

A Study on the Typological Structure and Communication Mechanisms of Fan Secondary Creations of Legend of the Dark River in the Context of New Media Platforms

Jie Deng

*School of Drama, Sichuan Conservatory of Music, Sichuan, China
1927141529@qq.com*

Abstract. With the development of short-video platforms and social media, fan secondary creations have gradually become an indispensable part of TV drama communication. After the broadcast of the male-oriented martial arts TV drama *Legend of the Dark River*, a large number of fans participated in creation, forming various secondary creation forms such as video editing, text creation and image reprocessing. Based on Jenkins' theory of "participatory culture", this paper analyzes the creators, typological structure, creation themes and communication platforms of fan secondary creations of *Legend of the Dark River*. The study finds that fan secondary creations can improve the popularity of TV dramas to a certain extent, expand the scope of discussion, and enhance audience resonance through re-expression of characters, plots and emotions. However, in the communication process, there are also problems such as homogeneous content, excessive emotional expression and partial interpretation deviating from the original work.

Keywords: Fan Secondary Creations, New Media Platforms, Participatory Culture, Legend of the Dark River, Emotional Community

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's TV drama industry has developed continuously. Compared with the traditional TV era, audiences are no longer merely at the level of "watching", but take the initiative to participate in the reproduction of film and television works through social media. For example, on platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou and Bilibili, users can conduct secondary creation of film and television content through editing, commentary, montage and other means, and publish it on online platforms to form new communication content.

At the same time, major platforms and content providers are constantly promoting this trend. Short-video platforms have launched incentive programs for film and television secondary creations, providing traffic support and reward mechanisms; long-video platforms have opened part of the authorized film lists, allowing creators to edit and re-create within a certain scope; many official TV drama teams also hold secondary creation activities or creation competitions to attract fans to participate in content production. In such an environment, fan secondary creations have gradually developed from individual spontaneous behaviors into a normalized communication phenomenon.

For example, classic TV dramas such as *Legend of Zhen Huan* and *My Fair Princess* still maintain high discussion popularity through emerging secondary creation works many years after their broadcast, and gain new meanings in the new context. This shows that secondary creation has become an important link in the communication process of TV dramas.

Against this background, as an ancient costume martial arts TV drama, *Legend of the Dark River* has also triggered an obvious secondary creation boom since its broadcast in October 2025. Its rating on Douban rose from an initial 7.1 to 7.3, and it was selected into the Excellent Works List of the Fourth Quarter of 2025 by the National Radio and Television Administration. In the communication process, fans continuously deepen the popularity of the work, build an emotional community and attract more audiences to watch the work through continuous secondary creation output.

The "participatory culture" proposed by Jenkins [1] provides an important perspective for understanding this phenomenon. The theory holds that fans are not passive audiences, but groups with active creative ability. Based on the above background, this paper takes *Legend of the Dark River* as the research object, analyzes fan secondary creations in the context of new media platforms, focusing on the creators, typological structure, creation themes and communication platforms. Through sorting out and analyzing relevant content, this paper attempts to further understand the role and characteristics of fan secondary creations in the communication of contemporary TV dramas.

2. Literature review

2.1. Review of research progress on fan culture and participatory culture

Since the 1990s, cultural studies have gradually shifted from emphasizing the one-way influence of media on audiences to focusing on the initiative of audiences themselves. In *Text Poachers*, Henry Jenkins proposed that fans do not passively accept media texts, but reuse texts through rewriting, collage and reproduction, and gradually form active understanding and expression of meaning in this process. In subsequent research, he further put forward the concept of "participatory culture" [1], and discussed this participation behavior of fans in a broader media environment.

Domestic academic circles have also extended participatory culture from different perspectives. For example, some scholars believe that the communication and transformation of traditional culture can be promoted to a certain extent by building fan participation platforms, innovating the expression forms of traditional culture, and encouraging fans to participate in relevant cultural activities [2]. Some studies also point out that secondary creation is not random splicing, but needs to be continuously adjusted in the process of "inheritance-innovation-feedback": it is necessary to retain the core symbols of the original work, make changes in expression, and constantly revise the creation direction through audience feedback [3]. From this perspective, secondary creation is more like a continuous generation process.

