

An Analysis of the Problems in Managing the "Guichuideng" IP and Thoughts on Optimization Strategies: A Case Study of the Transition from Online Literature to Film and Television Formats



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Abstract

"Guichuideng" (《鬼吹灯》) is a series of cyber fantasy novels written by Chinese author Tianxia Bachang (formerly known as Zhang Muye), first serialized in 2006 on the Tianya Forum and Qidian.com. This highly promising IP, which has garnered widespread support from capital, markets, and audiences alike, sharply reveals weaknesses in current copyright economics and IP operations. Despite its market potential, the path to managing such a prominent IP exposes significant gaps in handling copyrights, operational consistency, and long-term brand strategy. These challenges demonstrate that while the IP industry is growing, it still faces difficulties in creating sustainable value and maximizing the economic and cultural impact of such valuable intellectual properties.

Keywords: IP Management; Online Literature; Film; Television.

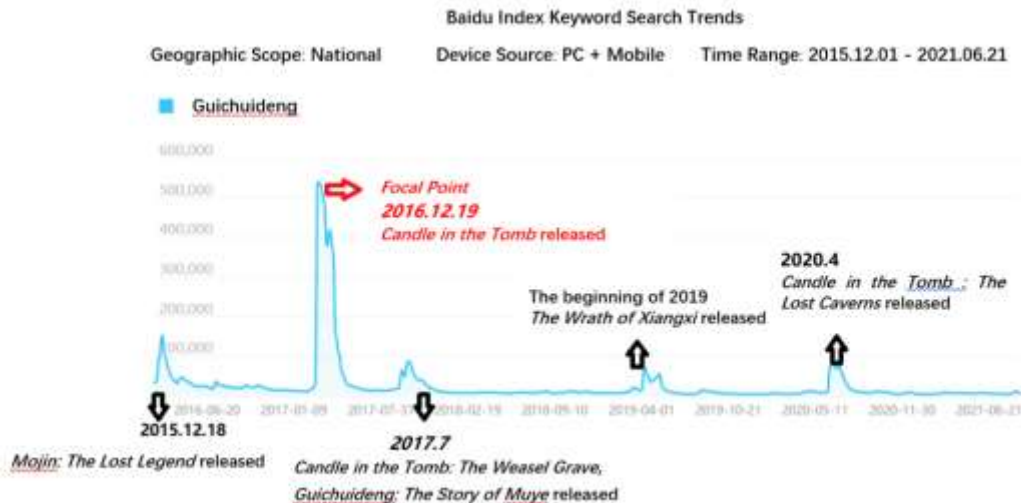
I. Introduction

The Concerns of "Guichuideng" IP Adaptations: Mismanagement and Overconsumption

The numerous adaptations of "Guichuideng" into films and television series have contributed significantly to the IP's exposure, as indicated by search trends on Baidu Index over a six-year period following the release of its first adaptation. Every new adaptation has consistently generated spikes in interest and boosted the IP's visibility.

Baidu Index is an analysis tool developed by Baidu that leverages vast search data to provide insights into user behavior and public opinion trends. It extracts and quantifies the search volume of keywords over time, offering crucial data on search popularity. This tool is vital for researching consumer demands, tracking market trends, and analyzing online discourse. In academic and business contexts, Baidu Index is widely used for public opinion analysis, consumer behavior research, and market decision-making support. It has become an essential tool for studying social sentiments, brand monitoring, and market analysis.

During the period from December 2015 to June 2021, searches for the keyword "Guichuideng" on Baidu Index revealed several spikes in interest, corresponding to the release of major adaptations of the "Guichuideng" series. These spikes occurred in December 2015, December 2016, July 2017, early 2019, and April 2020. Specifically, these search peaks coincided with the releases of Mojin: The Lost Legend (《寻龙诀》), Candle in the Tomb (《鬼吹灯之精绝古城》), Candle in the Tomb: The Weasel Grave (《鬼吹灯之黄皮子坟》), Guichuideng: The Story of Muye (《鬼吹灯之牧野诡事》), The Wrath of Xiangxi (《怒晴湘西》) and Candle in the Tomb: The Lost Caverns (《鬼吹灯之龙岭迷窟》). Among these, the highest spike in search popularity matched the release of Candle in the Tomb, a web series with strong ratings, indicating its significant role in revitalizing interest in the IP. This data highlights how well-received adaptations can boost public engagement and maintain IP visibility over time.



