

Proceeding Paper

2023 International Conference on the Sociology of the Global
Economy, Education, Arts and Humanities (GEEAH 2023)

Research on the Communication Strategy Based on the Challenge of Hong Kong TVB Detective Drama “Heading North”

Lanyin Xu^{1*}

¹ School of Film and Television, Hebei University of Science and Technology, Shijiazhuang, China

Email Address

1583887338@qq.com (Lanyin Xu)

*Correspondence: 1583887338@qq.com

Abstract:

TVB detective dramas, evolving from the genre of professional dramas, are one of the most representative and mature types of series produced by TVB. Historically reliant solely on television advertising revenue, these dramas have faced challenges under the negative impacts of Hong Kong’s market economy. In 2017, TVB officially ‘headed north’, partnering deeply with mainland China’s long-form video platforms. This move marked the beginning of an era of simultaneous broadcasting and customized co-productions. However, during the process of cultural interplay, TVB dramas have had to abandon their core competitive edge – the ‘Hong Kong-style’ geographical space. This, coupled with strategic misalignments within the company, has led to layered limitations in drama dissemination, making it difficult to reach a broader mainland audience. This paper aims to provide strategic considerations for the dissemination of TVB detective dramas in the context of their ‘northward’ expansion, addressing their awkward predicament.

Keywords:

TVB Detective Drama, “Heading North” Co-production, Geopolitical Space, Media Communication

1. Introduction

Founded in 1957, Asia Television (ATV) was a pioneer in Hong Kong’s broadcasting and television industry. However, due to multiple challenges stemming from poor management, the Hong Kong government decided not to renew ATV’s free television license. Consequently, ATV officially ceased broadcasting in 2015[1]. Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), established in 1967, subsequently rose to

prominence, becoming the largest television station in Hong Kong. TVB has played a crucial historical role in the birth and consolidation of Hong Kong's local culture, creating a homogenized cultural identity for its people [2]. Since the 1980s, TVB dramas have evolved, introducing a variety of genres including martial arts, business warfare, family, palace, and professional dramas. TVB detective dramas, a subset of the professional drama category, primarily feature the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Hong Kong Police Force. These dramas utilize techniques from departments like legal and forensic sciences, employing meticulous deduction to study and apprehend criminals [3].

In 2004, TVB obtained a broadcasting license in Guangdong Province, making it the only Hong Kong television station to date to have landed rights in mainland China. Its film and television business has been significantly impacted by Hong Kong's macroeconomic environment. Benefiting from the mainland's tourism boom to Hong Kong, TVB's total film and television revenue peaked in 2013. In the same year, TVB began licensing its original content to mainland long-video platforms like Youku. However, subsequent violent conflicts and the severe impact of the pandemic on Hong Kong's tourism and retail industries led to a sharp contraction in consumer spending and a drastic drop in television advertising revenue. This was a significant blow to TVB dramas, which had long relied solely on advertising sponsorship for production, leading to a decline in production quality. Additionally, the continuous loss of talent such as scriptwriters and actors contributed to the deteriorating development of TVB dramas. In search of new directions, TVB began its "northward" expansion in 2017, seeking deeper collaborations with mainland long-video websites such as Youku, Tencent, and iQiyi, through synchronous dramas and customized co-productions.

After co-producing detective dramas in its "northward" strategy, TVB saw an increase in production budgets and more diverse filming locations. However, the distinct "Hong Kong flavor" of the visual imagery was often obscured under distorted high-gloss filters. Moreover, in an attempt to enhance market and audience recognition, scriptwriters forcibly stacked nostalgic elements and recruited a wide array of veteran casts, leading to unclear distinctions between primary and secondary characters and resulting in convoluted storylines. This approach led to allegations that TVB was capitalizing on nostalgia and excessively exploiting classic IPs, causing a decline in the reputation of its co-produced dramas in recent years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of "Northward" Detective Dramas.

