

## ***Using the ‘Candle in the Tomb’ Fandom as an Example and Explain Its Associated Behaviours and Values***

Huailei Wen, University of Southampton, United Kingdom

The Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2022  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

In recent years, IP films and their fans have received increasing attention. Every film adaptation of an IP work has fans' support, which actively spreads information. Fans have created their own discourse space in virtual communities, producing a reasonably close-knit social group, thanks to the development of mobile internet technology and the relative democratisation of information. *Candle in the Tomb*, One of China's most iconic internet adaptations, has been a massive hit with fans since its release. From the film adaptation to its dissemination, *Candle in the Tomb's* fan base has contributed significantly, presenting a powerfully productive and creative force. This paper will analyse film fans in three main parts: the generation of film fans, film fans' behaviour, and fans' values. Firstly, by analysing the generation of the film's fans, we can understand how *Candle in the Tomb* resonates with its fans and its impact on them. Secondly, the analysis of film fan behaviour allows further exploration of how films interact with fans and the significance of film fans' behaviour. Finally, through an analysis of fan values, the relationship between fans and the constructed film text is explored to summarise the deeper meanings between film and fans.

Keywords: *Candle in the Tomb*, Fandom, IP Film

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

In recent years, IP films and their fans have received increasing attention. Every film adaptation of an IP work has fans' support, which actively spreads information. Fans have created their own discourse space in virtual communities, producing a reasonably close-knit social group, thanks to the development of mobile internet technology and the relative democratisation of information (Guo, 2017). Under the Internet environment, fan groups are progressively becoming "consumers of production, disseminators of consumption, and producers of communication" in all phases of production, dissemination, and consumption (Yan & Lee). *Candle in the Tomb*, One of China's most iconic internet adaptations, has been a massive hit with fans since its release. From the film adaptation to its dissemination, *Candle in the Tomb's* fan base has contributed significantly, presenting a powerfully productive and creative force. Fans of *Candle in the Tomb* as an online adaptation have emerged and grown from internet platforms and multiple social media connections and have become an inevitable and negligible sample of the community. This paper will explore the behaviours and values displayed by *Candle in the Tomb* fans, using literature research and case studies. This paper will analyse film fans in three main parts: the generation of film fans, film fans' behaviour, and fans' values. Firstly, by analysing the generation of the film's fans, we can understand how *Candle in the Tomb* resonates with its fans and its impact on them. Secondly, the analysis of film fan behaviour allows further exploration of how films interact with fans and the significance of film fans' behaviour. Finally, through an analysis of fan values, the relationship between fans and the constructed film text is explored to summarise the deeper meanings between film and fans.

### The impact of *Candle in the Tomb* on fan generation

IP is short for Intellectual Property and refers to innovative products with intellectual property rights, and IP films are adaptations of copyrighted creative works (Gong & Huang, 2017). Based on the online novel of the same name, the *Candle in the Tomb* (Pinyin: *Gui Chuideng*) has gained a huge fan following since its release. One of the most significant features of its fandom as an IP adaptation is the *Interpellation*. Intermediation is a concept based on intertextuality. Intermediation means that a text is quoted, reconstructed and added to another text, mainly by imitating the formal features of the original work (Ljungberg, 2010). The *Candle in the Tomb* mimics the original's artistic form and narrative structure to the greatest extent possible, drawing on and exploiting the large fan base that had already been acquired prior to the film adaptation through emotional empathy (Xiao, 2021). This kind of transformation from the original work, with love or even fascination for the original work, forms a complex participatory culture and a more independent circle of fans of the medium around the original work, here called fans of the original.

Secondly, *Candle in the Tomb*, one of the films in the series, has, since its release, shaped a fantasy view independent of the natural world through how the various branches have remained consistent in title, theme and style. Regarding serialisation, Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues that film sequels prompt audiences to read across texts self-reflexively and that sequels are responses to earlier works that also evoke audiences to reread or reread or reread or reread or reread rewrite their memories of previous texts (Jess-Cooke, 2009). In the simultaneous engagement with past and present texts, the viewer notices the dialogue between the sequel and its predecessor and constructs mutual meaning (reenactment). This interconnectedness is unique to *Candle in the Tomb* fans in that each work has a unique symbolic meaning, and it is impossible to ignore the critical role of the previous texts in

influencing the production of the later ones. The *Candle in the Tomb* franchise locks in or limits audiences, often preventing potential audiences from joining in unless they are willing to start with the narrative (Beaty, 2016). Those who follow the movie and become fascinated by its narrative are called roadies fans.