In addition, participatory culture provides possibilities for diverse interpretations in space and new ideas for the production and communication of genre dramas. Some scholars point out that participatory culture not only exists in the Internet media space, but may in turn affect traditional media communication, making subculture gradually absorbed by mainstream culture [4]. At the same time, fans can participate in the extension of IP content by expressing consumption preferences and emotional needs, and the interaction between fan communities can continuously expand the story boundary and enhance the cultural thickness of IP through "collective wisdom" [5]. Participatory culture provides a new path for mainstream cultural communication and patriotic

emotional expression [6]. In recent years, the discussion of fan culture has gradually shifted from "participation" to "labor" and "emotion". Some studies point out that "fan data laborers are deeply embedded in the production field due to factors such as emotional attachment to idols, group relationship drive and circle structure influence" [7]. However, this investment is not completely one-way, and many fans also gain emotional satisfaction and identity in this process.

2.2. Review of research progress on new media platforms and algorithmic communication

With the development of new media technology, academic circles have gradually expanded their research perspective to the platform communication environment. Relevant studies show that in new media platforms, content communication is jointly affected by algorithm recommendation mechanisms, user interaction behaviors and platform rules. For example, platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili and Weibo usually screen content through indicators such as likes, comments, forwards and completion rates, making some works gain higher visibility, while other contents are relatively difficult to spread. However, "the algorithm recommendation mechanism may lead to the information cocoon effect" [8], that is, users will only see content in line with their own interests and preferences, which may lead to cognitive limitations and information bias over time.

In terms of cross-media communication, Jenkins defines "transmedia storytelling" as "a transmedia story unfolding across multiple media platforms, where each new text makes a unique and valuable contribution to the overall story" [9]. Transmedia storytelling builds a sustainable narrative system through multiple media platforms and communication strategies, enabling stories to continuously expand in different media rather than being limited to a single text [10]. At the same time, some studies discuss the impact of new media communication from different fields. For example, some scholars believe that new media platforms combine the advantages of mass communication and interpersonal communication, making the communication mechanism more flexible [11]. New media with video as the main carrier is becoming an important way of traditional cultural communication [12]. New media not only expands the space for martial arts communication, but also helps to shape the public's cognition of martial arts culture [13]. The decentralized communication characteristics of new media enable cultural information to form more active interactive circulation among users [14].

Overall, new media platforms provide a broader space and more diverse expression forms for cultural communication, especially in film and television communication, where fan secondary creations have become an important part of transmedia storytelling. Therefore, the communication of *Legend of the Dark River* does not only rely on the drama itself, but forms cross-platform communication through continuous secondary creations by fans on new media platforms. This communication method transforms the work from a one-time broadcast event into a continuous cultural discussion process. However, from the existing research, although the academic circle has conducted rich discussions on participatory culture and new media platform communication, there are still relatively few studies on fan secondary creations of the TV drama *Legend of the Dark River*.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Creators

On the whole, the fan secondary creations of *Legend of the Dark River* present a relatively clear hierarchical structure, and different types of fans have certain differences in creative motivation and

expression focus. Combined with specific content, they can be roughly divided into actor fans, CP fans, drama fans and original novel fans.

Actor fans usually create around actors and focus on the overall presentation of the drama. In *Legend of the Dark River*, Su Muyu played by Gong Jun has received high attention, and his fan group "Junweixian" has become one of the important creators of secondary creations. Such fans produce a large number of rich and varied contents, from character highlight montages to acting analysis videos, which often repeatedly strengthen the charm of the characters and continuously amplify the character images in the communication process. CP fans pay more attention to the emotional relationships between characters and the emotional bonds between them. In *Legend of the Dark River*, there are concentrated discussions around the friendship and emotional relationships of the male protagonist Su Muyu, and some secondary creation works will strengthen the emotional connections between characters by editing specific clips. Drama fans have a relatively more holistic focus, and their creation contents often revolve around plot structure, character relationships and group portrait narration. For example, in the relevant secondary creations of *Legend of the Dark River*, many drama fans will emphasize the emotional bond similar to "family" within the "Dark River" organization and the overall perception brought by martial arts group portraits. Original novel fans establish a comparative relationship between the TV drama and the original novel, and their creations often have certain evaluation and interpretation implications. The original novel fans of *Legend of the Dark River* will compare the settings, character relationships or plot developments in the novel with the TV drama, discuss the degree of adaptation, and sometimes supplement the background information not fully expanded in the drama.

It can be seen that fan secondary creations are formed with the joint participation of multiple perspectives. Different fan groups provide their own understanding paths around the same work, making *Legend of the Dark River* present a more multi-level appearance in the communication process, which also confirms Bakhtin's view of "polyphonic text" [15], that is, the meaning of a text is not generated singly, but continuously enriched in the interaction of multiple voices.