However, a review of the rating data on Douban for the keyword "Guichuideng" reveals a significant decline in reputation. Established in 2005, Douban is a comprehensive social network and content evaluation platform, primarily facilitating ratings, discussions, and sharing of cultural products such as movies, books, and music. Through the integration of user-generated content (UGC) and social networking, Douban has gradually evolved into an influential platform for evaluating cultural products. Its rating system, characterized by high user engagement and a diversity of evaluations, holds considerable influence in the fields of film and literature. In academic research, Douban data is often used to analyze user preferences, market responses to cultural products, and trends in public opinion, offering valuable data sources for studies in sociology, communication, and related fields.

Currently, Douban hosts a total of 49 adaptations of the "Guichuideng" IP. After excluding unreleased and unrated works, there are 33 adaptations with available ratings. Among these, 21 works have a rating below 5, accounting for approximately 63.64% of the total. Specifically, among 24 film adaptations, 20 received ratings below 5, resulting in a low rating rate of 83.33%, with the comment sections brimming with negative reviews.

This dual extreme of high exposure and low quality has continuously stirred dissatisfaction among viewers and fans of the "Guichuideng" IP, rapidly eroding the audience's enthusiasm and trust in the franchise. The primary causes of this phenomenon can be attributed to the following four factors:

Chaos in Copyright Distribution

The copyright for the "Guichuideng" novel series has been out of the writer's control from the beginning. Currently, all proprietary rights to the book belong to Qidian.com. The film adaptation rights for the first and latter halves of the novel series have been purchased by Dreamer Pictures (Beijing) Co., Ltd. and Wanda Media Co. Ltd, respectively, while Tencent Pictures holds the rights for the web series adaptations of the IP.

The overly fragmented distribution of "Guichuideng" IP rights has led to chaotic management of its adaptations, fundamentally causing the disordered state of the series' cinematic adaptations. This fragmented approach has resulted in a lack of visual and character consistency across adaptations. To date, more than ten different actors have portrayed the protagonist Hu Bayi, each bringing a distinct appearance and interpretation to the character. Although these portrayals share the same character name, they differ drastically in appearance and portrayal style, preventing audiences from forming a unified perception of the character. The simultaneous release of multiple adaptations has exacerbated this issue, making it challenging for audiences to connect with and recognize a consistent character image. This fragmented approach hinders the development of a cohesive IP brand identity.

Disorganized Adaptations

Firstly, some adaptations of "Guichuideng" have involved reckless and illogical rearrangements of original work, resulting in adaptations that lack sincerity and diverge significantly

from the spirit of the original works. In the article, "A Brief Discussion on the IP Operations of Online Literature in Film and Television: A Case Study of Two Guichuideng Films," Yu Xiaogui mentions that the fan base of "Guichuideng" consists largely of die-hard fans, who demand a high level of respect for factual integrity and a deeply immersive content experience. This phenomenon explains the poor box office performance and negative reviews received by *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* and *The Worm Valley*, both of which introduced major alterations to the original work. If a film fails to capture the hearts of die-hard fans, it cannot succeed in both box office and critical acclaim.

Secondly, the adaptations of "Guichuideng" have not followed the chronological order of the original series, leading to a lack of coherence. This non-sequential adaptation approach has significantly weakened the audience's viewing experience, often leaving them with a sense of incompleteness.

There are also cases of repeated adaptations within the "Guichuideng" series. For instance, in April 2020, Tencent Video released a web series, while iQIYI and Youku launched online films, all recounting protagonist Hu Bayi's expedition in Longling Maze. The similarity in content and the concurrent release dates led to potential audience fatigue. Additionally, the storyline of *Jingjue Ancient City* was adapted separately as a theatrical film in 2015, an online film in 2016, and a web series in 2022. Each adaptation featured different main actors, which may have confused viewers due to the lack of consistent character portrayals.

Additionally, the titles of "Guichuideng" adaptations are highly inconsistent. Some titles include "Guichuideng" while others use subtitles from the original work. Furthermore, several adaptations adopt creative interpretations like "Xunlongjue" or "Mojin", and it is common to see titles named after specific elements from the novels. Some adaptations even deviate from the original trio featured in "Guichuideng", creating entirely new storylines. This lack of coherence results in a fragmented and disordered series, making it difficult for unfamiliar audiences to engage with the IP and wearing out the patience of dedicated fans.

Lack of a Unified Style in Works

Due to the fragmented copyright of "Guichuideng", there is no strong correlation between the various film and television adaptations, and the directors differ significantly. The 33 adaptations of the "Guichuideng" IP mentioned in this article are directed by 24 different directors, resulting in a difference rate of 72.73%. The most apparent consequence of having different directors is the lack of a unified style in the works, preventing the establishment of a distinctive and systematic style unique to "Guichuideng". This fragmentation diminishes the exposure and attention garnered by individual adaptations, wasting the benefits of reduced "cognitive costs" that could arise from their interconnections, which is detrimental to the establishment and branding of the IP.

