

## Approaches to Making a Popular IP of Dangai Drama: Case Studies of The Untamed and Word of Honor

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### Abstract

In recent years, Danmei literature, a genre of literature originating from China which features romantic relationships between male characters, has been attracting increasing attention, and dramas adapted from Danmei novels have flourished. "Chen Qing Ling" (The Untamed) set a trend of Dangai (film and television adaptations of Danmei novels) in 2019, and in 2021, "Shan He Ling" (Word of Honor) also stood out among the TV dramas of the same period. On one hand, the massive popularity of these dramas is owed to the novelty of the Danmei genre; on the other hand, effective publicity and dissemination are also indispensable. This essay investigates the making of Dangai IP, its positive effect as well as limitations, and also puts forward feasible suggestions on how to create a popular IP.

### Keywords

Dangai drama; Popular IP; The Untamed; Word of Honor.

### 1. Introduction

Danmei originated in Japan and was originally referred to aestheticism, but later it was used in China to describe romantic relationships between male characters. Danmei novels are novels that describe homosexual love. "BL" (boys' love) and "GL" (girls' love) are commonly used in China. In 1998, Danmei novels began to circulate in mainland China. With the rise of Danmei literature, the number of fans has gradually multiplied, and numerous outstanding Danmei novels have emerged. This has been followed by Dangai dramas. China's first Dangai drama "Shangyin" (Addicted) received huge public attention in 2016. After that, the market has been flooded with increasing numbers of Dangai dramas since 2018. For example, the broadcast of "Zhenhun" (Guardian) has been welcomed by many fans, and shortly after, The Untamed became an enormous hit in 2019. After that, Word of Honor has also received great popularity, and the latest Dangai drama "Zuo Jian You Ni" (also named Chasing The Light, adapted from Danmei novel "Saye") is under preparation, all of which reflects that Dangai drama will become an indispensable part of the future market.

### 2. Research on the IP of Popular Dangai Dramas

#### 2.1. The Fan Base Lays the Foundation for Widespread Attention

2.1.1 "Mo Dao Zu Shi", the original work of The Untamed, had a significant influence in Danmei Literature, and it is among the top three most-popular books on "JJWXC" (Jinjiang novel website) with more than 1 billion views. In 2018, an animation series "Mo Dao Zu Shi" based on the novel of the same name was launched. It has only 14 episodes but draws over 100 million views, and it also has cooperation with brands such as "Zhen Guo Li". It is more than enough to show that "Mo Dao Zu Shi" is a famous IP, and the animation has a large fan base, so do radio dramas and

comics. At the same time, the two starring actors of *The Untamed* had considerable fan bases before the broadcast of the drama (Xiao Zhan had about 7 million fans while Wang Yibo had about 15 million), which resulted in 4.5 billion views of the topic *The Untamed* on Weibo before it was on, and sizeable fans also laid the foundation for the popularity of *The Untamed* on the internet. The same is true of *Word of Honor*. Its original work "Tian Ya Ke" (*Faraway Wanderers*) is the author's early work. It has accumulated a lot of fans and has a large fan base. The main characters Gong Jun and Zhang Zhehan also participated in many works in the early stages of their acting careers, which made *Word of Honor* go viral rapidly.

2.1.2 When the broadcast of *The Untamed* was coming to an end, Tencent Video launched the concept of "pay-per-view in advance". Before that, other platforms had done it, but they failed to make great profits eventually. However, more than 2.4 million fans of *The Untamed* chose to pay for the episodes in advance on one night, and it aroused massive discussion and various votes for fun. It is because of this successful "pay-per-view in advance" that not only the platform was benefited, but it also attracted more people to watch the drama and discuss, making *The Untamed* one of the most popular TV series at the time.

## 2.2. Effective Communication: Innovative Publicity and Themes

2.2.1 On Sina Weibo, *The Untamed* has its own official blog called "Chen Qing Ling Official Blog" with more than 4 million fans. Since *The Untamed* set the makeup for the actors in 2018, the official blog has released the makeup photos of each actor sequentially, and the copy-writing is related to the photos, which have strong artistic appeal. The blog also released interviews conducted during the filming, and the actors' answers are quite mysterious. Many fans of the novel and radio drama were excited and curious, looking forward to actors performing their favorite roles. During the broadcast, the blog continued to issue previews of the episodes to come, which led to a higher excitement level of the fans and effectively promoted the drama. Besides, the official publicity also made full use of the fandom culture. For example, there are many lucky draws in the official blog or "Chen Qing Ling Chaohua" (fan pages of *The Untamed*). These activities include tasks such as designing actors' memes in the play, cartoon images or participating in different offline fandom events, and so on. The top ranks in each of these activities will receive prizes, such as autographed photos, *The Untamed* related gifts, and so on. The rewards not only mobilized fans to participate in the activities but also heated the discussion of the topic.

