



# Chinese Expression for Genre Film and Television

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**Abstract.** Legal drama is a typical type of film and television whose storytelling and plot design generally draw lessons from Western experience, highlighting the clash between positive and negative elements. It tends to emphasize intricate plotlines, striving for intense suspense and intense conflicts. However, an over-reliance on Western storytelling can sometimes lead to an overemphasis on curiosity and violence, creating a disconnect from the daily lives and social realities of the Chinese populace. Therefore, it is crucial to undertake narrative innovation grounded in a profound understanding of China's legal system and societal sentiments, producing legal dramas that not only convey socialist values but also meet the aesthetic needs of the audience. "Draw the Line," a TV drama deeply rooted in China's judicial reform journey, stands out for its focus on the nation's social reality. Through a narrative approach rooted in real-life experiences and warm realism, it breaks away from the stereotypes of traditional legal dramas. This innovative approach paves the way for legal dramas that authentically integrate the Chinese experience and characteristics.

**Keywords:** genre film and television, narrative innovation, legal drama, Chinese experience

## 1 Introduction

The TV drama "Draw the Line" was created under the guidance of the Supreme People's Court of The People's Republic of China, the Propaganda Department of the Hunan Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, and the Hunan Provincial Radio and Television Bureau. It tells the story of a group of legal professionals in the new era, including Fang Yuan, the presiding judge at the filing court of Xingcheng District People's Court, Zhou Yi'an, a post-judge, and Ye Xin, a young female cadre of the Supreme Court Research Office, who adhered to administer justice for people's benefit and interpreted the mission of the people's judges amid a series of complicated judicial cases concerning the vital interests of the people. As the first legal drama in China that comprehensively shows the latest achievements of judicial reform of people's courts, "Draw the Line" takes grass-roots people's courts and people's judges as creative prototypes, depicts their work routine using life-based narration without losing the human touch, popularizes legal knowledge, and witnesses judicial progress. It not only allows ordinary audiences to capture the scale and temperature of law through literary and

artistic works but also holds significance in narrative innovation by integrating Chinese experience into genre creation, establishing itself as a groundbreaking work of Chinese legal drama.

## 2 Genre Breakthrough: Pioneering the Creation of Legal Dramas Narrating Chinese Experience

"As a textual structure, genre films, like myths and languages, constitute a set of rules for construction that when combined, serve a specific communicative function."<sup>1</sup> Legal dramas generally focus on the work content of the public security organs. Its major plotline focuses on the process of case detection, emphasizing the controversy between public security personnel and criminals, involving court trials, criminal investigation, and other fields. Among these, the criminal investigation part targets showing scientific investigation means and strict logical reasoning, pursuing suspenseful and thought-provoking effects. Conversely, the court trial part prioritizes the court debates among the prosecution, the defense, and the judiciary, showing professional legal knowledge, thus realizing the popularization of law awareness and the defense of legal fairness and justice.

In addition, American scholar Altman proposed the flexible concept of inter-genre, subgenre and levels of genericity. The creation of "Bottom Line" reflects the variation of genres.<sup>2</sup> Positioned as a realistic legal drama and guided by the Supreme People's Court, "Draw the Line" aims to comprehensively display the latest achievements of China's judicial reform and disseminate knowledge of the law. When asked how to seek a breakthrough based on previous genre TV dramas in a media interview, Wang Kai, literary director of the drama, responded that "Compared with prosecutors and public security police, judges' work is relatively independent and static, resulting in a shortage of action and suspense in their creation." "So, we flipped our thinking, making the judge's decision the biggest mystery of the story, followed by the account of the case, and the excavation of the human conditions and feelings behind the case the core of the story, which is fascinating with empathy and depth."<sup>3</sup> "Draw the Line" takes a different approach by weakening the dramatic flair. The narrative focus is not on dramatic plots and suspenseful cases, but on how judges, taking facts as the basis and the law as the criterion, as well as relying on professional knowledge and skills and insight into human nature and the world, make unbiased and legitimate judgments after analyzing facts, judging values, balancing jurisprudence and reason. The drama elaborates on the jurisprudence and reason consideration of judges when handling cases under the background of judicial reform, so as to enter the core of law and achieve the popularization of law awareness.