Purely Pursuing the Existing Value of the IP, Excessively Consuming Its Vitality

In 2006, during the early period following the release of the original work of "Guichuideng", China's intellectual property framework, particularly in the development and awareness of film and television IP, was relatively underdeveloped. The writer overlooked the subsequent value of the IP, and a hasty attitude when selling the rights led to the easy transfer of IP copyrights to commercial entities, resulting in ongoing disputes.

Furthermore, the commercial institutions involved in developing the IP of "Guichuideng" lacked experience and failed to clearly articulate the structure and logic of the works. People generally regarded "Guichuideng" as a high-quality super IP, which led to a positive attitude among various investors towards the film and television adaptations generated from this IP. This led to the accelerated multi-threaded production of adaptations of "Guichuideng", resulting in a frequent emergence of film and television works. However, this eagerness for quick success has led to uneven quality in the works, disorganized storylines, and inconsistent character portrayals. The ensuing chaotic multithreading continuously drains the enthusiasm of both audiences and fans of the original work for the adapted productions.

Why Did *Candle in the Tomb: The Lost Caverns* Achieve Both Critical Acclaim and High Viewership?

As the highest-rated adaptation within the "Guichuideng" IP series, *Candle in the Tomb: The Lost Caverns* has not escaped the overall chaos of copyright associated with this IP series. However,

the reasons for its success had the important enlightenment significance for all the "Guichuideng" adaptations and are worthy of analysis.

Respect for the Original Work

Online literature brings more than just creative resources to the film and television industry, they can complement and enhance each other. Furthermore, online literature and film works share the same audience: young people. This connection determines that the online literature IP can provide thematic consumption hotspots and highly engaging viewing experiences for adapted film and television works, with the influence of its original IP fans present throughout the process.

Candle in the Tomb: The Lost Caverns shows a high level of respect for the original IP by director Fei Zhenxiang, producer Guan Hu, and the production team, who did not make sweeping modifications to the original story. The team effectively presented the detailed settings and classic scenes from the original work, earning recognition from IP fans. This support from fans resonated with general audiences, and the positive reviews from the wider public following their viewing further contributed to a word-of-mouth effect. As a result, the work's popularity and recognition gradually expanded.

Pursuit of Excellence in Production

Candle in the Tomb: The Lost Caverns is supported by a powerful film production team, which gives the web series a strong cinematic quality and a more refined production. Unlike some works that heavily rely on post-production special effects to create grand scenes, this series was almost entirely filmed on location, under extremely challenging conditions. But the production team maintained a serious commitment to the filming process and strict standards without compromise.

Moreover, the director's understanding of the work is commendable. He not only visually emphasizes the mysterious and eerie nature of the scenes but also presents innovative designs for the ancient tomb's mechanisms. In terms of dialogue design, the characters' language is humorous and fitting, effectively creating an atmosphere with just a few words, often giving a sense of "using a little effort to achieve a great impact."

Control of Rhythm and Casting Choices

Although Candle in the Tomb: The Lost Caverns is not a long series overall, each episode is rich in information and tightly paced, leading viewers to express that it is thrilling. In terms of the cast, director selected a group of capable actors with established fan base, who were well-received by audiences. For the role of the protagonist Hu Bayi, the production team chose the approachable actor Pan Yueming, making the character feel more relatable and like someone from "everyday life."

The character Wang Kaixuan, who plays a comedic role in the episodes, is portrayed by the comedian Jiang Chao. The ample interaction among the main characters and the "cross-talk" style atmosphere create a blend of seriousness and humor, adding vitality and a sense of immersion to the viewing experience for the audience.

Similarly, the film and television management of the "Harry Potter" series, created by J.K. Rowling, stands out as more professional and presents several points can be compared with "Guichuideng". The following analysis will compare the insights and reflections brought about by the management of the "Guichuideng" adaptations from three aspects: content creation, shaping the brand value of the IP, and improving the IP system.

Content Creation

"IP is like a revolution for the film and television industry." The film and television adaptations of IP heavily rely on the readers and fan base that the IP has cultivated, which suggests that IP can be seen as a double-edged sword; it represents "the challenge that the internet age has posed to traditional film and television."

