

The Atypical Villain: A Study of the Complexity of Constructing the Villainous Image in the Film and Television Drama of Crime Crackdown Postprint

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Date: 2023-07-23T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

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Full Text

Preamble

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1 Introduction

As China’s rule of law continues to deepen and a socialist rule-of-law country is gradually built, numerous crime crackdown-themed films and television dramas have flooded the market, impressing audiences with their richly developed characters, intricate cases, and profound details. Paradoxically, the villains—who are supposed to represent “evil”—exhibit strong complexity, simultaneously wrapped in layers of “true love” and “goodness.” Consequently, like positive characters, they often resonate deeply with audiences and are even beloved.

This particular communication phenomenon challenges viewers' traditional perceptions and attitudes toward villainous characters. This raises critical questions: How can such villains, while taking “evil” as their main characteristic, also present positive qualities like “true love” and “friendship,” making them so intricate that they arouse special emotions in the audience? Does this blur the audience's perception of good and evil? This paper develops a study based on these questions.

2.1 A Review of Image Construction Research

The study of constructed images has a long history spanning multiple disciplines. In semiotics, American sociologist Goffman proposed the famous Dramaturgical Theory in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which compares life to a play in which individuals or groups perform to construct desired images in others' minds. Many fields in social life require image shaping and management: states must build images for external communication, cities cultivate unique image characteristics, specific professional groups (doctors, teachers, police officers, etc.) manage their public images, and individuals constantly maintain their self-presentation. This phenomenon has attracted significant academic attention, with scholars using character portrayal as a means to convey underlying ideas.

In *Study on the Construction and Changes of Chinese Images in Western Films and TV Dramas* (2020), Huang Ju examines how Western political demands and cultural export strategies evolved from initially demonizing Chinese characters to integrating Eastern elements that gradually rendered Chinese images more three-dimensional. In 2021, Tu Liuyu's *The Construction and Imbalance of Urban Women's Image in Female Narrative Urban Drama—Take “Nothing But Thirty” as an Example* analyzes how the drama's overly perfect construction of female images paradoxically objectifies women and reflects an implicit attachment to men, revealing imbalances in female narratives. Research specifically dedicated to villainous images includes Liu Ming's 2021 master's thesis *A Study on the Shaping of Villainous Characters in Pixar's Animated Films*, which summarizes the positioning, types, characteristics, and significance of villains in animation compared to live-action films, proposing suggestions for Chinese animated film creation such as breaking the single formula of “ugly” villains, focusing on creative expression of villains' behavioral motives, and promoting all-ages animation development. In 2020, Zhu Yakun's analysis of villain images in *The Avengers* film series particularly proposed constructing villain images through detailed portrayal and complete narrative, noting that villains possess powerful dramatic functions and contain unique narrative charm and aesthetic value.

2.2 Review of Vladimir Propp's Narrative Theory Research

In 1928, Propp published *Morphology of the Folktale*, proposing the famous “31 functions” theory, which argues that characters and plots are not the basic units of stories; rather, the functions carried by characters and plots constitute the fundamental structure. In 1996, Li Yang introduced Propp's structural function theory in his doctoral dissertation *Analysis of the Structural Form of Chinese Folk Tales*, analyzing 50 Chinese folk tales to identify common structures in indigenous Chinese stories. In 2014, Deng Miao explored the significance and limitations of Propp's research in *From Story Morphology to Storytelling—The Meaning, Dilemma and Way Out of Propp's Storytelling Theory*, proposing to shift research from story morphology to storytelling studies by establishing a holistic, humanistic storytelling theory grounded in specific folktales.

Against this theoretical background, Chinese scholar Lu Puling analyzes the relationships between character and structure, action and identity in *The Inspirational Significance of Propp's Functional Theory for Narrative Character Studies*, drawing inspirational significance for character studies from these three aspects. Propp's narrative theory is not only applicable to literary and folklore studies but also provides strong insight into plotting patterns in film and television works. In 2012, Zhang Chunlei, inspired by Propp's theory, creatively summarized six character roles and 13 functions of spy dramas in *Analysis on Popular Spy Dramas from the Perspective of Propp's Role-Structure*. In 2018, Rong Yu and Tang Haidong, in *The Narrative Characteristics of “Empresses in the Palace” from Propp's Story Morphology Narrative Theory*, divided *Empresses in the Palace* into three major sections: fighting with Consort Hua, fighting with the Empress, and fighting with the Emperor, selecting the “fighting with the Empress” section as a typical representative to fit the drama's characters into Propp's narrative role theory model and analyze its narrative structure, character role functions, and narrative mode.