Moreover, based on the major production team's in-depth understanding of China's judicial system reform—"upholding fairness, efficiency and authority, safeguarding people's rights and interests, and ensuring that fairness and justice can be felt in every single case"—the unity of fairness and justice and judicial efficiency is considered one of the cores of judicial reform. After a large number of preliminary investigations, "Draw the Line" focuses on the work and life of grass-roots judges, and takes the "case-

filing tribunal" as the breaking point to solve the problem. Rooted in the general public, grass-roots courts are at the forefront of administering justice for people's benefit and the front line of judicial reform. "Case-filing tribunal" functions as the contact department of the People's Court, responsible for filing registration, case diversion, pre-litigation mediation, and complaint and proposal reception, among others. It is both the first stop for the public to express their needs and the front line for the courts to resolve conflicts, embodying the inherent requirements for litigation source governance, dispute resolution at the source, and acceleration of case diversion in China's judicial reform. "Draw the Line" grasps the core of China's judicial reform, takes the case-filing tribunal, which is most closely linked with the public, as the breakthrough point, accompanied by the civil division, criminal division, intellectual property division, speedy trial team, etc., with various court professionals involved, such as judges, assistant judges, and clerks. In terms of case selection, there are major cases with huge public concerns, civil disputes closely related to the general public, covering hot topics of people's livelihood, such as private lending, relocation compensation, competition for child custody, and labor disputes between online influencers and live broadcast companies under the new economic form. This shows the overall appearance of courts, the overall improvement of judicial productivity, and the outstanding achievements of the rule of law under the background of judicial reform in the new era.

The drama series presents multiple cases of "pre-litigation mediation" of civil disputes. Pre-litigation mediation refers to the settlement of legal disputes between the parties through mediation according to the law, so as to achieve the desired results of both parties. The mechanism, conforming to the traditional Chinese culture of "harmony is the most valuable," has the advantages of high efficiency, convenience and flexibility, can meet people's judicial demands in the shortest time, and effectively resolve social contradictions at their source. This follows the needs of China's judicial system reform, constituting an essential part of the pluralistic dispute resolution mechanism with Chinese characteristics, and has great significance for building a harmonious socialist society. Many cases in the drama have resorted to pre-litigation mediation, such as cases about the sudden death of a network anchor, reputation infringement, and sexual harassment in the workplace. As impartial neutrals, the judges and assistant judges of the case-filing tribunal led by the leading actor Fang Yuan (played by Jin Dong) coordinate the conflict of interests of all parties, and try to move the minds of the parties concerned to understand the reason from their point of view, helping them evaluate their interests and guiding them to make rational choices and decisions. Organizing back-to-back mediation to reach a settlement and maintain social harmony requires grass-roots judges to have wisdom both in work and life. In the drama, Judge Fang Yuan and his apprentice Zhou Yi'an have accumulated rich experience in grass-roots work, developing their own methodology for resolving contradictions and disputes, considering both principles and leniency. The demonstration of their pre-litigation mediation process vividly showcases law-based governance and law enforcement for the people, embodying distinct Chinese characteristics. The ingenious breakthrough of "Draw the Line" shatters conventional norms of legal dramas, charting a novel path for the development of legal dramas infused with Chinese experiences and characteristics.

