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Ecological Restructuring and Sustainable Development Paths of the Drama Industry in the Era of Traffic

Xiuzhu Zhao

School of Vocal and Verbal Art, Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, China
Yiheng000@icloud.com

Abstract: The deep penetration of digital media and the traffic-driven communication paradigm have driven China's traditional drama industry to break away from its inherent theater-centric and audience-stratified patterns, bringing about a structural restructuring of the industrial ecology. Adopting a dual perspective of media convergence and cultural industry studies, this paper systematically examines the ecological transformation of the drama industry in the traffic era, the breakout mechanisms of niche dramas, and emerging commercial models. It also addresses the minor impacts of youth traffic culture, identifies contradictions in industrial transformation, and explores sustainable development strategies suited to the digital context. The prevalence of short-video platforms, social media, and live-streaming has removed temporal and spatial barriers to drama dissemination, reshaping the production logic, audience structure, and commercial models of stage art. It has also created a new pathway for niche original and experimental dramas to achieve mainstream visibility. Traffic empowerment has decentralized artistic communication, expanded the public reach of drama, and enabled diversified commercial monetization. Meanwhile, traffic-driven communication and a light community support culture are emerging among youth groups, injecting vitality into the drama market; however, they have also led to superficial aesthetics and inflated popularity. The fast-paced nature of traffic dissemination, profit-driven capital orientation, and formulaic creation logic inherently conflict with drama's core values—narrative depth, critical reflection, and humanistic connotation. This tension has resulted in challenges such as superficial content, homogenized production, inefficient traffic conversion, and an immature industrial system.

Keywords: Traffic Era, Media Convergence, Drama Industry, Ecological Restructuring, Mainstream Penetration

1. Introduction

Drama, a comprehensive stage art integrating literary, performative, and aesthetic dimensions, constitutes a vital component of China's cultural industry [1]. For decades, the domestic drama industry has relied on physical theaters for creation and performance. Constrained by physical space, professional thresholds, limited promotional channels, and rigid operational models, it has long been characterized by elite-oriented aesthetics, niche circulation, and institutional dependence. Traditional drama relies on offline performances and word-of-mouth within closed circles, resulting in a static

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audience base, low public accessibility, and weak self-sustainability. For instance, the early small-theater production *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* remained confined to literary and artistic circles, failing to reach mass audiences. Many high-quality original youth dramas and experimental works suffer from a disconnect between artistic merit and market appeal, contributing to an overall conservative industry landscape.

The evolution of digital media has reshaped resource allocation and communication dynamics in the cultural sector. Algorithmic distribution, social sharing, user-generated content (UGC), and online performances have dismantled traditional drama's closed, static communication model, weakened the theater's monopoly on dissemination, and enabled ubiquitous, popularized content distribution [2]. Traffic empowerment has not only broadened drama's reach and rejuvenated its audience base but also restructured revenue models, reducing dependence on box office sales and policy subsidies.

At the same time, the marginal influence of fan culture and youth subculture in new media ecosystems has allowed young audiences to drive drama visibility through video edits, community recommendations, and viral topics. For example, the play The Pillowman gained widespread attention via analytical UGC videos on Bilibili, illustrating how niche works can benefit from youth-driven promotion. However, this trend has also fostered aesthetic biases that prioritize atmosphere over text and popularity over substance. Today, the drama industry stands at a pivotal stage of transition from traditional theater-based models to digitally integrated systems. Leveraging traffic advantages while mitigating superficiality, and balancing commercial viability with artistic integrity, has become a central research concern for contemporary drama studies [3].

2. Ecological restructuring of the drama industry in the traffic era

2.1. Transformation of communication paradigm: from theater-centric to media-decentralized

Traditional drama operates as a centralized communication system, where theaters serve as the exclusive venue, professional troupes and official cultural media control discourse, and audiences passively engage in ritualized aesthetic experiences. High artistic barriers and insular circles prevent niche dramas from crossing professional boundaries to reach the general public. Traffic media has overturned this model, establishing a decentralized, flat communication ecosystem [4].

New media algorithms distribute content based on user interests, bridging gaps between specialized and mass audiences. Ordinary users, young creators, private theater companies, and independent dramatists can all act as disseminators, achieving democratization in artistic communication. For example, the independent production Accidental Death of an Anarchist spread beyond full theater performances through user-shared highlights and dialogue compilations on Douyin, gaining cross-circle exposure without institutional endorsement and accumulating over ten million views. Spontaneous UGC and social sharing accelerate cross-boundary dissemination, significantly raising the public profile of stage art and moving niche drama from closed theaters to open digital spaces [5].

2.2. Shifting aesthetic field: from elite appreciation to everyday mass experience

Traditional drama demands focused, immersive aesthetic engagement, requiring audiences to possess specialized knowledge and cultivated taste. Long confined to elite circles, it struggles to align with mainstream entertainment consumption patterns. The traffic era has reshaped audience

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habits, with fragmented, lightweight, socially oriented everyday aesthetics becoming dominant, driving drama's aesthetic field toward mass accessibility [6].