2.2.2 Both *The Untamed* and *Word of Honor* are Dangai drama, so homosexual love is described in the original work. However, when it became an adaptation, the relationship between the two male characters was transformed into confidants and brothers. For example, in *The Untamed*, there is a line "Bless me with a confidant, I shall die without regret.", or in *Word of Honor*, "Nothing matters if I can meet a confidant", and these lines help transform the theme into the brotherhood, making the public curious about what will the adaptation of Danmei novels be like. Because of the adaptation, many fans of the original work or radio drama had a heated discussion about whether Dangai drama can be adapted as they appreciated. The results of this discussion, whether good or bad, will arouse the curiosity of the crowds and bystanders.

## 2.3. Fan Economy: Make Use of Emotions and After-sales Services

### 2.3.1. Concerts and Shows

Both *The Untamed* and *Word of Honor* crew held farewell concerts and meetings after the ending of the dramas. In particular, the tickets for *The Untamed* meeting in Thailand were once sold to 70,000 yuan by scalpers. What is even more surprising is that the Nanjing concert attracted 2 million people to buy tickets online at the same time, and scalpers ended up charging 150,000 yuan. The tickets for "Shan He Ling" concert also sold out in just 14 seconds, which

shows the strength of the fan economy. When the concert was held in Nanjing, the prices of local hotels and hotels close to the concert increased as fans flocked to the city.

What's more, after the end of the TV series, several other actors, such as Yu Bin and Ji Li, formed a group known as "Chen Qing Boys". And this group is featured in many other activities. Later, in addition to the leading actors, all the other actors participated in the group show "Shao Nian Ting Xue Zhong", which increased their exposure and let more people know about the drama.

### **2.3.2. Different Types of Drama-Related Merchandise: From "Online Products" to Physical Ones**

On the way to the meeting in Thailand, Harper's Bazaar participated in the documentary shooting, and issued the magazine's electronic version, with Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo as the cover, "What matters is not the direction but the destination." as the theme. The sales of the magazine reached about 7.36 million. Word of Honor also took advantage of the popularity and shoot the CP (couple) together, and the magazine sales reached 1.2 million.

After the broadcast of *The Untamed*, Xinpai Media launched two spin-off movies. Although they were not led by the two male protagonists of *The Untamed*, the expectation is very high because it is closely related to the theme and plot, and thus, many "Lingpai" (Chen Qing Ling's fan name) supported the movies. The weekly box office reached one million, and the film has repeatedly reached the top of the single-day box office of Tencent Video.

At the time of the broadcast, the whole series of interludes and opening and ending songs were widely praised. Therefore, after the show, The production team of *The Untamed* produced a complete album of the drama, including songs of different characters, and continued to take advantage of the fans' emotions. Most of the songs were sung by actors, bringing more fantasy to people. At the same time, this is an opportunity for publicity. Gong Jun, one of the two protagonists of *Word of Honor*, whose singing attracted great attention, and the public were very curious about how his flat voice would perform. Out of curiosity, many people would be eager to know how he sings on the album with the help of "Magical Tuners". In addition, *Word of Honor* and *The Untamed* both arranged "CP performance". The leading actors of the two dramas, Gong Jun and Zhang Zhehan, Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan, sang together the theme song or the ending song of the TV series respectively, which were "Tian Ya Ke" and "Wu Ji" (Unrestrained). This made their CP fans "Lang Lang Ding" (of *Word of Honor*) and "Bo Jun Yi Xiao" (of *The Untamed*) desperate to see the two actor's collaboration. Furthermore, *The Untamed* not only let the two male protagonists collaborate, but also launched singles for all the main characters. The songs presented each character's story and were extremely touching. The price of the album *The Untamed* is 20 yuan. On July 8th, after only one hour of release, the sales reached 750,000. It also topped various charts on different platforms, including QQ Music, Kugou and Kuwo, and broke the sales record of the domestic film and television soundtrack on Tencent Music. By the end of August, the total album sales on the three platforms exceeded 1 million. All the news astonished many netizens, so they began to pay attention to the drama.

During the broadcast of *The Untamed*, the official launched "Chen Qing Ling Official Mall". The mall sells props from the show, such as the Lan family's headband, or Wei Wuxian's favorite drink "Tian Zi Xiao" (Emperor's Smile, a liquor), etc. It also sells products like "Hanfu" (Chinese traditional clothing) with the same style as the starring role or some Q-version dolls. The sales of these products exceeded 5 million yuan. After the finale of the series, many co-branded products were launched, such as lipsticks that cooperated with Long Zijia, which had different colors and were respectively inspired by the different cultures of the five families in the TV series. The lipsticks were sold out 36 minutes after launch.