### 3 Theme Implication: Deeply Reflecting Social Issues and Popularizing Law Awareness

Genre films may even serve as a contemporary alternative to the public space proposed by Habermas, because discourse formed by various socio-cultural forces may enter it, making it a symbolic place for social issues to be discussed.<sup>4</sup> Popularization of law awareness is one of the core demands of this drama. "Draw the Line" is deeply rooted in the social reality and is of great concern to the times. Taking judicial practice as the starting point, it shows dozens of typical cases closely related to people's daily lives. The "Campus Bullying Case" and the "Tang Xiaoyun's Matricide Case" deeply reflect the key issues in the field of education; the "Custody Modification Case," "Full-time Housewife Divorce Case" and "Wife with Cancer Divorce Case" involve the field of family and marriage; the "Case of Network Anchor's Sudden Death," "Milk Tea Store Franchising Case," "E-commerce Platform Case," and "Star Pianist Malicious Prosecution Case" reflect new disputes in the society during the economic transition period. The drama also adapted a number of hot events in reality, arousing the public's deep concern about the rule of law. Taking "Lei Xingyu's Murder Case for His Humiliated Mother" as an example, the "Case of the Humiliated Mother" in real life is highly controversial, which is complicated by jurisprudence, reasons, public opinion, and truth. "Does the son's killing behavior for his humiliated mother constitute legitimate defense?" Judge Song Yufei, the presiding judge of the first trial of Lei Xingyu's case, believes that the knife was put in the cabinet by Lei Xingyu in advance, which suggests a premeditated tendency, so Lei Xingyu was found guilty of intentional injury. In contrast, other judges held that the persistent injuries suffered by the mother and child were valid, and Lei Xingyu might not necessarily remember the previously hidden knife in such an extremity, so he should be ruled as self-defense. In the first trial, Lei Xingyu was sentenced to imprisonment for life, but new witnesses and evidence emerged in the second trial, bringing a big turning point to the case. In the end, the court found that Lei Xingyu's statement was true, his action was justified as self-defense, and he was sentenced to five years in prison. The plot highlights the deliberation process of this case without shying away from the intense debate of the judges, and shows key facts that the public rarely understands in flashbacks. The intricate interplay of jurisprudence and rationality, coupled with the identification of key evidence, the focus of public opinion, and the weighing and decision of judges, all serve to engage the audience in thoughtful contemplation. This is not only a process of disseminating legal knowledge, but also a vital step in fostering public comprehension.

With the frequent presence of real trial scenes in the drama, the audience seemed to watch the live trial, generating an authentic feel while watching. The solemnity of the court and the prestige of the judges are naturally demonstrated in the integrity of the procedure, arousing spontaneously a reverence toward the law. In addition, the legal interpretation and reasoning after the judgment in the trial play has been fully displayed. The interpretation and reasoning of the judgment documents improve the transparency, fairness, and legitimacy of the trial results, embodying the judge's understanding and insight into the rule of law, the pursuit and practice of justice, and the reflection and wisdom of life. The legal interpretation of the presiding judge in the drama is heart-

warming. In "Li Fangning's Workplace Sexual Harassment Case," the presiding judge commented that "China's socialist values promote harmony and friendship; mutual assistance and respect among colleagues are an important part of the construction of a good workplace atmosphere." In the case of "Network Anchor's Sudden Death," the presiding judge said, "What distinct humans from machines is that humans have their limits; when all the system designs of an enterprise are completely profit-oriented, they will stifle humans and humanity. The most important point of such stifling is that it leverages the narrative of self-value realization through struggle and various success doctrines as rhetoric to induce workers to voluntarily engage in self-exploitation." These plain words have demonstrated the authority and credibility of justice, enlarged the power of justice, and functioned as value guidance. In the barrage, excited viewers left comments such as "touched," "teary-eyed," "upholding justice," and "brimming with positive energy." In the form of sensible literary and artistic works, this drama reveals the essence of China's judicial reform: allowing people to sense fairness and justice in every judicial case.

In addition, "Draw the Line" boldly confronts social issues, shouldering the responsibility of literary and artistic works. In recent years, the debate on gender issues has been highly intense in the public opinion sphere, almost becoming a highly sensitive topic. Starting with two workplace harassment cases, the drama boldly delves into this sensitive area. Throughout the handling of the cases, various factors like truths, considerations from all parties, the impact of public opinion, and value orientations interplay. Even the contradictory perspectives of male and female judges on the issue are revealed. Judges are no longer depicted as infallible beings; they have their vulnerabilities and biases as ordinary people. The contemplation, growth, and rectification of judges in the drama also propels the audiences to reflect and adjust their cognitions. From the inundation of barrage comments in the episodes related to workplace harassment cases, we observe the diverse opinions of the viewers and the lively debates from different standpoints. In an audience-oriented film and television market environment, "Draw the Line" dares to touch sensitive topics and risks criticisms from public opinion and the market, in an attempt to popularize law awareness, promote justice, and spread positive energy. Through multiple cases, it reflects the hidden social reality problems, realizing the function of popularizing law awareness and witnessing the gradual improvement of the national judicial system.