Drama Title	Year of Release	Producers	Douban Rating	"Northward" Format
Line Walker 2	2017	TVB, Tencent Video	6.8	Customized Co-production
The Defected	2019	TVB, Tencent Video	7.2	Customized Co-production
Line Walker 3	2020	TVB, Tencent Video	6.3	Customized Co-production
Forensic Heroes IV	2020	TVB	5.1	Simultaneous Drama (Broadcast simultaneously on Jade Channel and Youku Video)
Armed Reaction 2021	2021	TVB, Tencent Video	5.1	Customized Co-production
Forensic Heroes V	2022	TVB, Youku Video	6.2	Customized Co-productio

However, TVB detective dramas carry the collective memories of several generations of mainland audiences, making them difficult to replicate by other Hong Kong and Taiwanese broadcasters despite encountering bottlenecks in their development path. Based on this, the present article aims to address the limited dissemination of TVB detective dramas in their “northward” expansion process. It begins by discussing the opportunities and challenges brought about by the “northward” move; then, it integrates communication studies and geographical cultural analysis to formulate a dissemination strategy for TVB detective dramas.

2. Reasons for Limited Dissemination of the Series

The development of TVB detective dramas remains constrained even after the “northward” expansion. First and foremost, audiences can distinctly observe the disregard or abandonment of the previously pursued “Hong Kong-style” visual landscapes. Although the “northward” expansion is a process of cultural integration, balancing the “otherness of culture” with the audience’s “cultural empathy” is a matter worthy of exploration. Secondly, TVB itself has deviated in its strategic operation, not yet fully adapting to the complex cultural environment of mainland China, which also prevents the detective dramas from breaking through existing circles for effective dissemination.

2.1. The “Invisible” “Hong Kong-style” Landscape

The spatial aspect of TV dramas includes both the on-screen and off-screen spaces, with the latter often referring to social spaces, as shown in Figure 1.

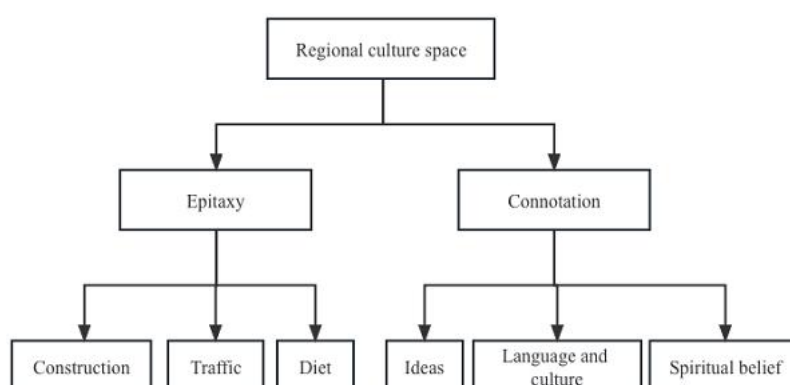


Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Hong Kong Flavor Space.

Traditional Hong Kong dramas often showcase regional food culture: Long Island iced tea, “hot pot”, Wife Cakes and Husband Cakes from Yuen Long, beef brisket noodles, cheung fun (rice noodle rolls), put chai ko (rice pudding), char siu bao (barbecued pork buns), sago desserts, and other street snacks. These are elements of daily life long coveted by mainland audiences. Correspondingly, the social spaces representing grassroots culture include cha chaan tengs (Hong Kong-style cafes), dai pai dongs (open-air food stalls), and bars. In early detective dramas, scenes of colleagues discussing cases over milk tea or coffee at cha chaan tengs, joking around, or enjoying hot pot after work showcased the diversity of Hong Kong life, giving audiences a taste of its unique food culture (as shown in Figure 2). This not only constructed a narrative space and cultural field unique to Hong Kong's grassroots culture but also greatly enriched the early TVB detective dramas with cinematic landscapes, a sense of reality, and cultural depth.



Figure 2. Daily Life Scenes at a Cha Chaan Teng in “Armed Reaction 2” (2000).