New media fragments complete stage narratives into visually engaging, concise segments. Staging, performance, and atmospheric moments align closely with short-video formats. For instance, the *Dream Interrupted* excerpt from Kunqu's *The Peony Pavilion* attracted millions of views on Douyin through edited visuals and classic arias, challenging stereotypes of drama as obscure or inaccessible. Generation Z has emerged as the core demographic for drama consumption and dissemination, rejuvenating the audience base and invigorating the market. Nevertheless, lightweight aesthetics risk diluting textual depth and intellectual engagement, encouraging superficial reception. Some young viewers prioritize celebrity casts in works like *A Dream Like a Dream* over narrative complexity or artistic inquiry [7].

2.3. Industrial Upgrading: The Emergence of Integrated Online–Offline Ecosystems

Traffic media has expanded drama's production and distribution boundaries, moving beyond purely offline operations to establish integrated ecosystems of "physical performance + digital dissemination." The theater remains central to artistic expression, delivering complete narratives, immersive experiences, and refined craft, anchoring drama's aesthetic core. Online platforms facilitate audience acquisition, sustained buzz, and arts education, overcoming limits on performance frequency, seating capacity, and geography to enable nationwide reach [4].

Supplementary content—creator interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, interpretive features, and actor highlights—can be systematically distributed via new media, extending the lifespan of productions and building long-term audiences. For example, the drama *The Age of Awakening* released interviews and backstage content online, amassing over 50 million views. The resulting online popularity boosted subsequent offline revivals and national tours, driving a 300% year-on-year increase in box office revenue. This creates a virtuous cycle: content production → media dissemination → audience cultivation → iterative creation, facilitating the shift from traditional offline models to digitally integrated, modern industrial structures and offering new viability for niche drama [6].

3. Mainstream penetration mechanisms and emerging business models under traffic empowerment

3.1. Multi-dimensional mainstream penetration for niche drama

New media traffic has addressed long-standing distribution challenges, enabling niche dramas to cross boundaries and enter mainstream consciousness. First, circle expansion: algorithmic recommendations reach non-artistic and general entertainment users, bridging elite–mass aesthetic divides. For example, the physical theater work *Aquatic Life* reached large non-specialized audiences via Bilibili algorithms, exceeding one million views. Second, age inclusivity: content and formats adapt to youth culture and Generation Z preferences. The original youth drama Hi, Mom resonated emotionally and gained traction via short-video distribution. Third, geographic extension: online streaming and national distribution overcome touring limitations, enabling local niche and experimental works to achieve nationwide exposure and transcend regional constraints [8].

In dissemination, UGC reviews, viewed posts, and personal experiences carry greater authenticity and emotional resonance than official promotions, triggering organic word-of-mouth. Youth subcultural communities and light fan groups amplify visibility through discussion,

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recommendations, and remixes. For instance, Rhinoceros in Love has sustained sold-out revivals through fan-driven UGC, illustrating how niche drama can achieve mainstream breakthroughs via youth networks [7].

3.2. Diversified commercial monetization systems

Traffic media has dismantled traditional reliance on box office and subsidies, enabling multi-layered, sustainable monetization aligned with digital distribution. First, traffic-to-ticket conversion: short-video promotion and social visibility drive direct ticket sales. *The Bad Kids* drama sold out its first run within three days after Douyin promotion with integrated ticketing links, lowering marketing costs and stabilizing core revenue.

Second, digital content monetization: live streaming, premium replays, and exclusive membership screenings transform stage works into scalable digital products. Kunqu's 1699·Peach Blossom Fan generated over one million yuan from paid online replays alone, creating new revenue streams. Meanwhile, IP development has matured: *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* leveraged online fame to build IP, launching merchandise and co-branded products with annual sales exceeding ten million yuan, extending commercial life beyond live performances [6].

Additionally, cultural tourism integration has emerged as a viable channel. Xi'an's Datang Everbright City developed the immersive performance Dream of the Tang Dynasty, designed for social sharing, attracting millions of visitors annually and generating diverse partnership revenue. Youth audience loyalty and community consumption strengthen commercial loops, enhancing market sustainability and self-sufficiency [9].

4. Challenges facing the drama industry in the traffic context

4.1. Superficial aesthetics from fragmented dissemination

Traffic communication prioritizes brevity, visual impact, and instant virality, conflicting with drama's emphasis on complete narrative, deep reflection, and humanistic depth. To suit fragmented consumption, platforms often reduce works to highlights and iconic moments, weakening character development, narrative coherence, and thematic complexity. Some historical dramas emphasize visuals and star appearances over core ideas, encouraging creators to prioritize spectacle over substance—a trend exacerbated by youth fan culture and fast entertainment consumption. In Yue opera's New Dragon Gate Inn, some audiences attend solely for celebrity actors, disregarding artistic and narrative depth, further entrenching superficial reception [5, 8].

4.2. Impaired creative ecology and declining originality

Traffic-driven economics and capital's focus on rapid returns foster imitation and formulaic production. Successful formats trigger waves of replication: after Hi, Mom, numerous nostalgic dramas adopted similar plots and staging, diluting innovation. The industry's rush for quick visibility shortens development cycles, compromising script refinement, performer training, and artistic experimentation. Output of distinctive, era-defining works declines. Niche creators risk abandoning experimentation to chase trends, losing their identity. The creative ecosystem becomes stagnant and risk-averse, hindering long-term progress [3].