In summary, few studies in the academic field analyze the construction of specific villain images in film and television dramas using Propp's narrative theory as a framework. Therefore, this paper employs textual analysis based on Propp's research results to examine the construction techniques and characteristics of complex villainous images in crime crackdown dramas. This approach also supplements the limitations of Propp's theory in the postmodern context, enriching image construction theory and offering suggestions for film and television drama character building.

3 A Study on the Shaping of the Character Gao Qiqiang in *The Knockout*

The characterization of Gao Qiqiang in *The Knockout* breaks previous patterns in crime crackdown-themed film and television dramas. His life trajectory and emotional experiences lend the character a vivid and palpable dimension that enables audience empathy with the battle between good and evil, weakening and

dissolving the traditional dichotomy of enemy camps. Therefore, Gao Qiqiang in *The Knockout* was selected for analysis.

3.1 Identity Shift Based on Image and Motivation

According to the author's rough statistics, nearly 80 named roles appear in *The Knockout*, each contributing to plot development. Analyzing these characters' role functions reveals that none deviate from the roles and narrative functions delineated by Propp; characters' roles merely shift according to different storylines. Gao Qiqiang exemplifies how strong character complexity arises from role changes, creating violent confrontation between "good and evil concepts" within the character. This section examines Gao Qiqiang as the main character through a typical episode to systematically analyze his complex moral shaping.

In the drama, Gao Qiqiang's brother Gao Qisheng wants to open a personal handy phone store but needs 25,000 yuan. Gao Qiqiang borrows money from Tang Xiaolong and Tang Xiaohu, learning that he can receive 20,000 yuan by helping Bai Jiangbo collect debts and beating Xu Lei, who owes money. Gao Qiqiang wants to refuse, but his brother refuses to abandon this opportunity to open a store and earn money, so he decides to help Bai Jiangbo. After Tang Xiaolong's investigation, Gao Qiqiang learns that Xu Lei and his friends are electro-fishing in the river. He plans to negotiate with Xu Lei first; however, when Gao Qiqiang unintentionally urinates on the electric fish generator by the river, Xu Lei is electrocuted to death. Terrified, Gao Qiqiang wipes off his fingerprints and flees the scene with the Tang brothers. Although this is an unintentional act, accidentally completing Bai Jiangbo's task provides him with 20,000 yuan in start-up funds to open the store.

In this incident, Gao Qiqiang's role transforms from "hero" to "villain" (see Table 1 and Table 2), but his "crime" is committed to "respond" to the needs of the "princess." Behind his atrocities representing "evil" lies the desire to help his brother fulfill his dream, change the Gao family's poor status, and bring his younger siblings a better life. His "evil deeds" are overlaid with love and care for his family. This role transformation, motivated by "goodness," creates a multi-dimensional villain image.

3.2 Breaking Through Traditional Roles to Shape a Three-Dimensional Image

From Propp's character naming conventions, "hero" and "princess" symbolize eternal justice, while the "villain" represents evil forces. In *The Knockout*, Gao Qiqiang is clearly the "villain" and An Xin the "hero," with the plot logically culminating in the hero's capture and punishment of the culprit—consistent with ethical and moral norms. However, many spectators unexpectedly showed sympathy and pity for Gao Qiqiang, reflecting certain limitations of Propp's narrative theory when detached from the specific narrative context of the story's macro-narrative universe.

According to the concept of “narrative transportation” proposed by American psychologists Green and Brock, the storyteller transmits cognitions, emotions, and attitudes into the narrative world, eventually reaching the audience, who then change their original perceptions and attitudes within the macro-narrative created by the narrator. Under the narrator’s strong narrative implication—that is, the tendency of character building—the audience generates emotional experiences of the story image.

Gao Qiqiang’s image is portrayed within this overall narrative universe. On one hand, he is a greedy man who built his business empire by any means necessary, showing no regard for innocent lives. On the other hand, he is also a gentle husband and loving father who maintains clear boundaries. He always smiles when facing his wife and never passes his business frustrations on to Chen Shuting. When Gao Qisheng reports to him about the interests of Zhong Asi, Bald Yong, and others, he instructs his brother to wait until his wife leaves before discussing business to avoid worrying her. He treats Lao Mo’s daughter Huang Yao like his own; when Huang Yao is kidnapped to a rooftop, he jumps over to save her, covered in blood, trying to exchange his life for his daughter’s safety. He strictly controls his subordinates’ activities, sternly prohibiting his brother and Tang Xiaolong from drug trafficking and explicitly forbidding the Gao family from accessing drugs. Even his initial motivation for crime was to support his brother’s dream of opening a personal handy phone store. Such narrative elements mix some “hero” qualities into his primary “villain” image, making his character more fleshed out beyond symbolic physical attributes. As Marx stated, “The essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each single individual; in its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.” From a macro perspective, Gao Qiqiang is not a pure, stereotypical good or bad person but rather the sum of all his surroundings and social relationships, making his image intertwined with good and evil, contradictory and complex.