Regardless of the type of fan, the Tomb series, as a subculture, has limited space to survive in China. As fans of Tomb content find it difficult to gain respect and satisfaction in real life, the Tomb film series provides an exclusive arena for them to aggregate individuals. According to Bourdieu's field theory, society is a large field, the workplace is a subfield, and the fan community is a new subfield; Individuals change roles in these fields according to their capital (Bourdieu, 1998). When the capital they have in one field is not sufficient for their identity, they switch roles to gain capital in another field to obtain their identity.

With the support of the mobile internet, the Tomb series has opened up a space of discourse that belongs to Tomb fans. Take *Baidu Tieba*, one of China's community platforms, for example, where the 'Candle in the Tomb bar' was first posted in 2006 and has gathered over 623,000 users and nearly 3.86 million posts to date (9 May 2022). The bar owner (screen name "I love Candle in the Tomb") categorises the community's content into videos, bar owners' recommendations, original novels, film and television, and gossip stories for fans to choose from. Fans can use their initiative in the fan community to gain capital and control more resources and initiatives. When a poster named "Tianxia Changba" (the novel's author is named Tianxia Bachang) shared his understanding of the novel in the bar, fans in the community responded with "yes", "It is good," and "top it up" were the positive responses from the community. Individuals gain a sense of belonging by participating in the fan community and achieving self-identity and satisfaction. Through community integration and individual participation, to some extent, the Tomb series of films aggregates audiences from different media fields and establishes a successful contact (Li, 2020).

### **Analysis of fan behaviours in the Tomb movies**

From Michel de Certeau to Henry Jenkins, the dynamic power of the viewer/consumer/reader/fan is well recognised, but the overemphasis on the fan's identity as the producer has also led to the neglect of the fan consumer. John Fiske suggests that the appropriation of texts by fans is an act of final consumption but never a clean separation of the two (Jenkins, 2012). In a transmedia system characterised by an IP-centric fan economy, fans are consumers and producers (Gong & Huang, 2017). These remind us that fan groups need to see fans as both consumers and producers, and thus the fan groups of the Tomb films will be studied through a dichotomous approach in this paper.

#### **(1) Fan base as a consumer**

Fans have different text consumption habits from the general public, and they are keen on peripheral product purchases. The term peripheral is used in the Japanese ACG industry for derivative products and is a more popular term among the fan community (Chu & Wang, 2017). Licensing peripheral products as merchandise is one of the most basic and vital ways to develop and realise consumer IP products (Zhang, 2021). Firstly, as an independent IP film brand, *Candle in the Tomb* has an emotional value to fans that other products do not. As IP derivatives echo the film's content, fans' purchase of preferred IP consumer derivatives is not a simple commercial purchase but rather another form of emotional expression and life-affirming implantation of their favourite IP (Zhang, 2021). It is a form of curatorial

consumption, i.e. the purchase and collection of all objects related to the objects they love. It changes the transient nature of culture and makes it a lasting and fulfilling cultural practice (Jenkins, 2012).

Secondly, when fans as individuals choose the text of the Tomb, they become part of the social space of the fan community. Social space can be seen as a symbolic space - a space constituted by social groups with different social forms, where the habits and tastes of the actors become a sign of class distinction (Bourdieu, 1998). For the sub-culture of Tomb fans, spatial compartmentalisation can create a sense of isolation within them, and Tomb's IP products provide a link to their identity. In the *Baidu Tieba* community, Tomb fans often post about their recent purchases, and fans within the community tend to be more enthusiastic about replying to posts that are iconic than the average post.

In addition to this, the consumption of Tomb IP peripherals can reinforce its fan identity. In contemporary capitalist societies, there is necessarily an ordered relationship between a set of consumer goods, in which the fundamental dominant factor is the symbolic value (style, prestige and position of power) created by the symbolic discourse suggestively (Baudrillard, 2016). Familiarity with works and possession of peripheral products are expressions of fan cultural capital, such as clothing, artefacts, dolls and accessories bearing the characters and logos of Tomb characters are symbols of fan identity. These symbols representing the group make members feel connected to the collective, while those filled with a sense of collective solidarity respect the symbols extraordinarily (Collins, 2012).