3.2. Creation forms

From the specific performance, the fan secondary creations of *Legend of the Dark River* can be roughly divided into three categories: video, text and image. Video secondary creation is currently the most active form and the most widely spread one. According to different content focuses, it can be further divided into plot montage, emotional, funny, commentary and other types. Such creations usually take the original pictures of the drama as materials, and integrate scattered plot clips into a new viewing experience through re-editing, soundtrack and rhythm control. For example, the fighting scenes, highlight shots and character growth lines of Su Muyu in *Legend of the Dark River* have been extensively edited into short videos and continuously spread on platforms such as Douyin. The video released by Douyin blogger "Yangjiaodui" on October 25, 2025 integrates key clips from the broadcast plot and official materials, and strengthens the character image through fast-paced editing, gaining 124,000 likes (see Figure 1). Compared with the original drama, such videos often highlight visual impact more and can attract audiences' attention in a short time.



Figure 1. Mixed - cut fan - created videos related to Su Muyu, a character in *Legend of the Dark River* (screenshot from Douyin platform)

In contrast, text secondary creations have a slower pace but more in-depth content, mainly including fan fiction, plot analysis, timeline sorting and character psychological interpretation. Such outputs require secondary creators to refine specific content in the original work and add their own understanding to form new text works, which have high requirements for creation and reading. For example, for the character Su Muyu in *Legend of the Dark River*, a large number of text works interpret and analyze his character setting, psychology and growth line. The post published by Douban blogger "Zhe Wei Zhuang Shi Qie Liu Bu" in the *Legend of the Dark River* group on November 29, 2025 interprets and analyzes the plot in the drama.



Figure 2. Retouched pictures in fan-created works of *Legend of the Dark River* (screenshots from Weibo platform)

Image secondary creations focus on visual reprocessing, mainly including screenshot retouching and painting creation. Such works usually select aesthetic or symbolic pictures in the drama, and strengthen the visual effect through color adjustment, composition or re-creation. For example, some shots of Su Muyu in *Legend of the Dark River* have strong expressive force in light, shadow and

composition, and present a more distinct visual style after being retouched by fans. The relevant picture released by Weibo blogger "Aladdin Shenjun" on November 18, 2025 is the reprocessing of the drama picture (see Figure 2). Such content is especially suitable for rapid dissemination on platforms such as Weibo, and is easier to be further transformed into avatars, emoticons and other forms to flow between different platforms.

3.3. Creation themes

From the content level, fan secondary creations of *Legend of the Dark River* re-understand and re-express the text to varying degrees, which can be roughly summarized into three types: narrative supplement, emotional enhancement and value reconstruction.

Narrative supplement mainly extends the parts not fully expanded in the original drama. It usually supplements information or re-sorts logic for the gaps in the plot, unclear character motivations or complex background settings to make the content more complete. For example, some fans will sort out the world view not detailed in the drama combined with the original *Legend of the Dark River* and its series works to help audiences understand the reasons behind the characters' behaviors.

Emotional enhancement focuses on amplifying the characters' emotions and the overall atmosphere, including strengthening tragedy and fatalism, as well as imagining plots. For example, in the relevant secondary creations around Su Muyu, many works repeatedly emphasize his process of being in a dark environment, constantly struggling and pursuing the "other shore". By comparing the short warm moments with the long-term depressed situation, the tragic color of the character is strengthened. Although this treatment simplifies the plot to a certain extent, it can arouse audience resonance more directly and is easier to spread on short-video platforms.

Value reconstruction reflects the active choice of fans in understanding the work. Such creations can focus on brotherhood, group portrait relationships, female characters, loyalty or power stratagems, and do not necessarily fully follow the core expression of the original drama. Instead, they re-emphasize character relationships or themes according to the creators' interests. For example, some secondary creation works will highlight the emotional bond similar to "family" within the "Dark River" organization and interpret it as a group portrait relationship; some creations will strengthen elements such as brotherhood, personal belief or individual choice, while relatively weakening the power stratagem narration in the original drama.

3.4. Publishing platforms

In the new media environment, fan secondary creations of *Legend of the Dark River* are distributed on Douyin, Weibo, Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Douban, LOFTER and other platforms.

Douyin and Bilibili, as video-based platforms, are the main positions for the communication of drama secondary creations. Douyin focuses on short-video communication with fast pace and high update frequency, making it easier to achieve rapid dissemination of content, and many montage and emotional videos achieve "breakthrough" on this platform. In contrast, Bilibili has more flexible video duration, and users are more accustomed to watching plot commentaries and character analyses. Therefore, there are more contents of systematically sorting out the plot or in-depth interpreting the characters on this platform.