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4.3. Disconnect between online visibility and offline conversion

High online metrics often fail to translate into real-world engagement. Many productions achieve millions of views and likes, yet this traffic is frequently shallow: users consume clips without deep engagement, rarely converting to paid attendance. One widely promoted drama reached 20 million Douyin views yet recorded under 5% box office conversion, exemplifying "online hype, offline indifference." Low conversion undermines sustainability and misguides strategy, inflating industry bubbles [4].

4.4. Underdeveloped industrial structure

New media commercialization remains nascent. Most small companies and independent troupes still rely on ticket sales; digital rights, streaming, and IP licensing are underexplored. Local small-theater works often lack online monetization and IP strategies, limiting revenue diversity. The sector also faces limited capital access and shortages of specialized operational talent. Niche projects remain financially vulnerable, struggling to scale even with online attention due to funding gaps, weak management, and insufficient self-sustaining capacity [9].

5. Sustainable development strategies for the drama industry in the traffic era

5.1. Cultivating quality-driven creation

Long-term sustainability hinges on upholding artistic integrity, rejecting traffic-first commercialism, and re-centering narrative depth and humanistic inquiry. Industry stakeholders should strengthen original script incubation, support emerging dramatists, and prioritize socially relevant themes. Works like *A Bite of China* drama demonstrate how grounded storytelling can balance artistic quality and emotional resonance, setting benchmarks for excellence. Niche creators should pursue distinct voices: experimental works like *Aquatic Life* retain avant-garde expression rather than mimic mainstream formulas, building competitive differentiation. Audience education should foster deeper appreciation, mitigating superficial consumption and aligning artistic and market values [1, 9].

5.2. Refined traffic strategy and audience development

Strategies must move beyond vanity metrics toward precision and professionalism. Big data analytics should inform audience segmentation and tailored content. Productions like Mind Games combine excerpted highlights with interpretive discussions online, balancing fragmented viewing habits with textual depth and enhancing engagement quality. Youth communities and light fan networks should be guided toward constructive promotion and UGC, discouraging excessive fandom. *The Age of Awakening* illustrates how positive youth engagement can drive meaningful audience growth. Integrated online–offline planning sustains long-term visibility, ensuring traffic translates into genuine industry progress [8].

5.3. Industrial chain expansion and commercial diversification

Commercial development should extend across the value chain. Beyond ticket sales, investment in digital rights and premium streaming, such as *1699·Peach Blossom Fan*'s, paid replays unlock recurring revenue. Systematic IP management, as exemplified by *A Thousand Li of Rivers and*

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Mountains' merchandise and partnerships, maximizes long-term value. Professional teams and talent recruitment improve market operations. Strategic capital partnerships enhance resilience, especially for niche works. A fully diversified revenue model reduces dependence on single sources and strengthens ecosystem stability [6].

5.4. Institutional norms and ecosystem governance

Government bodies and industry associations should enforce clear policies and standards. Increased funding and policy support for original and experimental works can counterbalance commercial pressures. A robust evaluation system should assess both artistic merit and traffic integrity, deterring data manipulation and hype. Arts education raises public taste and informed consumption, nurturing a mature market. Balanced regulation aligns artistic values with market dynamics, fostering a healthy, sustainable industry trajectory [3].

6. Conclusion

The advent of the era of massive traffic has promoted the ecological reconfiguration of the drama industry from multiple dimensions, such as the dissemination paradigm, aesthetic field, and industrial form. Dramas like *Only Green Color* and *The Awakening of the Century* have achieved cross-generational breakthroughs by leveraging traffic, attracting great attention from audiences and generating resonance. More viewers can feel a different kind of spiritual strength from them. Meanwhile, derivative contents such as interviews with the main creators, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and creative interpretations can be continuously and sustainably output, thereby extending the life cycle of the drama's dissemination and providing new opportunities for the development of niche dramas and the commercialization of the industry. This forms a closed-loop ecosystem of "content production - media dissemination - audience retention - iterative creation", achieving media equality in artistic dissemination and promoting the transformation of the drama industry from a single offline performance model to a digital integration and development model. It also enables the drama arts to undergo transformations, such as younger audiences, widespread dissemination, and digital operation. The problems brought about by the aesthetic superficiality, creative impulsiveness, inflated traffic, and immature industry, which are caused by the empowerment of traffic, have become bottlenecks restricting the in-depth development of the drama industry.

The future development of the drama industry should be based on the background of media convergence, adhere to the core of artistic essence, deepen the textual depth and critical value of drama, leverage the advantages of new media traffic to optimize the dissemination and operation models, improve the diversified commercial ecosystem, and at the same time avoid industry chaos brought about by traffic. Balance the artistic value and commercial value. Through high-quality creation, precise operation, all-chain development, and standardized guidance, the drama industry should break through development difficulties and achieve the deep integration of traditional stage art and digital media, helping China's drama industry achieve modernization transformation and sustainable high-quality development in the era of massive traffic.

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