After the “Headed North” synchronization and co-production, with increased investment and improved production quality, significant improvements in costumes and sets were made. Regrettably, current TVB detective dramas have lost the sense of everyday life and approachability. Additionally, there's a heavy emphasis on elite culture, with local markers in the dramas often being courtrooms, upscale office buildings, and western restaurants, symbols representing Hong Kong's elite class. Although elite culture may guide the mainstream direction of societal development, Hong Kong is not paved with gold. In reality, legal, forensic, and police personnel are not as affluent as imagined; many public servants still live in government-provided housing and work hard daily. This contrasts with some current dramas where main characters are shown swirling wine glasses in upscale offices, passing judgment on others, lacking practicality, and enjoying the conveniences of a smart society (as illustrated in Figure 3).



Figure 3. Scene from the simultaneous drama “Forensic Heroes IV” where the protagonist team debriefs after closing a case.

Moreover, most of the “northward” synchronized and co-produced TVB detective dramas are now equipped with highly saturated filters that distort the characters, losing the familiar feel and differing significantly from previous styles. The settings of these dramas alternate between crime scenes, forensic labs, and meeting rooms, almost devoid of the familiar streets and restaurants essential to Hong Kong dramas, thus significantly diminishing the “feel” of Hong Kong dramas. The 3D scanners at crime scenes, futuristic large touchscreens in the studios, and dazzling equipment used by forensic scientists and pathologists, coupled with the overly spacious, clean, and high-end studios and meeting rooms under the filters, represent a significant advancement in the working environment compared to earlier TVB detective dramas. However, they lack sufficient “human touch” and “Hong Kong flavor” (as illustrated in Figure 4).



Figure 4. High-tech working scene of the protagonist team in “Forensic Heroes IV”.

2.2. Internal Strategic Deviations in the Company

For a long time, TVB’s employee welfare and remuneration levels have been lower than those in mainland China, and the high intensity of work has led to a high staff turnover rate. Particularly after 2010, there was a peak period of TVB artists leaving the company, with many excellent actors from earlier detective dramas venturing into the mainland market (Table 2). However, audiences have a fixed perception of the character traits of TVB detective drama protagonists, and the younger faces appearing in recent dramas have not been well-received, leading to a significant generational gap in talent. Additionally, some young actors exhibit a noticeable disconnect in acting skills, leaving audiences unsatisfied with both plot and performance, thus failing to create emotional engagement and weakening the emotional connection with the drama.

Table 2. Statistics of Some TVB Artists ‘Leaving the Nest’ Around 2010.

Artist Name	Contract Termination Year	Representative Detective Dramas
Bowie Lam	2009	Detective Investigation Files I, II, III
Frankie Lam	2010 (Switched from full management contract to per-project contract)	Forensic Heroes I, II; Armed Reaction
Charmaine Sheh	2011 (Switched from full management contract to per-project contract)	Forensic Heroes II; Line Walker I
Jessica Hsuan	2011 (Returned in 2016)	Detective Investigation Files IV; Line Walker 2; Armed Reaction 2021
Raymond Lam	2011	Witness to a Prosecution I, II; The Mind Detective
Raymond Lam	2014	Line Walker 2, 3
Ron Ng	2014	Forensic Heroes III
Bosco Wong	2016	The Mind Detective; Forensic Heroes V
Linda Chung	2018	Forensic Heroes I, II

Amidst this talent crisis, internal management chaos at TVB has led to low operational efficiency. Frequent changes in the upper management have resulted in unstable company strategies, directly impacting the brand image and market competitiveness. Concurrently, the continuous shrinkage in market share and declining revenues have led to a mounting debt problem, contributing to TVB’s poor financial situation and jeopardizing the production and quality of TVB dramas.

