusters, Hollywood has tried hard to convince everyone that there’s just “no demand” for the wider distribution of non-English-language films. Fortunately, that myth is close to being busted.

Read This Next

[Bitch Comes to a Close](#)

April 12, 2022

[Knock It Down:](#)

by Jenna Wortham
April 11, 2022

[“X” Is a Slasher Film with an Important Message about Sex Work and Pornography](#)

by Laura LeMoon
April 11, 2022

[10 Essential Books About Writing](#)

by Nylah Burton
April 6, 2022



Due in part to the proliferation of non-English-language and international film and television online, it's clear that there's an *enormous* demand. On Netflix alone, viewing of "foreign language" titles [skyrocketed up by 50 percent](#) between 2019 and 2020. Even before *Squid Game*, the site's [top-10 most-watched](#) titles of all time included the Spanish-language series *Money Heist* (a.k.a. *La Casa de Papel*) and the French-language show *Lupin*. In previous decades, only specific independent and art-house theaters in cities like New York or Los Angeles would screen select "foreign films," or they would only appear in diasporic neighborhoods. This kind of limited release is partially responsible for the stereotype that international movies are just for pretentious elites or for native speakers of a film's language. But now, titles from all over the world are available on streaming platforms, for rent or even for free on sites like YouTube, Kanopy, Viki, or Tubi.

In fact, per that Morning Consult poll, the majority of Americans watched *Parasite* on a streaming platform. And young people were by far the most engaged with "foreign language" content; twenty-two percent of respondents aged 18 to 25 saw Bong's film. Increased media accessibility in a digital age, other countries' cultural promotion agendas (like the Korean wave), and our own country's growing multiculturalism all play a role here.

Engaging non-English-language media and media from other countries can open the door to new friendships, language learning, and travel. It teaches you things about other places' histories and people, and about your own place's histories and people. It humanizes those whose lives might look different to yours, whose languages and beliefs might be different to yours. And it can give you some of the most meaningful entertainment experiences of your life. It can give you "so many more amazing films."

While the controversy and debate surrounding *Squid Game*'s subtitle, closed caption, and audio dub quality may seem discouraging, it's awesome to see such a high level of attention and concern toward subs and dubs go mainstream. For some American viewers, regardless of how they consume it, *Squid Game* may be their gateway to more incredible Korean-language and non-English-language media in general. We should be encouraging these viewing habits in ourselves and others by offering and accepting recommendations, engaging people's analyses, and telling our own stories of breaking America-first-America-best pop culture consumption. I'm so excited to see where we go from here.

And in the meantime, if you're able to try *Squid Game* with the English subtitles, make sure you're not choosing those closed captions by accident.

Read This Next

[Bitch Comes to a Close](#)

April 12, 2022

[Knock It Down:](#)

by Jenna Wortham

April 11, 2022

["X" Is a Slasher Film with an Important Message about Sex Work and Pornography](#)

by Laura LeMoon

April 11, 2022

[10 Essential Books About Writing](#)

by Nylah Burton

April 6, 2022



BY DONALD COLLINS

[View profile »](#)

Donald Collins (he/him) is a writer and trans educator based in LA. He is the co-author of the award-winning memoir *At the Broken Places: A Mother & Trans Son Pick Up the Pieces*, and his work has appeared in *VICE*, *Salon*, and *PopMatters* among others.

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS

Sex Toy Collective

Vibrator Vixen

bitchmedia
a feminist response to pop culture



© 2022 BITCH MEDIA | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

About

[Who We Are](#)

[FAQ & Contact Form](#)

[Our Staff](#)

[Board of Directors](#)

[Contributors' Guidelines](#)

[Get Email Updates](#)

Bitch Magazine

[Check the status of your subscription](#)

[Find Bitch Magazine On Newsstands](#)