#### **4 Character portrayal: compassionate and relatable judges and ensemble roles**

"Draw the Line" presents the inheritance of judicial spirit among the three generations of judges, portraying a vivid image of the new era's judges practicing their initial mission, upholding judicial fairness for the people, and safeguarding equity and justice. The major production team conducted thorough preliminary research. The literary director of the series, Wang Kai, stated that during one-on-one field investigations, they didn't directly inquire about work or cases. Instead, they delved into the details such as clothing and accessories of court personnel, photos of their children on phone screens,

and other subtle aspects. Temporarily setting aside any preconceived notions, they were able to elicit enthusiastic narratives and professional insights from the interviewees.<sup>5</sup> This approach ensured that the characters in the script were depicted authentically, avoiding shallowness and clichés, and exuding a genuine sense of life. In order to portray the judges as three-dimensional and lifelike as possible, Director Liu Guotong set the requirement of "utmost authenticity" for the actors.<sup>6</sup> Jin Dong, Cheng Yi, and several other lead actors immersed themselves in grass-roots courts months in advance, living and dining with the judges, experiencing the lives of judges firsthand. They observed court hearings, underwent repeated training in simulated courtrooms, and even participated in real-life mediation sessions. The production team also invited professional judges to be present throughout the filming process. Under the demonstration and guidance of these judges, the actors familiarized themselves with the professional trial procedures, grasped complex legal terminology, and deeply experienced the sanctity and solemnity of the law. These experiences were ultimately internalized into their performances. During the official filming, actor Jin Dong naturally exuded the authoritative and dignified aura of a judge in the courtroom scenes. On the day young actor Cheng Yi filmed the swearing-in scene, the oath had already been etched into his mind. The scene where he solemnly pledged before the national flag profoundly moved countless viewers.

The portrayal of the new era's judges in "Draw the Line" is refreshing. To meet the requirements of modern legal construction, China's community of judges is selected and cultivated based on elite standards. They should undergo high-level professional education and pass a series of examinations, such as the civil servant exam, the judicial examination, and the judge quota exam, to pursue the opportunity of being a judge. Consequently, judges are perceived by the general public as the representation of professionalism, mystique, and high professional prestige. To dispel these preconceptions and bring characters to life, the drama uses plain language in character portrayal, departing from the conventional picture of legal elites and presenting a multi-dimensional and vivid image of judges imbued with a flavor of life.

One of the representatives is President Fang Yuan, played by Jin Dong. The inspiration for this character stemmed from the in-depth interactions of the major production team with grass-roots judges. During the field research, the planners, scriptwriters, and directors all realized that grass-roots judges are continuously working at the frontline, requiring them to conduct multiple visits, gather evidence on-site, and engage in interviews and mediation. As a result, the down-to-earth demeanor and human touch are common traits of grass-roots judges. This understanding gave rise to the character of Fang Yuan, who embodies these typical qualities. At the beginning of the drama, Fang finds himself forcibly presented with a gift. This stages a comical chase through the city's alleyways as he tries to repay the money, leaving the presiding judge in an awkward situation. Possessing both the logic of daily life and artistic creation, the comedic setting sets the warm narrative tone and breaks away from the rigid, solemn image typically associated with judges. As the presiding judge of the case-filing tribunal, Fang serves the parties with tea and water and smiles to mediate disputes, earning him the affectionate nickname "Auntie Fang." He's even joked about as the "gatekeeper." What's particularly notable is his Mandarin, tinged with a Changsha accent and his ever-

