

The Legend of Luo Xiaohei: Is It an Attempt of Crossing the Comfort Zone for Chinese Animation?

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The theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is a “blockbuster” made by domestic animated films in 2019, but it only costs 300 million yuan at the box office, which is not commensurate with the excellent reputation of the IP. Although *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* created this hot intellectual property (IP) through a series of dramas, the theater version failed miserably when it crossed the two comfort zones of instant noodles and fans to it: Its plot rhythm was slow, and its content was not full enough, so it was difficult to enrich it for a longer time than the series; it is difficult to support the content of the film which should be more complex than the drama because of its poor characterization and improper arrangement of plot content; the way of expounding its world outlook and theme is difficult to be accepted by the majority of the audience, and the unreasonable early publicity also makes it difficult to expand the audience. Combined with this case, this paper tries to discuss the development mode of animation IP based on “launching theater version animation on the basis of original dramas,” and concludes that the development of overseas animation ip should improve the script according to the genre, make full use of media publicity, and avoid relying on fans’ economy.

Keywords: Chinese animation, Chinese animated films, IP development, animation screen writer

Introduction

Animation intellectual property (IP) is an important part of the IP industry. As one of the important modes of animation IP development, “launching theater animation on the basis of original dramas” is in the ascendant in China. In recent years, many original domestic animation IP have sprung up, which has been supported and encouraged by a large number of audiences. Many production teams are ready to move the story to the cinema screen, and *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* has also made an attempt as a heavyweight IP. It firstly appeared on the network platform in the form of drama, and quickly gained a large number of fans. It scored 9.6 points in Douban and ranked first in the ranking of Chinese animation with a score of 9.9 points in station B. The theater version was released in 2019, but it only ended with a dismal box office of 311 million yuan. Looking at other domestic animated films in recent years, such as “NeZha” (4.8 billion yuan), “the return of the great sage” (956 million yuan), “crabapple” (565 million yuan), and the sharp contrast between the public praise and the box office of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is astonishing. It provides an enlightening case to point out the way for the National IP development mode of “launching theater version animation on the basis of original dramas”.

What is the Comfort Zone of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*?

The Plot is Simple And the Rhythm is Slow

As a bubble noodle opera, *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* has grasped the characteristics of this genre and successfully transformed it into its own advantages. The plot of paomianfan is not complicated, which coincides with the screenwriter Mu Mu's idea of "no routine" and "natural", making *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* keep a slow narrative. The first eight words of the drama are all about *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*'s daily life after he was adopted, and the ninth one begins to enter the main line of adventure. Even in the key plot and even the fight play, there are a lot of funny jokes and cute plots, making the plot always relaxed. This is undoubtedly precious for the audience struggling in the fast-paced life today: after busy, it's a pleasant experience to calm down and open an episode of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* to enjoy the lovely little black cat and be amused by the jokes.

Unique Painting Style, Highlighting the Characters

Instant noodles pay attention to eye-catching innovation, while the painting style of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is distinctive, using abstract way to weaken the shadow. The tone of shadow free picture is not complex mixed color, but simple monochrome. This unique shadow free painting can enrich the body language of the characters, show the fierce fighting scenes incisively and vividly, and fit with the fresh and pure tone of the film. Moreover, *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* deliberately uses thick lines to draw edges, simplifying facial lines, clothing wrinkles and other details, making the characters cuter. Compared with countless dramas with similar painting style, *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* can undoubtedly stand out with its painting style and leave a deep impression on the audience.

There are Many Easter Egg for Entertainment

Instant noodle belongs to fast-food animation, which requires stimulation and entertainment. *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* buries a lot of Easter egg in the plot. For example, three supporting roles are based on the prototype of "Mousse", "Tan Jiu", and "Old Xian", members of "Muxing Society", a well-known Chinese original cartoon team. The playful words "urge the watcher to die" are written on the details, such as water spray, power poles, and corners of buildings, which make the creator talk with the audience through the works. It is dazzling and gives visual stimulation. While watching the feature film, the audience also needs to spare energy to look for the Easter egg, and exchange and discuss with the netizens, so as to get the excitement of finding the truth and the pleasure of resonating.

Take the Secondary Group as the Core of Fans

The Legend of Luo Xiaohei is a fan drama. Although the image of "Luo Xiaohei" is popular all over the country, or appears on the Internet as an expression pack and signature file, or on various surrounding areas, and can be familiar to most people, only the so-called "two-dimensional group" really belongs to the core fans of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*.

Most of the stalks and Easter egg used in *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* have strong secondary color. If you don't understand them, it's difficult to taste humor, which greatly reduces the viewing experience. It's like a thick barrier, which keeps the loyal fans of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* in the inner circle and carries out a "Chinese animation's self Carnival". At the same time, it blocks the passers-by fans out, and lacks the attraction enough to encourage them to understand deeply. The theatrical version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is just a key attempt to break this barrier and bring in more and more audiences.