### 3. The Positive Effect and Limitations of Creating A Popular IP

#### 3.1. Positive Effects

With six episodes left in *The Untamed*'s run, Tencent Video introduced a novel and adventurous option for the audience called "pay-per-view in advance", that is, the audience could pay 6 yuan to unlock an episode in advance, or 30 yuan for a one-time purchase of six episodes. Although a lot of people are dissatisfied, many fans can not resist the temptation, they even paraphrased a catchphrase "it only costs you the money of a cup of milk tea". On the first day that the new option was launched, more than 2.6 million people paid to watch new episodes in advance. Although this kind of creative move is very risky, it is undeniable that it was a successful strategy, which has opened a new era. Many online dramas began to charge fees for early access to new episodes, but the huge success of *The Untamed* was hard to be replicated. At that time, a widely-accepted comment appeared, "Usually, dramas can only make the protagonists popular, but *The Untamed* put a group of actors in the spotlight." Successful promotion and marketing have not only made Xiao Zhan (one of the lead actors) top multiple popularity rankings, but also greatly increased the number of fans of each leading actor, which owes to effective exposure, such as behind-the-scenes and OST of each character. These contents helped fans have a deeper understanding of these actors, which resulted in their growing popularity. Similarly, the promotion of the secondary characters in *Word of Honor* is also very successful. When the finale was broadcast, they made several trending topics on Weibo, with some praising their acting skills, while others felt pity for the BE (bad ending), and the discussion gained increasing attention. Finally, due to the high popularity of *The Untamed*, the series was also released in Thailand, South Korea and Japan after the broadcast in mainland China, spreading the ancient Chinese culture to the rest of the world, and attracting more attention to the unique Chinese style.

#### 3.2. Limitations

Before the broadcast of *The Untamed*, some content was adapted because of the sensitive theme (BL), which dissatisfied many fans of the original work, and the Douban score of the drama was as low as 4.2/10.0. In fact, there is some natural conflict between the original work and the TV series. Many contents in the book cannot be presented in the dramas, while the book can arouse the reader's imagination, and thus the adaptation can be less than satisfactory for readers. Secondly, "Mo Dao Zu Shi" is a Danmei novel, so many fans of the two male protagonists could gradually pay attention to or even feel obsessed with Danmei novels. Fans of the book may likewise be fascinated by the two actors, which has led to many fans' modified creations. Unfortunately, that has triggered continuous conflicts. Some fans are unhappy about the Danmei clips of their idols and another actor, resulting in conflicts with other fans. There have also been quarrels among fans of *Word of Honor*, because some fans idolize only one of the starring roles, but the behavior of many CP fans irritates fans who don't adore the CP, so quarrels begin. Since "pay-per-view in advance" was a huge success during the broadcast of *The Untamed*, many other TV series have followed suit, but this strategy is not suitable for all shows. It is the strong fan base that encouraged the production team of *The Untamed* to make such an innovative attempt. The TV shows that followed suit received no great profits but more disapproval. Therefore, *The Untamed* became one of the most successful TV series that launched "pay-per-view in advance". Finally, after the finale of the show, Netease announced that it will launch the official mobile game *The Untamed*. Despite the high expectations of the public, the mobile game has not actually been released so far, which has reduced the public's expectations, and the promotional effect is limited for the show now.

#### 4. Feasible Suggestions for Creating A Popular IP

There is no doubt that the actors of the two shows are all very outstanding. They not only have considerable fan bases, but also have a good reputation as actors. Furthermore, these good-looking actors did an excellent job of portraying each character's characteristics and personality. The success of the two shows also owe to the excellent original works "Mo Dao Zu Shi" and "Tian Ye Ke". These two books were very popular before the TV series was released, and they both had a strong fan base, which brought crucial support to the producers of the dramas. More importantly, the adaptation of the original works can be delicate. Many Dangai dramas or TV series have a poor reputation because of unsatisfactory adaptation. The producers of the two shows, on the other hand, paid great attention to details, and they have effectively communicated with the author of the original books to create the background and vivid characters of each scene, respecting the essence of the original work. The official also took advantage of fan economy, selling drama-related products and holding meetings and concerts. And various approaches are used for publicity. For example, one of the behind-the-scenes of The Untamed, "Chen Yu Da Quan" had more than 58 billion views, which enabled the drama to go viral again.

Therefore, to create a popular IP of Dangai drama, simply choosing a hot star or a popular novel is far from enough. What is essential is to select excellent actors with a good reputation, screenwriters who respect the original work, a considerate production team who constantly polish details, and generate positive publicity before and after the broadcast of the drama. A TV series will not be a sudden hit. Every detail matters and continuous effort is indispensable to build a popular IP.

#### 5. Conclusion

Danmei literature is developing rapidly, and the increase in fans indicates that the market will be even more huge in the future. However, Danmei literature that integrated into TV series needs to be continuously improved and effectively promoted. Although it is obvious that the fan base is growing, there still exist many limitations and irregularities in the field of Dangai drama. In the future, Dangai dramas should shoulder the responsibility to promote positive values and find a balance between meeting the needs of Danmei fans and promoting positive values, only in this way will it be possible to make a popular IP of Dangai drama.

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