present thermos, embodying a friendly and approachable image of a grass-roots judge deeply connected with the people. Several years of working experience in the filing hall have granted him a deep understanding of the complex human nature and inconstancy in human affection. During dispute mediation, he exhibits skill and finesse, combined with witty humor. Meanwhile, his rich experience and keen insight allow him to efficiently sift through limited evidence, unravel facts, and resolve conflicts to ensure outcomes align with the interests of both parties. Despite the complexity of tasks in the grass-roots court, it hasn't diminished his pursuit and dedication. Confronted with numerous intricate cases, he seeks the truth behind human nature, upholding the principles of fairness and justice enshrined in the law. The "Case of Network Anchor's Sudden Death" and "Workplace Harassment Cases" are all in the controversial realm of justice. He fearlessly confronts the challenges of judicial practice and pronounces judgments under immense social pressure, reflecting the continuous advancement of the rule of law and the ongoing enhancement of the judicial system in China. The storyline also illustrates the internal conflicts and struggles of grass-roots judges. In the second trial of the "Custody Modification Case," when Fang's judgment is overturned, he is full of grievances and sheds tears in private. When a law firm extends a high-paying job offer, he finds himself tempted. In his family life, he also grapples with various troubles; despite being highly competent at work, he struggles to help his daughter with her homework, and differences in beliefs with his wife nearly lead to divorce. Through the contradictions and dilemmas in work and life, the drama has successfully shaped a multi-dimensional, well-rounded, and relatable image of a judge.

The drama also depicts the growth lines of young judges like Zhou Yi'an and Ye Xin. Taking Zhou as an example, the character is initially set as a judicial assistant, emphasizing his characteristics as a newcomer in the workplace. He occasionally displays youthful impulsiveness, engaging in debates with colleagues and sometimes showcasing a playful and endearing side. His relationship with his mentor, Fang Yuan, is akin to that of a father and son. Despite deviating from the typical serious demeanor, Zhou is intelligent and astute, possesses excellent judgment and has imbibed the teachings of his mentor. He doesn't dwell on minor issues but stands firm on significant matters. In the "Custody Modification Case," he carefully collects evidence, overturns his mentor's judgment in the second trial, and staunchly upholds the interests of the involved parties. In the case of "False Accusation of Workplace Harassment," he confidently responds to the provocations of the individuals involved. The judge quota system is an essential measure in the judicial system reform. In the drama, Zhou undergoes a transformation from a judicial assistant to a post-judge. The solemn swearing-in ceremony for judges, which marks their appointment, provides a vivid glimpse into the nobility of the judicial profession and the sacred mission they shoulder. The storyline does not shy away from portraying the setbacks and blows encountered by young judges. Due to offending the evil person, his mother was stalked. In a moment of panic, he nearly loses his composure as a post-judge and almost resorts to violence. In the case involving Tong Rui, he is filled with guilt and struggles to face the situation, even submitting a resignation letter. "Is a judge's word really that important?"—this is his self-questioning, filled with doubt and confusion about himself. "I'm just a person, not a god" carries a deep sense of helplessness and frustration. Yet, in the end, he withstands

the torment of his soul and grows into a seasoned judge. The young actor Cheng Yi accurately grasps the character's personality, emotional threads, and inner journey. Through genuine and delicate acting, he portrays Zhou Yi'an's ideals, steadfastness, conflicts, and struggles, vividly showcasing the spiritual transformation of a young judge and evoking resonance in the audience's thoughts and emotions.

The courtroom workplace ecology depicted in the drama is both serious and tense yet light-hearted and lively. The series involves several mentor-mentee relationships. On the one hand, Fang Yuan and Zhou Yi'an are mentors and friends—passing down knowledge at work and supporting each other in their personal lives. On the other hand, Fang Yuan and civil court judge Chen Kang are both disciples of Zhang Weimin, the deputy chief judge of Xingcheng District Court. The three characters have different personalities. Fang Yuan called Chen Kang a "sly old fox." They are not only mentor and disciple but also partners, often playfully counteracting each other, earning them the nickname of "besties" among their colleagues. In the drama, the court leadership held a research conference. Facing the inspection from superiors, Fang Yuan seized the opportunity to point out the shortcomings in the work. Chen Kang remained silent, and Zhang Weimin was visibly displeased. After the meeting, Fang Yuan persuaded Chen Kang to accept Zhang Weimin's criticism together. The extreme tension between the dialogues has showcased distinct Chinese cultural characteristics. The performance of the three men portrayed a comical and amusing scene, allowing the audience to resonate and chuckle. Furthermore, the portrayal of characters like the bosom elder sister played by Wang Yanan, the clothing store owner played by Huang Xiaolei, and the cunning lawyer, Dylan, portrayed by Yue Yang, all possess high recognizability. The successful depiction of diverse characters condenses the myriad facets of society, presenting the entire drama with a vibrant and authentic life essence.

