

Original Research Article

Class cultural memory and the export of "britishness" in British period dramas

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Abstract: British period dramas usually present the class identity of different characters in front of the audience with various details before the name of the character appears. In many dramas that tell the story of rural life, the arrangement of staircases, dinner bells that announce meals, the uniforms worn by servants, and inherited estates, these elements can quickly let the audience see who has the power in their hands and who is in the position of needing obedience to service. This article uses the well-known film and television works "Downton Abbey", as well as the screen adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice" as an example, to specifically discuss the creative process of this display class. This article will analyze from a variety of angles, including the house pattern that appears in the story, the daily food specifications, the costumes worn by the characters, the etiquette norms followed every day, the consideration of the role in making marriage choices, and the rules of order within different families. The core point of this article is that these film and television works are not in the same way to re-enact the real British historical content. The creative team will specifically single out the part of the class life that is easy to be seen by the audience, convenient to remember, and at the same time, with the fun part of watching, and then bind these contents together with the polished and refined "British" image. This processed image is often bound by restrained personality, stable social order, long cultural tradition, elegant aesthetic taste and smooth social continuity. On the one hand, such images can help overseas audiences quickly identify the characteristics of British culture, and on the other hand, it will also make the real class hierarchy in history seem to be much more elegant and reasonable than the actual situation.

Keywords: British period dramas; class cultural memory; britishness; cultural export

1. Introduction

A viewer of Downton Abbey usually understands the social order before any character explains it. The family live in bright rooms, sit at the dining table, and receive service. The servants move through back stairs, kitchens, corridors, and workrooms. In this kind of drama, class is not only a topic in the plot. It is built into space, clothing, gesture, and sound.

This visual quality partly explains why British period dramas travel so well. Many foreign viewers do not know the detailed history of the British aristocracy, the entail system, or domestic service. Even so, they can recognize that a manor owner, a butler, a maid, and a young woman looking for marriage do not face the same choices. A room, a meal, a uniform, or a form of address often does the work of explanation. The central question of this article is not simply whether British period dramas show class. They clearly do.

2. British period dramas and class cultural memory

2.1. Overview of social classes in the United Kingdom

Class in British social history has never been only a matter of income. It is also connected with land, family name, education, accent, manners, marriage, and the right to command others. Period dramas simplify this long history, but they also make it concrete. They show the aristocracy, the gentry, the middle classes, and working people through the places they occupy and the rules they must follow.

In Downton Abbey, the Crawley family and the servants live on the same large estate, but their daily lives are clearly divided. The family's spacious and decorated rooms are used for guests and social activities, while the servants' spaces are practical and close to work areas. This contrast directly shows class difference. A similar symbolic use of space appears in screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. Longbourn

suggests respectability and uncertainty; Rosings shows aristocratic authority and pressure; and Pemberley reflects wealth, taste, and stable social order. These houses help viewers understand property, rank, and personal security.

2.2. The film and television representation of class consciousness

Film and television are good at class because they can show status through small things. Costume is one example. Noble and gentry characters are often linked with formal suits, fitted dresses, gloves, hats, and carefully chosen fabrics. Servants and lower-status figures are usually linked with uniforms or practical clothes. The costume may look like historical decoration, but it also tells the viewer where a character stands.

Houses work in the same way. Large estates, portraits, libraries, gardens, silverware, and decorated halls suggest inherited authority. Kitchens, servants' halls, narrow stairways, and workrooms point to labor. Social rituals add another layer. Tea, visits, church, balls, and formal dinners all require people to know where to sit, when to speak, how to greet, and how much emotion to show. A mistake in these rules can expose a character's social weakness more directly than a long explanation.

Dialogue also carries class meaning. Titles, indirect language, polite refusal, and emotional control become part of social performance. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are not only two lovers who misunderstand each other. Their conversations are shaped by pride, property, family expectation, and rank^[1].

2.3. The reconstruction of class cultural memory

Memory is not the same as the past itself. A culture remembers by selecting, repeating, and arranging certain images. British period dramas often choose country houses, old portraits, family names, inheritance problems, dinner rituals, and strict manners as the most memorable parts of the past. When these images appear again and again, they begin to stand for British class culture as a whole.

This kind of memory has two effects. First, it makes history easier to understand. Viewers can quickly see hierarchy, family duty, and social change. Second, it may make inequality look softer. Music, beautiful rooms, elegant costumes, and emotional plots can reduce the harshness of class relations. *Downton Abbey* shows the decline of aristocratic life in the early twentieth century, but much of that decline is told through loyalty, duty, and gradual adjustment instead of open social conflict.

3. The cultural export of "britishness"

3.1. The connotation of "britishness"

In this article, "Britishness" does not refer to a fixed national character. It is understood more as an image created on screen. In British period dramas, this image is often built through repeated details, such as polite manners, emotional restraint, social order, respect for tradition, refined taste, and a strong sense of family duty. These qualities are seldom explained directly by the characters. Instead, they are shown through the way people speak, behave, dress, and deal with social situations.

For example, an aristocratic character may appear "British" by speaking calmly when embarrassed. A dinner scene may suggest order through seating, tableware, clothing, and service. A servant may show loyalty by knowing the routine of the house without being told. A family may protect its reputation by hiding conflict in public. In these scenes, national identity looks like a style of living.

This is why period dramas are useful for cultural export. They do not need to offer a long definition of British culture. They let the audience watch a way of life and then connect that way of life with Britain. The result is an image that is easy to recognize, even when the viewer has little knowledge of British history^[2].