3. Analysis of Drama Dissemination Pathways

TVB detective dramas, as high-quality series, have a broad prospect for dissemination in mainland China. The development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area is a national strategy, and reform is in line with the general trend. Firstly, the unique cultural temperament that geographical space brings to film and television aesthetics should be valued; at the same time, internal reforms in

enterprises should focus on the marketing strategies of detective dramas. By seizing the opportunities brought by short videos to long video development, true “breakthrough” dissemination of the series can be achieved.

3.1. Collaging “Hong Kong-style” Geographical Space

Regional culture typically refers to long-standing, historically rich, and distinctive cultural traditions that are still influential today, reflecting the specific ecological environment, customs, and living habits of a particular area [4]. Hong Kong culture is a branch of the Lingnan culture in the Greater Bay Area, sharing geographical proximity, language, and cultural roots. TVB detective drama creation should continuously explore Hong Kong-style humanistic concepts, presenting the “otherness of culture” created by social, cultural, and historical experiences different from those in the mainland. This involves distilling local folk characteristics and the spirit of the times, concretely manifested in the series through local landscapes and character personalities. The dissemination of this “otherness of culture” through the dramas to more mainland audiences is an effective way to build and promote the regional culture of the Greater Bay Area.

3.1.1. Local Landscapes

The mainland Chinese detective drama “The Knockout”, aired in 2023, became a phenomenal TV series, maintaining high popularity with a score of 8.9 on Douban. “The Knockout” narrates the story of frontline detective An Xin and other forces of justice, engaging in a life-and-death struggle against criminal forces spanning two decades [5]. Audiences not only experience the black-and-white confrontation and complex human nature in the anti-gang operations from the interlocking plot but also appreciate the rich Guangfu flavor and regional characteristics from the visual space.

The series utilizes regional characteristics to build its suspenseful style. The primary filming location for the fictional “Jinghai City” in the series is in Jiangmen, Guangdong (as shown in Figure 5). Following the broadcast of “The Knockout”, many of its filming locations have become focal points of media attention and popular destinations for citizens and tourists [6].



Figure 5. Filming of the Pengjiang Long Dike Historic and Cultural District in “The Knockout”.

The food culture depicted in “The Knockout” not only includes the Guangdong specialty “cheung fun” but also popularizes “pig’s trotter noodles” among national audiences. As one of the most important clues in “The Knockout”, it almost accompanies the life of character Gao Qiqiang (as illustrated in Figure 6).

Mainland audiences have always anticipated TVB detective dramas to showcase a unique blend of Hong Kong’s local street vibe with an international, modern flair – a collision and fusion of both worlds. TVB detective dramas should retain and display Hong Kong’s urban architecture, streets, transportation, and culinary culture in their

shooting locations. Locations like Mong Kok, Yau Ma Tei, and Sham Shui Po, familiar to audiences as common backdrops in TVB detective dramas, should not be discarded. The Star Ferry shuttling between Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Kong Island, taxis, and trams are indispensable elements of TVB detective dramas, forming a unique cultural landscape of Hong Kong. Cha chaan tengs, typical representatives of Hong Kong's culinary culture, should be prominently featured, providing a narrative space and showcasing a Hong Kong brimming with humanity and local flavors through its rich food culture.



Figure 6. Scene of Gao Qiqiang and An Xin eating pig's trotter noodles in 'The Knockout'.

3.1.2. Character Symbols

TVB detective dramas, featuring modern Hong Kong citizens as protagonists, should encompass a wide range of occupational classes in their character settings to represent the diversity of Hong Kong society. Businesspeople, lawyers, doctors, teachers, models, entertainers, unemployed vagrants, street ruffians, and ordinary housewives... any of these could be the main characters in individual cases [7]. Through a variety of character symbols, audiences can see a microcosm of Hong Kong society, experiencing the clash between grassroots and elite cultures. In character development, the portrayal of the grassroots level should not be neglected. True representatives of Hong Kong are its grassroots culture, encompassing commoner and popular culture. The grassroots level, which constitutes the largest proportion of Hong Kong society, and their everyday stories and local flavors form the foundation of Hong Kong's societal existence.