## **5 Artistic Technique: Realism Interwoven with Warm-Toned Life Narration**

Realism is an aesthetic style that demands a work to be deeply rooted in reality, faithful to the true face of life, grasp the contemporary context, resonate with people's emotions, and manifest humanistic sentiments. In order to make a solid script, Dangran Film, a subsidiary of Xiaoxiang Pictures Group, organized the major production team during the preparation phase to conduct in-depth research trips to more than 60 local courts in Changsha, Hengyang, Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and other places. They interviewed nearly 200 frontline court staff and collected over 500 representative cases with high societal attention, organizing and categorizing more than 100 cases that align with the spirit of the Civil Code<sup>7</sup>. All the major staff in the production team immersed themselves in the daily work and life of the courts. According to Shu Rui, the expert consultant of the drama, the literary director Wang Kai and the screenwriter Li Xiaoliang dropped in on a "mediation meeting" involving credit card disputes upon their first encounter. There were over forty defendants present. Judge Shu Rui and the assistants were busy meditating, successfully resolving disputes for over thirty people right on the spot<sup>8</sup>. This unique courtroom observation deeply impressed the two



main creators, solidifying their determination to conduct thorough grass-roots research. Over the next year and a half, the creative team continuously visited various levels of courts, experienced their lives, and refined the script. They went through 20 revisions before arriving at the final product we see today. The life-based artistic technique of realism has given the script of "Draw the Line" a highly authentic style.

"The essence of the domestic judicial system is that justice serves the people, aids the vulnerable, and protects the weak. Its undertone is warmth, which is also the biggest difference compared to foreign judicial systems," mentioned Director Liu Guotong in an interview. He said that the staff of the production team was deeply moved when they heard this sentence during their visits to the court, which became the source of the warm realism in the drama<sup>9</sup>. The series is rich in the authentic atmosphere of life, portraying colleagues in the court engaging in casual conversations, sharing grievances, and spending leisure time playing sports, making dumplings, and dining together. The depiction of the ups and downs of judicial personnel in their daily lives after shedding their judicial robes sets the warm and lifelike narrative tone. "Law has its scales, yet judges have their warmth." This is the insight expressed by the character Ye Xin after mediating a civil dispute in the drama. Starting from the grass-roots court's case-filing tribunal, the story portrays the everyday life of grass-roots judges mediating conflicts among the public. They unravel the conflicts and knots between the two parties in a short time by perspective-taking, using kind and persuasive words, and engaging in heart-to-heart conversations. For instance, when a couple on the verge of divorce neglects their child, Fang Yuan, holding the child, facilitates mediation during the court proceedings. In another case, a centenarian who spent half a lifetime in an old house received a court summons from the descendants of her late spouse. To ensure the centenarian celebrates her hundredth birthday there, Fang goes to great lengths, even seeking approval from the court director for an extension. In the case of "Mother with Cancer Seeking Divorce," which typically takes three months to complete, the judges work overtime to ensure the divorce proceedings are finalized before the plaintiff's passing, safeguarding the legal rights of her mother and daughter. These specific cases depict judicial figures with a human touch, vividly highlighting the humanistic radiance of "Law has its scales, yet judges have their warmth."

## 6 Conclusion

"Draw the Line" breaks free from conventional creation patterns and successfully achieves a narrative innovation in the genre drama. Adopting the realism artistic technique and a warm, lifelike narrative tone, it is highly attuned to the times while demonstrating courage and responsibility. In addition, it boldly addresses societal hot topics and deep-rooted issues, showcasing the latest achievements of judicial reform in China comprehensively. Alongside legal popularization, it portrays the warmth and intricacies of human relationships behind cases, evoking emotional resonance and contemplation on human nature and serving as a guiding light toward truth and goodness.

## About the author

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