In the eight films adapted from "Harry Potter", as well as in the subsequent prequel "Fantastic Beasts," the author J.K. Rowling personally took on roles as screenwriter and producer, closely overseeing the adaptations of her literary works. Although there were several director changes during the adaptation, the overall style remained relatively unified, with the same actors portraying the same characters whenever possible. This allowed young actors to grow alongside the audience, creating a strong sense of immersion.

It can be seen that viewers' evaluations of adaptations have consistently revolved around the adaptations' alignment with the spirit of the original work. This highlights the importance of the original author or a screenwriter with a deep understanding of the original material in controlling the content during the IP adaptation. The ideal scenario for film and television adaptations is to combine the original story with new content from the screenwriter, thereby enhancing the overall IP, which aligns better with market prospects.

Shaping the Brand Value of the IP

Since 2001, the adaptations of the Harry Potter IP have been released at a pace of one to two films every year, spanning over a decade in the creation of the IP. The film adaptations closely followed the storylines, maintaining a steady pace that kept the audience consistently looking forward to the next installment. In addition, J.K. Rowling wrote a prequel, "Fantastic Beasts", which was also adapted into film, thereby clearly and systematically building and enhancing the "Harry Potter" IP universe and brand.

In contrast, the adaptations of the "Guichuideng" series appear rushed, with various film and television companies producing numerous series in response to the IP's popularity, ultimately draining the vitality of the IP. This illustrates that in the early stages of building an IP matrix, it is essential to adopt a long-term perspective rather than hastily extracting all rights and values from the IP. Maintaining the vitality that allows the IP to continuously expand and evolve is the path to effective long-term management.

Given that the film and television adaptation rights of "Guichuideng" are fragmented among different companies, whether future copyright holders can attempt to negotiate and collaboratively produce content to systematically brand the series is key to advance the "Guichuideng" IP adaptations steadily. While making such concessions and compromises may be challenging due to competitive interests among companies, if the current state of "chaos" continues, it will only accelerate the depletion of the "Guichuideng" IP's life value.

IP managers should understand that the ultimate goal of all copyright management is to enhance the expressiveness, communicability, and content richness of the IP, ensuring that the series generates profits while protecting the IP's sustained vitality. Only by maintaining the long-term life force of the IP and continuously infusing it with new energy can ongoing development take place, cultivating and attracting an ever-growing number of genuinely loyal audiences.

Improvement of IP System

The best way to sustain the vitality of an IP is to enrich its content and continuously expand its boundaries, a principle validated by both the "Harry Potter" and "Guichuideng" film adaptations.

J.K. Rowling's prequel, "Fantastic Beasts," has been adapted into three theatrical films— "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them", "Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald", and "Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore," respectively released in 2016, 2018, and 2022. All of them were directed by David Yates and received many positive responses. This series of films effectively sustained the popularity of the "Harry Potter", enhancing and expanding it, allowing the IP to grow continuously and remain attractive over time.

In comparison, the film *Mojin: The Lost Legend*, which is also an extension of "Guichuideng" series, similarly relies on the original settings for its re-creation. TianxiaBachang served as a script consultant for this project, providing ideas and direction for the adaptation of the overall storyline, which also gained market recognition. This demonstrates that "old wine in new bottles," or re-creation based on existing IP content, may be a viable approach to sustaining the vitality of IPs.

II. Conclusion

In the film and television sector, online literature IP primarily encompasses both the literary works themselves and IP operations. A successful IP requires not only the intrinsic high value of the literary work but also the cultivation of its unique appeal to the audience.

The analysis of numerous adaptations of "Guichuideng" demonstrates that transitioning from a quality online literature IP to high-quality film and television works remains a challenging journey. Reasonable adaptations of the original content, systematic planning and development of the IP brand, as well as ongoing expansion and refinement of the IP brand are all essential components. A long-term development plan for an IP necessitates comprehensive strategic planning, ensuring that each

step contributes to the vitality of the IP. During the adaptation process, it is crucial to avoid disruptions for the audience caused by frequent changes in actors or directing styles. Additionally, the narrative should strive to maintain a degree of coherence, creating a chain reaction that fosters audience anticipation and ensures a consistent effect across multiple adaptations.

The most significant challenge the "Guichuideng" IP faced is the lack of a unified and long-term management strategy, leading to excessive consumption that weakens the IP's value and cultural influence. Given the audience's existing interest in the original work, the film adaptations of the IP naturally attract significant attention, which raises audience expectations and makes the works more susceptible to the influence of word-of-mouth. Adaptors should skillfully balance the experiences of original readers and purely film audiences, fostering resonance and empathy to continually expand the IP's value.

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