

# Analyzing the Reasons for the Crime Drama *The Knockout* Going Viral

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## Abstract

In early 2023, *The Knockout* had gained tremendous popularity since its initial broadcast. As a visual expression of the results of China's crime crackdown and the education and rectification of the political and legal teams, *The Knockout* has realized a new path of crime drama creation by virtue of its strong realism, and truly reproduced the scene of China's crime crackdown. It adopts a three-act narrative structure to build the main logic of the plot, which makes the audience resonate strongly; through the characterization of reality, it provokes the audience to think deeply about good and evil, human nature and the causes behind crimes. In the balance of artistic storytelling and real life, it enhances the depth of the work and provides many lessons for the creative development of crime drama.

**Keywords:** crime drama, crime crackdown, three-act narrative structure, realism, characterization

## 1. Introduction

*The Knockout* is a crime drama produced by CCTV and iQiyi, directed by the Publicity and Education Bureau of the Central Committee of Political and Legal Affairs and the Information Center of Political and Legal Affairs of the Central Committee of Political and Legal Affairs, directed by Xu Jizhou and starring Zhang Yi, Zhang Songwen and Wu Gang, etc. It is China's first crime drama based on the normalization of crime crackdown and the education and rectification of political and legal teams. *The Knockout* is the first Chinese film and television production to be based on the normalization of crime crackdown and the education and rectification of the political and legal teams. It tells the story of a 20-year battle between the forces of justice represented by An Xin, a

front-line criminal police officer, and the forces of gang crimes. *The Knockout* combines many elements of criminal investigation, deduction and suspense, and profoundly exposes the social problems, the changes of the times and the sinking of human nature in a distinctly realistic style, reflecting the real scene of the struggle against crime crackdown. Its first broadcast ranked first with a high market share of 17.4%; within 4 days of its launch, the inner station popularity value of iQiyi has exceeded 9,500. As a phenomenon crime drama that won both ratings enthusiasm and word of mouth, the reasons behind its gone viral also provide many lessons for the development of crime drama.

## 2. Exploration of the New Path of Crime Drama Creation

Film and television works are often derived from life, reflecting real problems and having important practical significance. *The Knockout* explores a new path of crime drama creation in terms of narrative techniques, characterization and value guidance, and opens up more possibilities for genre creation.

The narrative logic of traditional Chinese crime drama is usually based on case solving, with heavy social reality and ethical connotation, and it is a kind of genre drama that mainly promotes social justice and has a wide audience base. The earliest crime drama can be traced back to 1979's *Sacred Mission* directed by Mao Yuqin, which tells the story of Wang Gongbo, an old police officer who overcame many difficulties to help vindicate Bai Shun in the late Cultural Revolution, and eventually, in order to protect Yang Qiong, he died to fulfill his sacred mission as a police soldier.

In July 1980, the People's Daily published an editorial entitled *Literature and art serve the people and socialism*, formally proposing "literature and art serve the people and socialism" as an important part of the Party's literature and art policy in the new era. The works of this period, such as *The Strange Case of the Rose* and *Captain of the Criminal Police*, showed the relative autonomy of literary adaptations, and the plots had a certain atmosphere of reflective literature.

Most of the crime dramas in the 90s were based on real cases, such as *The Chronicle of the September 18 Case* and *12.1 Major Shot*, which had a strong documentary color, and in order to restore the real face of the case to the greatest extent, they even let professional police officers star in them, with live-action shooting and scenario reenactment. In addition, there were also crime dramas that focused on suspense and deduction, including *No Regrets as Heroes* and *The Hunt for the Two Wangs*, with a distinct realistic color and market-oriented production strategy.

In 1999, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China proposed at a national symposium on internal management reform of the broadcasting, film and television system that it would "actively promote the separation of broadcasting and production of radio and television programs other than news programs, and further give play to the basic role of the market mechanism in the production of radio and television programs". Thus, crime drama

officially entered the golden period of development.

After entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, crime dramas are mainly divided into two categories: One is to highlight the red and black sides of the game as the logic of action, exploring social reality and ethical issues. Such as *Black Ice*, *Black Hole* and so on, the former focuses on drug enforcement, the latter is to combat smuggling and corruption; And the other is to focus on suspense and deduction, this genre of film is often deep into reality and explores human nature. For example, *The Red Carnation*, it takes a steel enterprise group's huge state-owned assets loss case as the background of the investigation process, tells the story of the young lawyer Zhou Ruobing in the release of Liu Zhiming's suspicion, witnessed Xu Xiaoqing was smashed dead by steel ingots. This activates the suspicion in Zhou Ruobing's heart, and through investigation, she unveils the secret behind the truth; *Jade Goddess of Mercy* tells the story of An Xin, a female narcotics cop, who grows from a simple girl to a tough fighter who penetrates the drug cartels.

But with the serious homogenization of the subject matter and the misguided value orientation of the antagonist portrayal, in 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued the *Notice on Strengthening the Censorship and Broadcast Management of Crime Drama* and the *Implementation Plan for Strengthening and Improving the Ideological and Moral Construction of Minors in Radio, Film and Television*, which explicitly sought to strengthen the censorship of crime drama theme and strictly prohibited its broadcast during prime time. Since then, the crime drama entered a 10-year-long silent period. In 2014, *The Mekong River* won the 30<sup>th</sup> Flying Apsaras Award in China, leading crime drama to re-enter the viewers' vision. In 2018, China's special conference fighting against crime crackdown was held, crime dramas with background of crime crackdown have recovered. Works such as *Roving Inspection Team* and *Day & Night* have gained good reputation.

*The Knockout* is an in-depth exploration of human nature through a story that is highly relevant to reality. It conducts a brand new exploration in narrative technique, adopts a three-act narrative structure, divides three time spaces, tells the life trajectories of An Xin and Gao Qiqiang using multiple clues, unveils the good and evil encounters under the changing

times, and reveals the rise of gang crimes in the changing era. It explores a new path for the creation of subsequent crime dramas.

### 3. Genre Breakthroughs in Three-Act Narrative Structure

Jean Piaget believes that “the notion of structure is comprised of three Key ideas: the idea of wholeness, the idea of transformation, and the idea of self-regulation” (Piaget, 2009).

Narrative structure is the process of development and presentation of the structural layout of content, plot, and other components.

The three-act narrative structure used in *The Knockout* is a very novel attempt for Chinese crime drama, dividing time and space into three key points: 2000, 2006, and 2021.

*The Knockout* opened in the year 2021, and the director uses flashbacks, starting with the Steering Group’s arrival in Jinghai City, where the Steering Group felt that the city has been infiltrated by gang crimes as soon as they entered. The main character of the drama, An Xin, appeared with a head full of white hair, showing all the vicissitudes. As a key figure in eradicating gang crimes, this makes the audience wonder what has happened to the city, why are the forces of gang crimes so rampant, and why is An Xin, the main character, a people’s police officer representing justice, so down and out?

This is how the drama’s director Xu Jizhou described the narrative framework, “At each intersection, the two people’s life experiences are hugely different, constantly changing and reversing. Each act of a dozen episodes is shot in a different style and with different character states.” (Zhang Yi, 2023)

Gao Qiqiang met An Xin in the Spring Festival of 2000. At the time, he was just a fishmonger in the Jiuchang Street, always oppressed by the two brothers Tang Xiaolong and Tang Xiaohu, and eventually went to the police station because of his booth; while An Xin was a people’s police officer. Their identities were so different that Gao Qiqiang never dreamed he would be associated with An Xin, but the dumplings from An Xin brought the two together and quietly changed the course of their lived.