3.2. Transformation and Upgrade of Marketing Strategy

TVB faces a parallel situation of content strength and traffic difficulties in its self-operated business in mainland China. Since 2018, TVB has been distributing content in mainland China exclusively through the official streaming media, the Mai Dui Dui App. However, in 2022, its 6.1 million data users pale in comparison to the several hundred million MAU (Monthly Active Users) of Ai You Teng (iQIYI, Youku, Tencent Video) platforms (Figure 7).

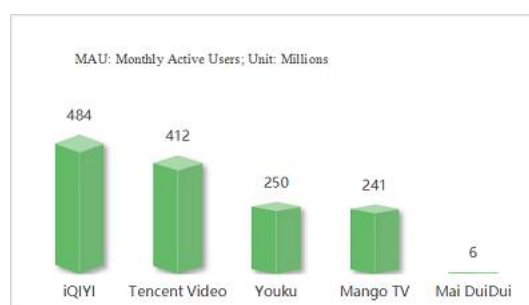


Figure 7. Comparison of MAU between Mai Dui Dui and other mainstream long-video platforms in mainland China (Source: Company financial reports, Quest Mobile).

The traffic driven to TVB dramas through Mai Dui Dui is limited, but the app has a substantial collection of about 10,000 TVB copyright contents. In contrast, Youku, which has the highest number of TVB dramas among other domestic video platforms, only has 130 (Table 4). Therefore, finding better ways to drive traffic and exposure for TVB dramas is a primary task in strategic reform.

Table 4. Comparison of TVB Content on Mainland Video Platforms (Source: Data from various platforms).

Platform	Number of Contents
Youku	130
iQiyi	9
Tencent Video	8
Bilibili	5
Mango TV	0 or No results for TVB
Migu	0 or No results for TVB

In the era of deep integration of media, marketing through micro-media has become an important strategy for companies to compete for young audiences. Short videos are characterized by their simplicity, rich content, and strong participation and interactivity. Psychologically, short videos provide an immersive experience to internet audiences through a three-dimensional form of text, sound, and visual senses. The audience's feedback on the action level, such as comments and shares, becomes a part of the short video experience [8]. However, TVB's social media accounts are not very active, and its presence on the tiktok short video platform is mainly focused on e-commerce live broadcasting, offering limited marketing for its dramas. According to the "2023 China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report", nearly a quarter of new internet users are drawn in by short videos, whose 'new user acquisition' capability far exceeds instant messaging. As of December 2022, short video users reached 1.012 billion [9]. Given this, long video drama content seeking sustained and in-depth exposure should pay attention to the development opportunities brought by short video marketing models. Likewise, for TVB's high-quality drama content to gain wider attention among netizens, relying solely on official drama broadcast platforms and routine official account marketing is insufficient; deeper media integration should be pursued.

TVB's drama broadcasting platform, Mai Dui Dui, can emulate the cooperation model between tiktok, iQiyi, and Tencent, exploring areas such as secondary creation and promotion of long-form video content. Previously, iQiyi authorized tiktok to use content from its high-quality drama series, including the "Mist Theater" collection with mystery dramas like "The Bad Kids" and "The Long Night". As of the writing of this article, the tiktok topic "The Bad Kids" has garnered over 6.3 billion views. In contrast, a classic TVB detective IP like "Forensic Heroes V", which should already have numerous loyal fans in mainland China, has only achieved about 750 million topic views on tiktok.

In August this year, TVB announced a partnership with Tencent Video to co-produce four customized dramas, including two detective dramas, "Anti-Black Hero" and "Detective 12". These customized detective dramas can leverage Tencent Video's large platform for integrated media promotion. Building on this, if the dramas are licensed for collaboration with tiktok short videos, allowing quality content to enter the traffic pool in a standardized manner, internet content creators could then generate more high-quality content. This would enable the "breaking out" of TVB's mystery and detective dramas on the internet, sparking a wave of interest in these genres. It

would allow more mainland young audiences to watch and appreciate the culture and charm of TVB detective dramas, potentially translating this into significant traffic (as illustrated in Figure 8).