3.3 Breaking Role Perception and Innovating Narrative Function

According to Propp, although stories feature wide varieties of characters and plots, they cannot be separated from a fixed narrative paradigm, and the number of their “functions” is very limited. Analyzing this particular genre of crime crackdown drama through *The Knockout*, this paper shifts Propp’s study framework from positive roles to center on the villain Gao Qiqiang, similarly summarizing the following 31 main functions of crime crackdown dramas:

Table 3 31 Main Functions of Crime Crackdown Drama

The table reveals the ups and downs of Gao Qiqiang’s life. Driven by his own desires and forced by the interests of his times, he transforms from a good, law-abiding person to someone who cannot turn back from the wrong path. The villainous figure of Gao Qiqiang implies a variety of functions that, upon specific analysis, also serve the function of motivating kindness, breaking the traditional villain image function model and making it a community where good and evil

intermingle.

4 Considering Villain Image Construction Based on Audience Attitude Toward Gao Qiqiang

The famous British novelist E.M. Forster divided characters into “flat” and “round” categories, with “round characters” referring to multi-faceted, nuanced characters. Gao Qiqiang represents such a “round character.” In this drama, his image is undoubtedly successful, attracting many viewers to discuss and recreate it. Various clip videos spread virally across the internet, triggering reflection on villain image construction.

4.1 Strictly Observing Moral Boundaries and Preventing the Spread of Negative Values

As a special medium of communication, film and television dramas can subconsciously transmit content, culture, and values to audiences. As mentioned above, audiences immersed in the narrative universe constructed by film and drama easily empathize with Gao Qiqiang, inserting themselves into his life trajectory to experience his humiliation, helplessness, and urgency. Even when he uses extreme means to become a gang leader later, audiences mostly feel excitement. However, life’s misfortunes are not justification for crime. *The Knockout* features not only Gao Qiqiang but also An Xin, who pursues the truth for twenty years; Li Xiang, who circles dark forces in his own way; and the investigation team that persists despite numerous difficulties. In shaping villain images, emphasis should be placed appropriately: their merits may be highlighted, but their criminal facts must be strictly condemned without ambiguous representation.

4.2 Planning a Complete Narrative Line and Constructing a Character Arc

Character arc specifically refers to a character’s nature changing for better or worse under various factors, allowing audiences to witness the “sublimation” of character when plot reversals occur. Gao Qiqiang’s identity transforms from a fishmonger at society’s bottom to a powerful business tycoon, unfolding a complete narrative line that changes the negative images of traditional film, television, animation, and literature that follow patterns of “bad to the end” or “bad first, then good.” This makes Gao’s character image more fleshed out. Therefore, when portraying villains, creators should depict characters through precise details, weaken the absolute dichotomy between good and evil to achieve the right blend, build character relationships that inject touching elements such as family, love, and friendship, and emphasize costuming to hint at character states. Ultimately, audiences will develop correct perceptions of villain images through complete narrative lines.

4.3 Clarifying Narrative Meaning and Playing an Appropriate Role in the Script

Villainous images in dramas typically function to highlight positive images and spirits. In *The Knockout*, Xu Zhong asks An Xin twenty years later, “If you could go back to the past, would you still be willing to help the bullied Gao Qiqiang?” An Xin’s answer remains “yes.” The drama uses Gao Qiqiang’s evil to accentuate An Xin’s goodness, persistence, bravery, and other wonderful qualities. Film and television drama creation should emphasize the expression of good and evil characters when they confront each other, delivering correct ideological value guidance to audiences.

5 Summary and Reflection

This paper focuses on the “atypical” villain Gao Qiqiang in *The Knockout* as its research object. Through content analysis, it explores why he has changed impressions of villains and triggered mass frenzy, though several areas could be improved.

First, the research object is singular. In recent years, many popular crime crackdown dramas have portrayed charming villains, such as *In the Name of the People*, *Penalty*, *Crime Crackdown*, and *The Long Night*. Future research could select these works individually, analyzing their universality and specificity to answer questions like: “How should negative images be portrayed in melodramatic films and TV works?” “How is the scale of negative roles grasped?” and “How can villains’ stories guide audiences to form correct values?”

Second, research questions could be further developed by combining psychology, drama, and film studies to explore why audiences love villains and the effects of script design and filming techniques.

Third, research methods should be diversified. Beyond content analysis, questionnaires and focus group interviews could explore how audiences interpret villain images from their reception perspective, providing suggestions for antagonist shaping.

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