Weibo and Xiaohongshu present a more comprehensive content form. As a platform with high fan circle activity, Weibo has videos, pictures, topic discussions and real-time interactions. Many hot searches and super-topic discussions related to the drama are concentrated here. Fans conduct

promotion, interaction and even "drama protection" here, forming a relatively obvious public opinion field. Xiaohongshu is more inclined to "recommendation" and "grassroots planting". Some users will introduce the highlights of the drama in the form of "promotion posts" and attract others to watch through personal experience.

Douban platform is dominated by written discussions. In the "Legend of the Dark River" related groups, a large number of analytical posts around the plot, characters and adaptation can be seen. Although such content has a relatively limited communication scope, the discussion atmosphere is relatively stable and it is easier to form continuous communication. LOFTER mainly focuses on fan creations, especially fan fiction and fan art.

On the whole, different platforms are not isolated. Video clips, emoticons and viewpoint content often flow between multiple platforms. In this process, the relevant content of *Legend of the Dark River* is constantly repeated, rewritten and re-communicated, making it continuously active in different media spaces.

4. Discussion

4.1. Social functions of fan secondary creations of Legend of the Dark River

The continuous output of fan secondary creations around *Legend of the Dark River* has continued the popularity of the work to a certain extent and brought the discussion into a new context. The drama's rating on Douban rose from an initial 7.1 on November 3 to 7.3 on November 18; Su Muyu played by Gong Jun ranked eighth in the "2025 Weibo Annual Character Selection", and the "TV Drama Legend of the Dark River Super Topic" was selected as one of the "Top Ten Work Super Topics of 2025". These changes are certainly related to the quality of the drama itself, but also inseparable from the continuous promotion and content output of fans on various platforms.

In the specific communication process, secondary creations often attract audiences by extracting a certain type of highlights in the work. For example, the representative martial arts fighting scenes, male-oriented narration and group portrait structure in *Legend of the Dark River* will be edited into more concentrated and intuitive content, thus stimulating the interest in watching the original film. Secondary creations around characters will also strengthen the public image of actors to a certain extent. During the broadcast of the drama, Su Muyu played by Gong Jun received much attention, and relevant secondary creation works continued to emerge, which also made the actor gradually establish a connection with the "martial arts image". This cognition extended from the work sometimes affects the audience's expectations for the subsequent development of the actor.

In addition to the role in communication, secondary creations virtually build an emotional connection. The high-pressure living state presented by the "Dark River" organization in *Legend of the Dark River* is compared by many audiences to the pressure and situation faced by young people in the workplace; the question "What is the sword for?" raised at the beginning of the drama is also extended by some audiences to thinking about personal choice and life direction. At the interaction level, fans also integrate "meme playing" and "drama protection" into secondary creations. During the broadcast of *Legend of the Dark River*, around data disputes, some drama fans rewrote the "Ask Sword for Matchlessness" in the drama into "Ask Sword for Yunhe", which is both ironic and expresses the position of maintaining the reputation of the work.

From a longer-term perspective, secondary creations are also promoting the extension of works to a broader media space. *Legend of the Dark River* was first serialized in the form of a novel, and then adapted into a TV drama, animation and audio drama. After the broadcast of the drama, relevant emoticons, edited videos and discussion contents flow between multiple platforms. At the same

time, the interactive gameplay launched by the platform, such as mini-games participated while watching the drama, also allows the audience to gain more participation experience besides watching.

On the whole, fan secondary creations provide another way for the work to continue. It is in these seemingly scattered creations that the work gains new life and gradually accumulates richer meanings.

4.2. Potential risks and reflections on fan secondary creations in the context of new media platforms

While seeing the communication vitality brought by fan secondary creations, we can also notice some emerging problems. The first is the phenomenon of content homogeneity. Some creators are relatively concentrated in material selection and expression methods. For example, some secondary creation videos for martial arts scenes in *Legend of the Dark River* are mostly lens splicing with fast pace and dense pictures, which is easy to cause visual fatigue after long-term viewing and makes the performance of the work tend to be single. At the same time, some creations stay at a superficial understanding, lack in-depth thinking on the text itself, and even individual contents deviate from the original work. For example, over-entertaining the setting of the "killer organization" in the drama, or mistaking the friendship and brotherhood between male characters as non-traditional emotional content, will weaken the connotation of the work itself to a certain extent and may affect the audience's overall understanding of the plot and characters.