The Failure of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei's* Crossing the Comfort Zone and Its Reasons

Unfortunately, this attempt did not succeed. Even if *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* inherits the world outlook of Fanju and the two main roles of “Luo Xiaohei” and “Wu Xian”, it does not inherit the high popularity of Fanju. The reason is that although *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei's* theatrical version and Fanju are both animations, there are great differences in various aspects. If we do not see the differences and make adjustments, but copy the experience of Fanju, failure is inevitable.

The Rhythm of the Plot is Slow and the Content is not Full

Some people say that the theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is like a road movie, because the movie tells about Luo Xiaohei and “Wu Xian” travel from 21 minutes to 59 minutes. From the sea to the countryside and then to the city, Luo Xiaohei’s emotion towards “infinity” has changed from hostility to dependence: He is forced to be displaced because of the destruction of nature by human beings, so he hates all human beings, but finds that “infinity” as human beings is not bad. Therefore, he began to change his view, thinking about the relationship between good and evil, thus, introducing the key plot 59 minutes later.

However, this one-third journey of the film is as boring as white water, with little effective information, and a large number of daily life fragments lacking substantive content. This kind of fragment is very common in *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei's* dramas, but each episode of the dramas has only five minutes on average, just like snacks and desserts. A small amount of it is appropriate. However, the 101 minute theater version takes 38 minutes to repeat this kind of routine, which has not entered the theme for a long time. The theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is not so much a road movie as a landscape movie, but after all, the audience cannot just be satisfied with the picture and music. In the long and meaningless plot, the expectation will only be scattered, and the negative evaluation will come with emptiness and boredom.

The Characterization is Thin and the Plot Content is not Arranged Properly

The characters of paomianfan tend to be flat characters, but the theater version cannot be satisfied to attract people’s attention by a few labeled personality characteristics, but requires the full core of the characters to be deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. But as the protagonist of the theater version, Luo Xiaohei’s character is as white as paper, and his initiative is weak, and his internal and external contradictions are poor. The important role of “Wu Xian” has no characteristics, can always easily solve difficulties, and is always indifferent, lacking the struggle and growth to attract readers.

In the aspect of plot, the idea of “randomness” can reflect the unique personal style in the five minute drama, but if it is used in the creation of the theater version, it will become the ignorance and fearlessness who ignores the creation rules. Instead of “not playing the routine”, it will fall into a bigger routine. The theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is simple and ordinary. You can basically guess the end when you see the beginning, but as long as you make the details humorous or moving, you can still move the audience. It’s a pity that when the well tried “two-dimensional” stem of the drama cannot be used, the theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* also exposes the poor skill of making funny points from wood. For example, during their journey, the funny story of “Luo Xiaohei’s escape or resistance” is captured by “Wu Xian” has been repeated no less than ten times! The routine has not changed at all, and the conflict has not intensified at all. After making people laugh several times before, there is endless embarrassment and fatigue.

The character’s emotion develops with the plot, and the simplicity of the plot will affect the shaping of the emotional line. Luo Xiaohei’s emotional change of “Wu Xian” can be summarized as “lasting love”, but the

depiction of the plot lacks moving details and the subsequent sense of substitution, so the audience will not be moved by their later deep friendship. *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*'s theatrical edition has undoubtedly failed in all aspects of becoming an excellent work.

The Exposition of World Outlook is Unreasonable and the Theme is not Profound and Appropriate

The Legend of Luo Xiaohei's world outlook is full of fantasy with Chinese characteristics, and has special settings, such as "spiritual space", which needs to be explained. However, in the theater version, the setting of world outlook basically depends on the direct explanation of roles, which is rather rigid and difficult for many non-animation, comic, and game (ACG) audience groups to quickly understand. Therefore, many audiences commented that they did not understand it very well.

There are two themes in the theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*. The first is "it is difficult to distinguish between good and evil". The theater version has a good explanation, but this dialectical proposition is too common to be profound. Due to the plot defects, *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* does not present the speculative process of this proposition well, so it is impossible for the theater version to add points on the theme. The other is that "man and nature should live in harmony", but as one side of the contradiction, the image of man in the film is quite one-sided. At the beginning, the theater version only shows the "evil behavior" of human beings in destroying nature, which provides motivation for Luo Xiaohei to hate human beings. After that, it describes the harmony and beauty of human society, forces Luo Xiaohei to change his ideas, and does not discuss the two behaviors of human beings in "destroying nature" and "developing civilization", let alone explain how human beings should strike a balance between the two. There is a grand theme, but no in-depth thinking, so that the credibility of the film and the sense of substitution significantly reduced, it is difficult to withstand more attention.

Early Publicity is not in Place

Before the launch of the theater version, *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* was well known in the forefront of Chinese animation in the country, and its fans were sticky enough. However, due to the lack of publicity, the dissemination of the theater version was still limited, and there were problems in the trailer stage: the amount of information was seriously insufficient, it was just a show off of the screen and soundtrack, and the audience could not even know what the theater version said after watching it, Being extremely unfriendly to passers-by foreshadows the failure of the theatrical version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*.

