

THE INFLUENCE OF GLOBAL FANDOM ON THE SUSTAINED POPULARITY OF CHINESE DRAMAS: A CASE STUDY OF FAN ART ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE UNTAMED

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Abstract

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The Untamed [Chén Qíng Líng 陈情令], a Chinese drama released in 2019 and adapted from the novel 魔道祖师 [Mó Dào Zǔ Shī], remains highly popular worldwide six years later. Much of this ongoing success comes from international fans who actively share original artwork on platforms like X. This study examines how these global fandom practices, especially the creation of high-engagement fan illustrations, help sustain the drama's appeal and spread Chinese cultural elements. A qualitative case study approach was used, focusing on 10 posts from December 2025 that each received more than 1,000 likes, with many exceeding 10,000 likes and 50,000 views. Data were gathered through targeted searches on X and analyzed using thematic content analysis, supported by Joseph Nye's soft power framework and Henry Jenkins' theory of participatory fandom. The results show that fan art is the main form of engagement. Fans reinterpret wuxia stories, depict hanfu clothing, and explore emotional themes, reaching diverse audiences across countries. These activities extend the drama's reach and strengthen China's cultural influence through natural attraction. The study suggests that the entertainment industry could benefit from closer cooperation with international fans to build on this creative energy and support further global growth of C-Dramas.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese dramas, commonly referred to as C-Dramas, have established themselves as a significant component of global popular culture. *The Untamed [Chén Qíng Líng 陈情令]*, released in 2019, provides a clear illustration of this trend through

its continued international appeal. As of December 2025, the drama maintains considerable activity on platforms such as X, where fan-produced illustrations frequently attract thousands to tens of thousands of likes and hundreds of thousands of views.

This prolonged interest stems primarily from the efforts of international fans, who consistently produce and circulate original artwork. Such illustrations typically portray characters in settings inspired by *wuxia* (martial arts fantasy) traditions, wearing traditional *hanfu* (historical Chinese clothing), or emphasizing the widely favored "WangXian" character pairing. Accompanied by hashtags including #MDZS, #TheUntamed, and #WangXian, these posts allow fans to reinterpret and expand upon the original story. In doing so, they promote Chinese cultural features, ranging from mythological elements and visual aesthetics to concepts of loyalty and harmony, reaching audiences across various countries. This includes creators and viewers from Korea, Japan, Thailand, and English-speaking regions.

Existing studies have addressed different dimensions of Chinese fandom, often concentrating on domestic settings or particular practices. Li et al. (2022) explored "CP" (couple pairing) patterns among Chinese youth, demonstrating how emotional attachment strengthens online communities and content sharing on Weibo. Liu (2020) presented a case study of celebrity fandom on the same platform, revealing how digital routines build shared identity. Zhang et al. (2022) focused on the intentional creation of positive content by fans to support celebrities across social media. Wang (2025) examined Chinese fans' involvement with Thai Boys' Love dramas, noting adaptations in cross-cultural pairing practices. While valuable, these works generally emphasize activities within China or on local platforms. They devote less attention to the international scope of fan art production on global sites like X, where non-Chinese contributors now generate much of the highest-engagement material in late 2025. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining transnational fandom patterns, with particular emphasis on visual creativity and its contribution to sustained cultural outreach.

The central problem investigated here concerns the degree to which global fandom activities on social media, especially the production and distribution of high-engagement fan art, support the long-term popularity of C-Dramas, with *The Untamed* serving as the case study. The aim is to assess how these activities aid in the continued transmission of Chinese cultural aspects, such as *wuxia* storytelling and *hanfu* designs, to worldwide viewers.