In fan circle interaction, as mentioned above, "drama protection" is a common phenomenon. It is understandable that fans hope to maintain the reputation of the work through comments, forwards or creations out of recognition of the work. However, when this behavior is too concentrated and too "sharp", the communication between audiences may shift from discussing the work itself to positional opposition. In the long run, it is not conducive to forming a more open discussion environment, and will also leave a negative impression on the public about the drama and even the actors.

The *Detailed Rules for the Review of Online Short Video Content (2021)* issued on December 15, 2021 clearly stipulates that it is forbidden to use short videos to conduct fan circle behaviors such as pulling, provoking conflicts and irrational support, which also provides basic norms for relevant creations. It can be seen that fan secondary creations are also affected by the platform environment and group atmosphere. While encouraging creation, how to maintain a certain balance between expression and understanding may be a question worthy of further consideration.

5. Conclusion

Those seemingly scattered edits, texts and images actually connect the understanding and emotions of different audiences, and allow a work to be repeatedly discussed and re-entered into view after its broadcast. In this process, fans are both audiences and participants. Some retell stories through editing, some supplement characters through words, and others express their feelings in comments and interactions. It is these different forms of participation that make the work no longer stay in the original text, but gradually grow new meanings.

Of course, participation also means certain boundaries. How to maintain respect for the work itself while expressing enthusiasm, and how to avoid excessive amplification of emotions while sharing love, may be issues that fans need to gradually understand in the process of participating in communication. It can also be understood that when the public begins to retell it, rewrite it, and even

use it to express their own life experience, it enters another longer existence. As Benjamin said, works of art will continuously gain new "aura" [16] in the process of communication and reproduction, and this change is the continuation of their vitality.

This paper still has certain limitations, mainly focusing on content observation and lacking more systematic data support. In the future, questionnaire surveys or platform data can be combined to further analyze the communication effects and audience preferences of different types of secondary creations, and compare the differences between works of different themes, so as to form a more detailed understanding of the specific manifestations of contemporary participatory culture.

References

- [1] Jenkins. (2016). Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture (Z. X. Qing, Trans., p. 81). Peking University Press.
- [2] Zhou, Z. Q. (2025). Research on the path of fan participatory behavior promoting the development of traditional culture under the background of mass entrepreneurship and innovation — Taking the TV drama Legend of Zhen Huan as an example. *Journalism & Communication*, (1), 23-26.
- [3] Han, X. X., & Zhang, Y. Y. (2026). Reproduction of "style": A study on transmedia practice of animation secondary creation under participatory culture. *Masterpieces Review*, (2), 53-56.
- [4] Wang, R. Y., & Wei, J. Y. (2025). From textual nomadism and poaching to hunting: An analysis of the art acceptance process of Legend of Zhen Huan from the perspective of participatory culture. *Drama and Film Review*, (6), 19-21.
- [5] Cong, T., & Wang, H. (2025). Research on innovative publishing of film IP derivatives driven by participatory culture — Taking Ne Zha: The Devil Boy Rouses the Sea as an example. *Editor's Journal*, (4), 90-97.
- [6] Chen, H. M., & Yang, L. X. (2025). Research on participatory cultural representation of montage videos of mainstream themed films and TV dramas — Based on 100 montage videos on Bilibili. *National Art Forest*, (2), 57-73.
- [7] Jin, H., & Zhang, W. (2026). Production logic and emotional disembedding of data laborers from the perspective of fan culture. *Journal of Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication*, 34(1), 9-14.
- [8] Xu, J. Y. (2025). The role of user-generated content and algorithmic recommendation mechanism on short video platforms. *Journal of Reporter*, (3), 15-17.
- [9] Jenkins. (2012). Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide (D. Y. Ming, Trans., p. 157). The Commercial Press.
- [10] Cheng, L. R. (2017). Transmedia storytelling: Narration in the new media era. *Editors' Friend*, (2), 54-58, 64.
- [11] Chen, H., & Liang, J. M. (2013). Opportunities and challenges for health communication development in the new media environment. *Journalism Review*, (5), 60-65.
- [12] Ji, L. X., Ma, Z. Y., & Liu, Y. X. (2020). Communication and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage in the new media era. *National Art Research*, 33(4), 137-143.
- [13] Li, C., Wang, G., & Jin, Y. Z. (2022). Morphological evolution, public opinion issues and development paths of Chinese martial arts communication in the new media era. *Journal of Wuhan Institute of Physical Education*, 56(4), 65-71.
- [14] Wang, P. (2014). Research on new media communication of shadow puppet art (Master's thesis). Hunan University.
- [15] Bakhtin. (1988). Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics (C. R. Bai, Trans.). SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- [16] Benjamin, W. (2002). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (C. Y. Wang, Trans.). China City Press.