## **(2) Fan base as a producer**

Tomb film fans are already more than simply consumers of media texts; they are a group of people brought together by an emotional connection to the same object, connected by a common love. Fans are a creatively productive group. Because of their over-interpretation and emotional investment in popular culture, fans voluntarily add their own emotions and will to the original text, actively producing and creating text from it, i.e. fans are textually productive (Fiske, 2010). Fans of Tomb films obtain the original text, process it and produce products with a specific cultural meaning, using their technical approach and means of thinking. For example, there are various other products, such as spin-offs of the IP series, fan-drawn comics and derivative products. (Figure 1) Fans analyse the original text to form a knowledge community and make bold predictions and speculations about the film based on their basic knowledge. For example, a fan named 'rednosegod' in *Baidu Tieba* analysed the future of the film and what the protagonist might face in the future by depicting the cave space himself (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Fan-drawn cartoons based on the characters within *Baidu Tieba*

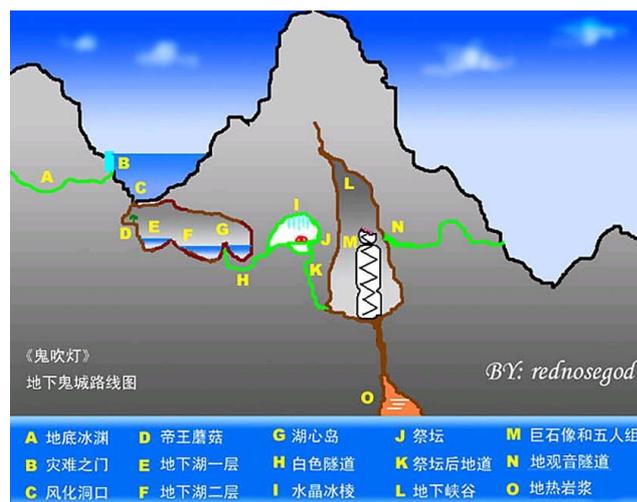


Figure 2: Fan-drawn structure within *Baidu Tieba* based on the original

Fans of the Tomb series are adept at sharing and creating their own emotions within the group. Ling Yang describes it as a kind of fan economy, where fans uniquely present their love for their idols or media texts and participate in fan group practices such as fan fiction, fan-made videos, and classical fan analysis. Fans spend time and effort creating their works and selflessly share and disseminate them as gifts to the group's fans, building their own identity and gaining recognition from the group members in their way, while fans can also enjoy the excellent texts created by other members of the group, further extending and deepening their emotional connection with their idols or media texts (Yang, 2015). The highly prolific video creator *bilibili.com* is home to many fans of Tomb content production. (Figure 3) These fans can be broadly divided into two categories, those who narrate the film's story characters and those who narrate the original story. Of these, the original story narrations make up the majority. They refer to the content of the film to introduce the original story. There are also many fans of the character "Pangzi" in *Baidu Tieba* who are loyal viewers of the main series and have produced several high-performance compilations of the character and a series of popularisations of other characters. (Figure 4) The secondary creation of the tomb film distinguishes film fans as producers from the general audience, and Jenkins argues that while this is a form of cultural poaching, the participatory reading of fans embodies interconnected processes of discussion that extend the textual experience and go beyond initial consumption (Jenkins, 2012). Excellent texts created by fans can also be commercially exploited if businesses see them, thus converting them into tangible economic capital. This in-group sharing and social media operation also contribute to the widespread promotion of IP films, achieving a win-win situation for both parties (Wang & Yang, 2020).



Figure 3: Video analysis by fandom on *bilibili.com*



Figure 4: Fans on *Baidu Tieba* list characters of the same movie character from different films

### The battle for sovereignty over the text of the film by fans of the original

In his study of fan culture, Jenkins introduced the concept of "participatory culture", which refers to a fan culture in which fans are connected in a free, equal and openly shared way (Jenkins, 2012). This theoretical connotation coincides with the spirit of the Internet, and it is on the Internet that participatory fan culture is developed. By actively creating media texts and disseminating media content on the Internet, Tomb IP fans strengthen the interactivity between online interactions, and this strengthened interaction feeds Tomb IP fan culture to produce meaning more actively and efficiently. However, there are also complex interactions between fans that are both unified and conflicting, leading to the shifting of boundaries between different fan groups and the changing and reconfiguring of the identities of multiple fan communities (Phillips, 2011). Original fans have a contentious relationship with the author of the film over ownership of the text and interpretation of meaning. Usually, the reader (the original fan) is always in a passive defensive position, accepting the meanings prescribed by the authority (the producer), and any deviation from the meanings prescribed and limited by the producer is negatively evaluated (Guo, 2017). However, in the state of IP franchising, the status of the fan as a producer should be repositioned (Bowrey, 2011).