In 2006, both of them were eating noodles in a restaurant. At that time, Gao Qiqiang was already a successful entrepreneur who was

making a living in Jinghai City with his connections, while An Xin was a criminal police officer, and the balance of their identities seemed to have tilted. Gao Qiqiang, who already had a certain amount of wealth and power, still missed his childhood when the three siblings shared a bowl of pork’s feet noodles. But he gradually turned cold-blooded and ruthless in the pursuit of wealth and power, treating human lives like dirt and getting closer and closer to the abyss. At that moment, Lao Mo appeared to Gao and An. Lao Mo was originally a prisoner who was completely desperate for life and society, but with the help of An Xin, he accidentally learned that he had a daughter who was still alive. So, with renewed hope, he once tried to turn over a new leaf, but was subjected to strange looks because of his dishonorable past. Eventually, under the guidance of Gao Qiqiang, he returned to the path of crime. Lao Mo was just a marginalized person struggling for a living at the bottom of society, a pawn of Gao Qiqiang in his pursuit of fame and fortune. Thus, the year 2006 can be seen as a critical point for An Xin and Gao Qiqiang to move to two extremes, with Gao moving up the social ladder and An starting to run into walls. At this point, the drama shifts back to 2021, and the audience gets to understand the reason for the drama’s opening sequence. In the past 20 years, An Xin has endured too much, his closest master Cao Chuang, criminal police chief Zhang Biao, anti-drug captain Yang Jian have colluded with gang crimes; his good buddy Li Xiang and his apprentice Lu Han died in the line of duty; and Gao Qiqiang took advantage of his kindness, all of the above have made him gray-haired, down and out. At this point, the scales have completely tipped in favor of Gao Qiqiang, and the two of them have swapped the statuses. The three time periods are closely connected, and they revolve around An Xin and Gao Qiqiang, echoing the main logic of the plot through the change of their status. Only when the temporal structure serves the theme of the content can a smooth narrative logic be built and the audience resonate strongly.

### 4. Characterization into Reality

Characterization is the core element in film and television. The characters and the story complement each other; the creator outputs his view of the world through characterization, and the audience sees reality through characterization. Forster’s “flat and round

characters” argue that “the flat character” is created in its purest form, following a pure idea or nature, while “the round character” must give a sense of novelty in a convincing way. (E. M. Forster & Yang Shuhua, 2021) *The Knockout* follows these two points in characterization, breaking away from the stereotype approach to creation, with distinctive characters and traceable behavior.

The character setting of *The Knockout* follows the creation principles of crime drama and adopts a dichotomous approach. However, in the face of good and evil, the righteous force represented by An Xin and the gang crimes represented by Gao Qiqiang are not just a simple fighting relationship, but their respective life trajectories have made the characters more three-dimensional and round. *The Knockout* explores the causes behind the crimes through the different characters’ wavering and choices between good and evil. The balance between artistic storytelling and real life has enhanced the depth of the work.

#### 4.1 Disruptors of the Social Order

The success of *The Knockout* in depicting the antagonists is the refinement of the antagonists’ hearts. The cold-blooded killer Lao Mo, the gangdom leader Xu Jiang, the ruthless brothers Tang Xiaolong and Tang Xiaohu, all of whom have distinctive characters and rich psychological layers. When the gears of fate began to turn, there was nothing they could do.

Gao Qiqiang has turned from an honest fishmonger to a gangdom leader who was blinded by desires, which has doomed him to the dark abyss in the pursuit of fame and fortune.

In the beginning, Gao Qiqiang was just an honest and weak fishmonger who only wanted to earn money to take care of his younger brother and sister. The Gao siblings suffered humiliation under the oppression of the brothers Tang Xiaolong and Tang Xiaohu, and their strong desire to turn over a new leaf has led them astray. Taking advantage of An Xin’s kindness, Gao got a taste of power. The Tang brothers who had used to oppress him were groveling before him, and the seeds of his evil desires took root in his heart. In order to obtain wealth and power, he did whatever it took. From the first taste of power through An Xin, to being mistaken by the Tang brothers of killing Xu Lei, to using Lao Mo to kill Xu Jiang, to

kneeling without hesitation when admitting Zhao Tai as his godfather, to killing Cheng Cheng the rival of Jiangong Group, to replacing Uncle Tai of Jiangong Group, to standing in line with Zhao Lidong the corrupt official of Jinghai City and so on, in these key events, he completed the counter strike again and again, and eventually became the largest criminal gang in Jinghai City.