Enlightenment

Improve the Script by Combining Genre Characteristics

Fanju, in a narrow sense, is an animated TV series, with 12 or 24 episodes in a season. Most of the dramas are related to each episode. One episode tells a small part of the story and one season tells a complete story. Theater version of the animation is usually 90-120 minutes long, tells a complete story. With the development of the film industry, series films allow creators to narrate in a longer space, but a film still needs a relatively complete structure.

Although both Fanju and theater animation belong to the same category of animation, their creation focuses are different due to their different duration and playing methods. In the original drama based on the release of theater version of animation, we need to pay attention to the difference between the two, and change the production method. In the aspect of plot rhythm, theater version animation usually needs three act structure,

which is composed of four progressive major scenes, namely, the incentive event at the beginning and the climax of the first act, the second act, and the third act, so that the rhythm is not only gentle, but also boring and not too compact, which makes it difficult for the audience to digest information. In the aspect of plot fullness, the theater version of the animation plot needs at least “start—inherit—turn—turn—combine” to have sufficient content to support the whole huge narrative. In the aspect of characterization, theater animation should pay more attention to portraying characters than drama, otherwise the thin characters are easy to be magnified under the effect of time. In the aspect of plot content arrangement, due to the need to show the story to the audience in a continuous period of time, the requirements of theater version animation will be higher than that of Fanju. One episode of Fanju is unsatisfactory, and many episodes follow to make up for the defects. If something goes wrong in the movie, it will destroy the rhythm and logical structure of the whole story. In terms of world outlook and theme elaboration, the theater version of animation should be adjusted according to the situation of the drama and its own positioning.

Establish a New Media Matrix to Fully Publicize

Due to the small number of domestic animation fans, they usually like to watch Fanju on Websites with strong “two-dimensional” flavor, such as Station B. However, if theater animation wants to expand the audience, it should not be satisfied with propaganda on such Websites and micro-blogs with obvious information cocoon phenomenon, but should cooperate with major authoritative news media to explore potential audience groups, Tiktok should also fully realize the important role of trailers in film marketing, create trailers with intent, and create momentum on new media platforms, such as jitter, Kwai, and so on, and use network media matrix to occupy a larger public opinion field to achieve a wider, lasting and three-dimensional effect.

Recognize the Fan Economy and Broaden our Horizons

Works of art have the freedom to choose their goals, not all of them have to step out of the original fan group, but the goal of the production team of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is to be recognized by more audiences. Director Mu Mu said, “In fact, in the early stage of the creation of the theatrical version of the story of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*, the orientation is not for fans. Our works always start from the story—how to tell a good story.” Since the positioning is for the public, we should be ready to step out of the comfort zone.

However, the theater version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* has obvious defects when it crosses the comfort zone: slow rhythm; The plot is dull; The way of expounding world outlook is improper; The theme has logical problems; The tendency of creative self satisfaction is serious; Insufficient publicity and distribution; and stay in the comfort zone, blind, too much trust in the consumption of fans.

The word “fan” is easy to say, but the operation of “fan economy” is not so simple. Fan economy is a double-edged sword. While gaining traffic and momentum, fans’ radical actions will also hurt IP. Whenever someone raises an objection to the theatrical version of *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*, brain powder will label it as “don’t want the development of Chinese animation”, or argue that “*The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* is an easy healing work and should not be asked to learn business routines”, so many viewers who may become fans leave disappointedly in a piece of abuse. What is worrying is that the production team of “*The Legend of Luo Xiaohei*” was blinded by the fans and failed to realize its own limitations. In response to the dispute between fans and bad critics, the director said on Weibo: “What you like is a domestic first-class animated theater version. It doesn’t need sympathy. Don’t worry about the box office. I’ve got it back. The sequel and the second one have

been arranged (cheers here)” There is full of self-confidence between the lines, but I don’t know that “Chinese animation” is not an excuse for not wanting to make progress, and “cure” and “relax” are not a shame cover for the boring plot. It’s better to set up a sense of crisis, step out of the comfort zone and open your eyes to other really excellent works than to be conceited in the crowd of fans.

Conclusion

The success of one link in IP development does not mean the success of other links. We should pay attention to the requirements of different links for excellent works, and step out of the comfort zone in order to achieve overall success. In addition, Chinese animation IP development is also faced with an additional task: away from fans to the public. Now that the hot IP has been created through the original drama, the theater version should try to step out of the original fan group and further expand the audience. Fans to animation should not be resisted, but its development time is not mature. In China, as a kind of minority art form, it has just started to develop. Compared with being complacent, it needs to be committed to attracting the attention of more non fans to promote Chinese animation. And only through the attempt of more meta vision, Chinese animation can further develop and mature. As long as animation creators work hard in their works to avoid becoming a frog in the well, Chinese fans will naturally come into being. Therefore, the comfort zone that Chinese animation wants to cross not only refers to the transition from one genre to another in the process of IP development, but also the transition from fans to popularization. The authors hope that other Chinese animation can learn from *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* and successfully cross the comfort zone.

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