The above section divides the production of fans of the Tomb films into original fans and passerby fans, who have higher emotional loyalty and textual expectations of the film texts than passerby fans (Benyon, 2020). Fans of the original are inevitably drawn to the adaptation because they were the first to encounter the original plot. Because of their emotional value, fans of the original (including the original author) want to see the specific plot as accurate to the original author as possible when they encounter the adaptation to meet their inner expectations. Therefore, the author of an IP film needs to make it part of the film's operation to accommodate the expectations of the original fans and legitimise the film's interpretation (Guo, 2017). The core competency of Tomb IP films is content. When the fans of the original are not satisfied (usually when the adaptation is far from the original content), they will rebel

out of their desire to preserve the original image in their minds, and this emotion will be expressed through externalisation (Gong & Huang, 2017).

A significant part of the fan base of IP movies adapted from online novels is influenced by opinion leaders originating from the fan base, namely the authors themselves (Wang & Yang, 2020). Thus, for a tomb film series adapted from an online IP, it faces a complex relationship between the creator of the film, the fans of the original and the author, who plays with the space of the work (text). The tomb series of films creates a space for fans of the original to have an equal dialogue. Jenkins' theory of 'poaching' pushes the reader and the author into an unprecedented tension. Here, there is a constant struggle for ownership and control of the meaning of the text. Any text is waiting for the reader to give it meaning, and any reader, through his or her own discursive and aesthetic experience, will establish a framework before reading it and match and screen it in the process (Jenkins, 2012). Both fans of the original and the author of the film (one of the original fans) are seen here as poaching. In essence, they are on the same equal footing, but the equality between fans is broken when this poaching is re-sold as a product to the original fans through cultural processing by the author of the film. The power imbalance has led to resistance from fans of the original Tomb film and a struggle over the text, which has been discussed on the Chinese social media platforms *Baidu*, *Douban* and *Zhihu*. Fans of the Tomb IP movies have used the status label "having read the original" to denounce the authors of the movies, creating a strategic atmosphere of "respect for the original".

Michel de Certeau suggests that strategies are characterised by a unified subject of power, an exclusive site that can be defined and thus clearly distinguished from the 'other', the 'outside', by establishing what he calls 'enemy-versus-us relations' (Certeau, 2009). Here, fans of the original Tomb series do not embody traditional readers' nomadic, tactical identity but rather drive out the poachers by forming a solid territory with the original authors as the core of their combined efforts. Their relationship with the original authors is not one of textual poaching or strategic resistance but rather self-empowerment in a cross-media migration. Fans of the original (self-perceived) share the identity resources of the original and thus have a certain sense of authority or even the power to question the adapted text in place of the author of the original. For fans of the original Tomb IP series, their self-perceived status has been transformed across media platforms, hence the competition for the film's text. In many tomb movies, the writers always use "we have restored the original" as a selling point, after which a "high degree of restoration" is highlighted as the core point of publicity. In this ritual of empowerment, fans, as a highly engaged audience, have begun to consciously rebel against the centralised media system, advocating "decentralisation", dismantling and reshaping the official discourse, and finding a breakthrough for their consumer behaviour. As fans of the originals contend with the authors of the films, fans are aware of their growing position as subjects of power. They are increasingly eager to form checks and balances in their communication with the creative company and to escape from the central discourse of the higher communication subjects.

The phenomenon of textual battles for fans of the original also occurs in the struggle with other films, such as *The Lost Tomb*, a series of IP adaptations similar to the *Candle in the Tomb*. Due to the similarity of their subject matter, they are often the focus of fan arguments. Fans of *Candle in the Tomb*'s original film argue that the character "Pangzi" in *The Lost Tomb*'s film is not found in the original and that it copied *Candle in the Tomb*'s text for the sake of narrative richness. On the public social media platform Weibo, fans of *Candle in the Tomb* have responded strongly to fans of *The Lost Tomb*, citing various evidence and even

some crude language. Fans of the original *Candle in the Tomb* share a joint psychological base - an identity. The 'resistant identity', which constructs the subjectivity of the self/group by confronting the other, has the powerful function of drawing boundaries, and the 'distinction' can often lead directly to the formation of a community (Castells, 2011). The Tomb IP fan community has consolidated its status as a fan construct and identity while being united. In the context of the Internet-based culture of fan participation, fans of the original have re-established their position of power in their interaction with society through commentary, questioning and opinion-led participation.