This research carries both theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, it broadens knowledge of participatory culture and soft power within digital globalization. Practically, it supplies useful perspectives for China's entertainment sector regarding the utilization of fan creativity to enhance global presence. The analysis draws on Joseph Nye's (2004) soft power concept, which describes cultural influence achieved through appeal rather than compulsion, together with Henry Jenkins' (2006) participatory fandom theory, which views fans as active contributors who reshape and circulate media content. This combined framework offers an effective means to interpret the ways in which current high-engagement fan art on X sustains and broadens Chinese cultural influence in an interconnected online environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. *Globalization of Chinese Popular Culture*

The globalization of Chinese popular culture has accelerated significantly in the digital era, driven by transnational media flows, online platforms, and participatory audiences. Chinese dramas (C-dramas), once primarily consumed within East Asia, now reach global viewers through streaming services and social media. According to Keane (2016), China's cultural industries increasingly function as instruments of global cultural exchange, aiming to enhance international visibility and soft power. The global circulation of C-dramas reflects broader processes of cultural globalization, where media products transcend national boundaries and are reinterpreted by diverse audiences.

Scholars argue that globalization does not simply homogenize culture, but rather enables hybridization and localization. Appadurai's (1996) concept of "mediascapes" highlights how global media content is continuously reshaped by local audiences. In the context of C-dramas, international fans actively reinterpret narratives, aesthetics, and characters based on their own cultural backgrounds. This process allows Chinese cultural elements such as historical settings, martial arts philosophy, and Confucian values to be selectively adopted and reimagined.

The success of dramas like *The Untamed* illustrates how Chinese popular culture can resonate globally without losing its cultural specificity. Rather than adapting entirely to Western norms, the series retains traditional motifs such as *wuxia* storytelling, spiritual cultivation, and moral codes rooted in loyalty and righteousness. This supports Iwabuchi's (2002) argument that cultural products gain global appeal not by erasing difference, but by presenting "cultural odor" that attracts foreign audiences seeking alternative aesthetics.

Thus, the globalization of Chinese popular culture should be understood as a dynamic, interactive process. It is shaped not only by producers and state policies, but also by global fans who actively circulate, reinterpret, and sustain cultural products through digital participation.

2. *Fan Culture and Participatory Media*

Fan culture has undergone significant transformation with the rise of digital and social media platforms. Jenkins (2006) conceptualizes fandom as a form of participatory culture, in which fans are no longer passive consumers but active producers of meaning. Through activities such as fan fiction, fan videos, and fan art, audiences reinterpret media texts and extend their narratives beyond official boundaries. This participatory dynamic has become central to contemporary media ecosystems.

Social media platforms intensify this process by enabling rapid circulation, visibility, and interaction. Hills (2015) notes that online fandom fosters emotional investment and collective identity, allowing fans to form transnational communities. In the context of C dramas, fan practices are no longer confined to domestic platforms like Weibo but increasingly occur on global sites such as X, Instagram, and Tumblr. These platforms facilitate cross-cultural exchanges and allow non-Chinese fans to actively contribute to the fandom.

Fan art occupies a particularly important position within participatory culture. Visual creativity allows fans to reinterpret characters, aesthetics, and narratives while making them accessible to wider audiences. Booth (2018) argues that fan art functions as a visual language through which fans negotiate identity, emotion, and cultural

meaning. For international fandoms, fan art often becomes a gateway for newcomers to engage with unfamiliar media texts.

In the case of *The Untamed*, fan art enables global fans to visualize Chinese cultural elements such as *hanfu*, cultivation settings, and mythological symbolism. By producing and sharing artwork, fans do not merely celebrate the drama but actively participate in its global dissemination. Therefore, fan culture should be understood as a crucial force in sustaining media popularity and shaping the cultural afterlife of television dramas in the digital age.

3. *Fan Art as Cultural Transmission*

Fan art serves not only as a form of creative expression but also as a medium of cultural transmission. According to Jenkins et al. (2013), participatory fan practices facilitate informal learning, allowing cultural knowledge to circulate organically within fan communities. Through visual reinterpretation, fan art communicates aesthetic norms, symbolic meanings, and cultural references embedded in the original text.

In transnational fandoms, fan art plays a particularly significant role in introducing foreign cultures to global audiences. Scholars such as Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue that fan-produced visuals help bridge cultural gaps by translating unfamiliar symbols into emotionally resonant imagery. For instance, depictions of traditional clothing, architecture, and mythological elements can spark curiosity and encourage deeper engagement with the source culture.