3.2. International communication channels

The circulation of British period drama is practical as well as symbolic. These works move through television broadcasting, cinema distribution, DVD, streaming platforms, fan discussion, and social media clips. A viewer may first meet *Downton Abbey* on television, on an online platform, or through short scenes shared by other viewers. In each case, the drama reaches people far from the social world it represents.

Downton Abbey is a clear example. It became familiar to audiences in North America, Europe, and Asia, and it is often used as a recognizable case of British heritage drama. Its success is not based only on distribution. The signs it uses are also simple to read: Estates, tea, servants, balls, polite conversation,

inheritance disputes, and restrained emotion. A viewer may not know the exact history behind these signs, but the social meaning is still readable.

3.3. Global acceptance and localized understanding

Foreign audiences do not receive British period dramas in one single way. Their readings depend on local culture, education, media habits, and earlier ideas about Britain. In China, for instance, many viewers notice clothing, estate life, aristocratic manners, and images of gentlemen and ladies. These features are often linked with refinement and taste.

At the same time, Chinese viewers may also connect the stories with familiar concerns. Marriage pressure, family reputation, social mobility, and respect for order are not completely distant topics. The screen world looks foreign, but some of its problems are easy to understand. This mixture of distance and closeness helps the dramas travel.

Cultural export is therefore not a one-way movement. British period dramas send out images of "Britishness", but viewers in other countries select, translate, and sometimes question those images. Some viewers enjoy the elegant surface. Others notice the limits created by class, gender, and inheritance. The meaning of "Britishness" changes when it enters a new viewing context.

4. Case analysis

4.1. Class culture and britishness in *downton abbey*

In *Downton Abbey*, upstairs and downstairs are more than directions inside a house. They are a map of power. The Crawley family move through large rooms made for display and ceremony. The servants move through kitchens, passages, pantries, and working rooms. The camera often connects these spaces, so the viewer sees that the comfort of one group depends on the labor of another^[3].

Dinner scenes show this structure very clearly. For the aristocratic family, dinner is a ritual of taste and self-control. Clothing, seating, tableware, conversation, and timing all have to be right. For the servants, the same dinner means preparation, service, discipline, and attention to mistakes. The same event has two meanings. It is status for the family and work for the servants.

The characters also show how class memory works. Lord Grantham often acts as if he is responsible not only for his family but also for the whole estate. Carson believes emotionally in the old order; his loyalty is not simply a job skill. Tom Branson is different. As a former chauffeur who enters the family through marriage, he proves that class boundaries can be crossed. Yet his discomfort also shows that crossing the boundary does not erase class memory at once.

4.2. Cultural memory in screen adaptations of *pride and prejudice*

Screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* build class memory through marriage, property, manners, and domestic space. The relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy is a love story, but it is also a story about social position. The Bennet family's future is uncertain because of inheritance pressure and limited property rights. Marriage is therefore tied to family security, public reputation, and class movement^[4].

The houses in the story carry strong social meanings. Longbourn shows the Bennet family's respectable but insecure position. Rosings shows rank and intimidation, especially through Lady Catherine. Pemberley is different. It is wealthy, but it is usually shown as orderly and tasteful rather than merely expensive. When Elizabeth sees Pemberley, her view of Darcy changes partly because the estate suggests responsibility and self-command. Space becomes a way to judge character.

Ball scenes make class visible in another way. Dancing, greeting, invitation, refusal, conversation, and silence all follow rules. Elizabeth's wit makes her attractive because she is not passive, but she still has to move inside the language of politeness. Darcy's pride and reserve are also shown through manners before they are explained directly. The relationship develops because both characters learn how to read and correct each other in public social space.

4.3. Comprehensive analysis

The two examples are set in different periods, but they make class visible in similar ways. *Downton Abbey* uses the estate, domestic service, ritual, and historical change. *Pride and Prejudice* uses marriage, property, manners, and moral judgment. Both works depend on objects and spaces: Rooms, clothes, tables,

letters, ballrooms, carriages, and houses.

This helps explain their international appeal. A foreign viewer does not need to know every detail of British social history before watching. The basic order can be read from images. A uniform, a large house, a formal dinner, a ballroom, or an inheritance problem quickly suggests social position. After these signs are repeated, they become part of a wider image of Britain as historical, orderly, refined, and distinctive.

There is also a limitation in this attraction. The exported image of "Britishness" is selective. It shows elegance and continuity more often than exploitation, colonial history, or the harsher side of class inequality^[5]. Period dramas keep class memory alive, but they also make it beautiful. Their success depends on this tension: Hierarchy is made clear enough to understand and graceful enough to enjoy.

5. Conclusion

British period dramas show class not only through the plot, but also through many visible details, including clothing, houses, rooms, manners, rituals, and relationships between characters. These details are more than background decoration. They help the audience remember and understand British class society in a cultural form. In *Downton Abbey* and screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, class is shown through questions of property and inheritance, the order of daily life, rules of behavior, domestic labor, and the sense of responsibility attached to family and social position.

The export of "Britishness" depends on this memory. Period dramas take specific British historical experiences and turn them into signs that overseas audiences can recognize. Estates, servants, formal dinners, balls, and polite dialogue become ways of imagining Britain. The image is attractive because it is elegant and emotionally clear. It is also limited because nostalgia and visual beauty may soften inequality.

This study is limited by its small number of examples. It also lacks large-scale audience data. Further research could compare more British period dramas and examine how viewers in different countries understand class, gender, and national identity in these works. Streaming platforms also deserve attention because they have changed the speed and range of the global circulation of British historical culture^[6].

About the author

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