## **The values and impact of the film**

### **(1) Export of Chinese culture**

As an IP film, *The Tomb* is one of the products of China's strategic layout of production upgrading in the Internet+ era in recent years (Li, 2020). Chinese IP films are becoming a powerful tool for building cultural identity internally and enhancing cultural communication externally as a film genre with a large fan base. Although the "Tomb" genre is characterised by fantasy, thriller and spooky aesthetics, it is rooted in the ancient mysterious cultural system of the Eastern peoples. In *Candle in the Tomb*, the author of the novel, Tianxia BaChang, has created a world of tomb raiding represented by the four schools of tomb raiders, namely *Mojin*, *Xieling*, *Faqiu* and *Banshan*, and a discourse system and *Jianghu* full of mystery, which provides a unique Chinese culture and Chinese spirit, and is expressed in a unique form of Chinese cinematic aesthetics (Zhang, 2019). It is expressed in an aesthetic form of Chinese cinema. Tomb IP fans who identify with the film's content will, over time, subconsciously identify with the culture. At the same time, the widespread of fans on the Internet creates a solid promotional environment for the Tomb IP. With a solid fan base and high-frequency IP, the IP film's fame and impact will grow quickly, creating the groundwork for the promotional brand and culture's success. Chinese IP films draw creative inspiration from traditional culture and real life to achieve value in farming and cultural confidence (Li, 2018). In a way, Tomb movies strengthen the confidence of Chinese fans in their own culture and the spread of Chinese culture.

### **(2) Entertainment-heavy consumer environment**

The Internet is anonymous. With the anonymity of the Internet, the public can become less self-aware and not want to be held accountable for their actions (Christopherson, 2007). In being channelled, the Tomb fans are constantly enjoying the little things that turn the court of public opinion into an irrational crusade in the wave of entertainment revelry. In the constructed fan communities, some netizens follow the trend of cathartic expression of personal emotions without question of right or wrong. Their limited attention is attracted by the generalised information, blurring the boundaries between primary and secondary, public and private, light and heavy, and leaving their minds numb and incapable of thinking. The development of the Tomb IP movie stems from the love of online fans, which may lead some of them to overindulge in the virtual online community, and the entertaining online space then becomes an environment for them to grow, vent their emotions and find faith.

At the same time, Xinyun Jiang and other scholars have analysed that IP positively impacts consumers' utilitarian and hedonistic values in their articles (Jiang, 2022). IP films, as fan films, are a symbolic cultural consumption product that uses film as a vehicle to cater to and satisfy fans' excessive consumption of their idols by using the gimmick of entertainment

icons crossing over to be the creators of films. Due to the frenzied consumption of fans, an IP industry chain is being constructed based on the co-development and integration of multiple domains of the Internet and mobile networks (Yan & Lee, 2021). Tomb fans may buy Tomb IP-related products in large quantities out of a need for identity and emotional projection. In consumption, the fan community and IP derivatives become their spiritual anchor. The industrial operation of the Tomb IP and the consumption habits of fans to satisfy their identity cooperate, to some extent causing damage to the psychology and economy of fans, and even other irrational consumption behaviours such as some fans not eating to save money to raise funds to vote in the charts.