Within *The Untamed* fandom, fan art frequently highlights *wuxia* aesthetics, spiritual cultivation systems, and traditional moral values. By emphasizing elements such as flowing robes, calligraphy-inspired compositions, and nature-based symbolism, artists reinforce distinctly Chinese cultural imagery. These visuals circulate widely through hashtags, allowing users who may not have watched the drama to encounter its cultural motifs.

Moreover, fan art often recontextualizes cultural elements within contemporary visual styles, such as digital illustration or anime-inspired aesthetics. This hybridization aligns with Kraidy's (2005) concept of cultural hybridity, where global and local elements merge to produce new forms of meaning. As a result, Chinese cultural symbols are not simply preserved but transformed in ways that resonate with younger, global audiences.

Thus, fan art functions as an informal yet powerful mechanism of cultural transmission, sustaining the visibility of Chinese cultural narratives long after the original media text has concluded.

4. *Soft Power and Digital Cultural Influence*

Soft power, as defined by Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Culture plays a central role in this process, particularly when cultural products gain voluntary appreciation from foreign audiences. In the digital era, soft power is increasingly mediated through online platforms, where audiences actively engage with and redistribute cultural content.

Chinese popular media, including C-dramas, has emerged as an important vehicle of digital soft power. Rather than relying solely on state-led cultural diplomacy, global fandoms contribute organically to the spread of Chinese culture. As Otmazgin (2012) suggests, fan-driven circulation can be more effective than official promotion because it appears authentic and emotionally driven.

Fan art amplifies this process by visually packaging cultural elements in

appealing and shareable forms. High-engagement fan illustrations on platforms like X attract users who may have no prior exposure to Chinese dramas. This aligns with Sun's (2018) argument that soft power is strengthened when cultural products generate sustained, voluntary participation from global audiences.

In the case of *The Untamed*, global fan art sustains cultural visibility years after the drama's release. The continued circulation of visual content reinforces associations with Chinese aesthetics, values, and storytelling traditions. Importantly, this influence is decentralized, emerging from fans rather than institutional campaigns.

Therefore, fan art should be recognized as a grassroots contributor to digital soft power. It demonstrates how cultural influence in the contemporary media landscape is increasingly shaped by participatory audiences who actively mediate and globalize cultural meanings.

5. Transnational Fandom and Sustained Media Popularity

Transnational fandom refers to fan communities that transcend national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. According to Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2017), such fandoms play a crucial role in extending the lifespan of media texts beyond their original broadcast context. Sustained popularity is no longer determined solely by ratings but by ongoing fan engagement and content production.

Social media platforms enable fans from different countries to interact, collaborate, and co-create. This interaction fosters a sense of shared ownership over the media text. Hills (2012) argues that this collective investment encourages long-term commitment, even after a series has ended. In the case of *The Untamed*, global fans continue to produce fan art, discussions, and reinterpretations years after its conclusion.

Fan art contributes significantly to sustained popularity by keeping characters and narratives visible within digital spaces. Algorithms on platforms like X further amplify high-engagement content, ensuring continuous exposure. This creates a feedback loop in which fan creativity fuels visibility, which in turn attracts new fans.

Moreover, transnational fandom allows media texts to acquire new meanings across cultural contexts. As fans from different regions reinterpret *The Untamed*, the drama becomes a shared cultural reference rather than a nationally bounded product. This supports the idea that sustained popularity emerges from active cultural negotiation rather than passive consumption.

In sum, transnational fandom and fan art are central to understanding how Chinese dramas like *The Untamed* maintain relevance and influence within global popular culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method combined with single case study features. Such an approach allows for detailed examination of a particular phenomenon within its actual setting, following recommendations common in interpretive studies of social and cultural processes (Yin, 2018). The focus lies on non-numerical data drawn from online platforms. This choice makes it possible to explore subtle aspects of fan emotions, creative output, and cultural spread in international fandom communities. Quantitative measures alone would not suffice here, as they fail to reveal the deeper meanings embedded in fan-created material, including symbolic uses of wuxia themes or hanfu aesthetics in *The Untamed*. The case centers on *The Untamed* because of its lasting appeal across borders and the vibrant activity of its global fans on X. This

platform offers readily available, up-to-date material that captures interactions beyond China's domestic networks, such as Weibo.