Gao Qiqiang was blinded by his desire for power and was ruthless, treating human lives like dirt. He has violently demolished Niluo Village, killed village cadres and innocent people, opened an underground casino, sold drugs, kidnapped and threatened ordinary people with violence for business projects, lured entrepreneurs to loan sharks and broke their families, meddled in official appointments, interfered and obstructed the work of the Steering Group, etc. His desires expanded infinitely and eventually turned against him.

#### 4.2 Guardians of Restoring Order

The positive characters portrayed in the crime drama are vivid and rich, and the power is given by the law to prevent, stop and fight against the disruption of social order and maintain the harmony and stability of society. The positive characters often have to go through a long and tortuous struggle to bring the criminals to justice.

An Xin, the main character of this drama and a representative of positive characters, is kind and warm, upright and defiant of power. He has been fighting against gang crimes for 20 years, never forgetting his original intention and never giving up. Watching his comrades and relatives around him sacrifice one after another, he still upholds justice and fairness and carries forward alone, becoming a firm guardian of the people’s interests. The lack of emotion is an important factor in An Xin’s choice to go it alone. An Xin grew up without his parents, Meng Dehai and An Changlin who raised him, and his master Cao Chuang, are like his parents, and their teachings were an important reason for An Xin to become a police officer. Later, Cao Chuang colluded with gang crimes and was shot dead by Lao Mo, which was the first time An Xin experienced the pain of his relatives leaving him; his comrade Li Xiang attempted desperately and finally died in front of his eyes, Li Xiang’s suicide note was like a blow to the head, making An Xin feel deeply powerless. Precisely because

of this, he decided to carry all this alone, he cut off his feelings, pushed away his childhood sweetheart Meng Yu, and fought alone against the darkness, boldly marching on the road of crackdown on gang crimes. In terms of friendship, An Xin found out that his comrade Zhang Biao has long been corrupted; Yang Jian, who used to be an anti-drug captain, has gone astray and colluded with gang crimes; Lu Han, his apprentice who acted like a young An Xin, still investigated the case alone when An Xin was marginalized, and was involved in dangerous situations and eventually died. The mentors and friends who once fought side by side have left one after another, leaving An Xin alone to hold on. He was cynical, yet very innocent, and was ostracized immediately after he went public and warned Zhao Lidong, a leader of the city was the protective umbrella of gang crimes when there was no decisive evidence; When Li Xiang died, An Xin was transferred to the traffic police brigade, in the middle of the road, he knelt down and cried, his deep sense of powerlessness makes it more tragic. As director Xu Jizhou said, "We designed An Xin to be alone, in order to shield him from all his weaknesses. If not, with the power of the Gao Qiqiang gang, they would have knocked out all of his weaknesses and broken through all of his defenses." An Xin also becomes the purest guardian in the drama, a quintessential image of an unsung hero in the hearts of the general public.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Knockout* is a new way to explore the creation of crime drama, in which the characters in crime drama meet reality, and the audience is both in the drama and in reality. It profoundly exposes social dilemmas, conveys positive values, and provokes people to reflect on real problems, highlighting the warning and educational effect of realistic crime drama. *The Knockout* adopts the novel three-act narrative structure in the creation of crime drama, realizing a brand new expression of narrative logic; breaking the disadvantages of stereotype and flatness in the characterization. Although it is dichotomous, the characters are three-dimensional, vivid and substantial, and there are profound analyses and reflections on human nature.

*The Knockout* has been in the limelight since its inception, and today, the show is still being discussed. As a visual expression of the results

of China's crackdown on gang crimes, *The Knockout* profoundly recreates the real scene of the crime crackdown struggle and provides a reference for the creation of crime drama.

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