## Conclusion

*Candle in the Tomb* has become one of the popular texts in China as a result of its unique model of creating separate worlds through IP adaptations. Through an analysis of the value orientation of the behaviour of Tomb IP fans, this paper argues that the Internet has provided a vast space for IP fans to participate, resulting in the formation of diverse fan communities. Tomb fans analyse and exchange their reading experiences in the online community and spread the word about the products they generate. Tomb fans gradually develop a strong sense of belonging and identity in their time with the fan community, becoming a powerful group. No matter how much emphasis is placed on the productive nature of fans as transitory consumers in popular culture studies, fan identity is always tied to consumption, and fans' textual consumption and textual production together constitute their fan identity. The act of purchasing gives the fan consumer a sense of satisfaction on a psychological level while strengthening the connection between the individual fan and the community. This sense of belonging to an organisation can, to some extent, create an emotional resonance with the fan base and deepen the bond between fans and the original work. As a series of films adapted from the original, the behaviour displayed by Tomb fans is inevitably linked to the author of the original. A text that is not linked to the original cannot be circulated and accepted by the fan community, leading to a series of rebellions from fans. Under the egalitarian conditions of the Internet, Tomb fans have actively participated in building a community forming a unique aesthetic and have a strong desire for expression and practice, and are working to create an equal relationship of power with the film's author. The Tomb as a film adaptation connotes a distinctive Chinese culture, which is widely spread in the production and consumption of fans, deepening Chinese fans' identification with their own culture and cultural confidence. The economised properties of IP adaptations bring excessive commercialisation to Tomb fans. The cult of entertainment on the Internet has become a meaningful way to express their feelings and meanings, conveying false values in the constant construction of individual identities. At the same time, the above summary in this paper is articulated around a sample of fans on public Internet platforms and does not give a good overview of fan communities on some private social software, so it is difficult to have a comprehensive analysis of the behaviour of ancient tomb fans. Overall, IP adaptations cannot be made without the support of fans. The analysis of *Candle in the Tomb* fans' behaviour provides a preliminary basis for further exploring the development of IP adaptations and how to maintain the relationship between fans properly.

## Bibliography

- Baudrillard, J. (2016). *The consumer society: Myths and structures*. Sage.
- Benyon, A. (2020). Affective fidelity and schadenfreude: Fans and the adaptation of Game of Thrones' Red Wedding. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 8(2), 185–200.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (M. Li, Trans.). Central Party Literature Press.
- Bowrey, K. (2011). The new intellectual property: Celebrity, fans and the properties of the entertainment franchise. *Griffith Law Review*, 20(1), 188–220.
- Castells, M. (2011). *The power of identity* (14). John Wiley & Sons.
- Christopherson, K. M. (2007). The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog". *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23(6), 3038–3056.
- Fiske, J. (2010). *Understanding popular culture*. Routledge.
- Gong, L., & Huang, Y. (2017). *A SWOT Analysis of Tomb IP Movies Under the Background of Internet Plus*. 330–336.
- Guo, N. (2017). IP movies and fan culture. *Broadcasting Realm*, 3, 76–79.
- Guocong, L. (2018). The Transformation and Upgrading of Chinese IP Movie and the Deep Ploughing of Its Value. *Canadian Social Science*, 14(7), 28–34.
- Jenkins, H. (2012). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
- Jess-Cooke, C. (2009). *Film sequels: Theory and practice from Hollywood to Bollywood*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Jiang, X., Deng, N., Fan, X., & Jia, H. (2022). Examining the role of perceived value and consumer innovativeness on consumers' intention to watch intellectual property films. *Entertainment Computing*, 40, 100453.
- Li, J. (2020). The platformization of Chinese cinema: The rise of IP films in the age of internet+. *Asian Cinema*, 31(2), 203–218.
- Ljungberg, C. (2010). Intermedial strategies in multimedia art. *Media borders, multimodality and intermediality* ( 81–95). Springer.
- Phillips, T. (2011). When film fans become fan family: Kevin Smith fandom and communal experience. *Participations*, 8(2), 478–496.
- Sheu, J.-J., Chu, K.-T., & Wang, S.-M. (2017). The associate impact of individual internal experiences and reference groups on buying behavior: A case study of animations, comics, and games consumers. *Telematics and informatics*, 34(4), 314–325.

- Wang, L., & Yang, S. (2020). *Analysis on the Dissemination of Internet Novel IP (Intelligent Property) Dramas in the New Media Era*. 234–239.
- Xiao, Y. (2021). “Yesterday once more:” IP film, phantom/fandom of music, and the youthful (re) turn of Chinese cinema in the age of new digital media. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 15(1), 87–103.
- Yan, J., Lee, B. C., & Yun, T. (2021). A study on the elements of Chinese animation IP (intellectual property) development based on the pan-entertainment industry. *International Journal of Internet, Broadcasting and Communication*, 13(1), 168–179.
- Zhang, Y. (2021). *Disney IP Industry Development Strategy*. 215–218.