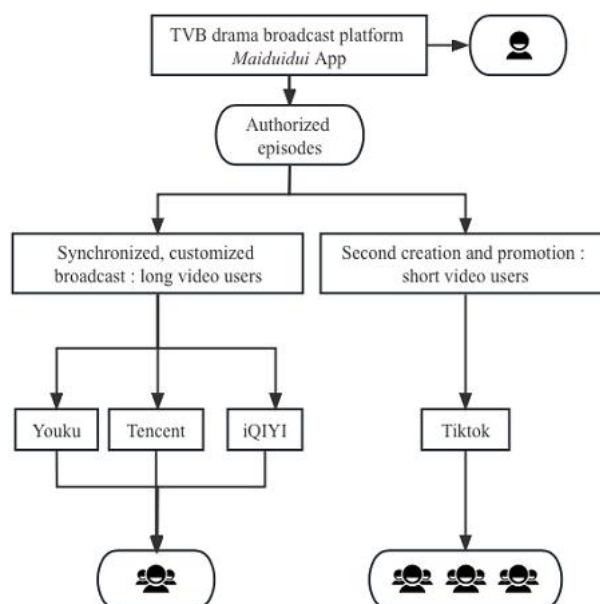


Figure 8. Conceptual Process for 'Breaking Out' Dissemination of TVB Detective Dramas.

4. Conclusions

TVB detective dramas “heading north” to integrate into the mainland market will inevitably undergo a period of adjustment. Despite the cultural tug-of-war, as time progresses, the integration between Hong Kong and the mainland is becoming increasingly seamless [10], with deeper collaboration and exchange in the realms of drama creation and dissemination concepts. As the main agent of change, TVB should focus on leveraging the advantages of geographical culture and cater to the aesthetic preferences of mainland audiences. At the same time, a strategic transformation and upgrade of marketing concepts for detective dramas is necessary. Utilizing short video secondary creation and promotion can extend the reach of these dramas to deeper layers of internet audiences, achieving a profound integration of long and short videos and media. Relying on the mainland market, TVB detective dramas can interactively and integratively develop with mainland culture and the internet market, contributing to the current narrative of China.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] HK's oldest free broadcaster ATV goes off air. 2016. Available online: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2016-04/02/content_24253181.htm (accessed on 12 December 2023).

- [2] Lily, R. Claidentity: Hong Kong film and television. *History and Anthropology*, 1933, 6, 261-292.
- [3] Zhao, J. Study on the Genre Narrative Elements of TVB Detective Dramas. Northwestern Normal University, 2013.
- [4] Zhou, B. The Formation of Film Geography as a Discipline and Its Theoretical Construction. *New Film Works*, 2023, 3, 20-27.
- [5] Zhang, L. Analysis of Public Opinion Feedback and Review Standards on Character Portrayal in the TV Series “The Knockout”. *Journal of Journalism Studies*, 2023, 14(4), 235-237.
- [6] Peng, J. Delving into the Pengjiang Elements in “The Knockout” and Exploring the Charm of Pengjiang. 2023. Available online: http://www.pjq.gov.cn/jrpj/pjly/content/mpost_2808990.html (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- [7] Cao, S. Research on TVB Detective Dramas. Hebei University, 2011.
- [8] Gong X. A Personalized Recommendation Method for Short Drama Videos Based on External Index Features. *Advances in Meteorology*, 2022, Article ID 3601956, 10 pages.
- [9] Liu, X. Online Audio-Visual Becomes the Largest Internet Application! “2023 China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report” Released. *China Broadcasting and Television*, 2023, 08, 42-43.
- [10] Wang, Y. From “Heading North” to “Integration”, How New Hong Kong Dramas Enchant Three Generations of Viewers. 2022. Available online: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1737385911325021133&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed on 12 December 2023).



© 2024 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)