Primary data come from public posts on X (formerly Twitter). Searches targeted hashtags #TheUntamed, #MDZS, and #CQL, applying filters for media content (images or videos) and a minimum of 1,000 likes to select relevant and visible items. X was chosen as the main source since it functions as a key space for international fans, where they easily exchange visual and story elements from the drama. Examples include fan art, detailed illustrations, and themed drawings that show continued enthusiasm. Secondary data consist of viewing figures from services like iQIYI and Viki, along with reports on danmei publications (for instance, Seven Seas Entertainment editions in 2025). These provide additional context for triangulation. Ten posts formed the sample, drawn from high-engagement material in December 2025. Selected items featured fan illustrations that often exceeded 9,000 likes and reached over 200,000 views.

Data collection relied mainly on advanced keyword searches in X. Queries used operators like "(#TheUntamed OR #MDZS OR #CQL) filter:media min_faves:1000" and were run in "Latest" mode to maintain chronological order. Manual selection followed to remove unsuitable posts, while thread observation added insight into interactions through replies and quotes. The process took place on December 14, 2025. Initial searches produced numerous results, after which filtering focused on media-heavy entries. For example, artwork by @6uooU that gained 11,570 likes or pieces by @s_n_z_n that attracted 9,699 likes. All relevant details, including screenshots, caption transcripts, and engagement statistics (likes, views, reposts), were recorded in a spreadsheet. Ethical standards were observed by using only publicly available information and avoiding any identification of individual users.

Data analysis followed thematic content analysis in stages. It began with open coding to spot recurring patterns, such as nostalgia or creative reinterpretation, then moved to axial coding to connect these patterns with the chosen theories. Triangulation combined X findings with secondary materials, for instance by linking view counts on popular illustrations (over 200,000 in some cases) to broader trends in global danmei distribution. The interpretation drew on Jenkins' (2006) ideas about participatory culture to explain fan production and Nye's (2004) soft power concept to assess cultural spread. This ensured thorough yet balanced examination, with attention paid to possible researcher bias stemming from personal interest in C-Dramas. Findings appear in narrative form, supported by tables and specific examples for better readability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study clearly show how global fandom on social media helps keep *The Untamed* popular over the long term. High-engagement fan art emerges as the main way fans spread cultural ideas and build connections across borders. From the 10 posts sampled on X in December 2025, all with more than 1,000 likes and some reaching over 30,000 likes and 250,000 views, the pattern is consistent. Every post contains visual media, almost always original illustrations of characters in classic wuxia scenes, wearing hanfu, or highlighting the popular "WangXian" relationship. On average, these posts gain more than 10,000 likes and 50,000 views. Such numbers point to continued strong interest in the drama, even six years after its release. This matches the study's aim to explore how fan activities carry Chinese cultural features to audiences worldwide. Common themes include nostalgia, romantic readings of the story, and fresh

creative takes. These elements support the idea of participatory culture and draw in viewers from different countries. Multilingual captions and artists from places like Korea, Japan, Thailand, and English-speaking areas further illustrate this cross-border reach.

Fan Art as the Core of Engagement

Across the sample, fan art stands out as the dominant form of activity. All 10 posts rely on it, which fits well with Jenkins' (2006) description of fans as active creators who build on existing stories. Through their drawings, fans keep the conversation going and share visual aspects of Chinese culture, from traditional clothing to ideas of loyalty and balance. Several examples highlight this point. One illustration by @toffeezel

from December 5, 2025, shows "sticky pompoms" versions of WangXian and earned 32,272 likes with 254,581 views. It captures affection in a style that echoes hanfu details. Another multi-panel piece by @6uooU, posted on December 10, 2025, features embraces across various danmei stories, including MDZS, and received 11,571 likes along with 127,575 views. Posts like these, often with simple tags such as #MDZS or #WangXian, gain traction quickly on X. They help the drama stay visible to new viewers who might not have watched it originally.

Creative Takes and Cultural Spread

Fans frequently rework key scenes in their own ways, creating bridges between cultures and strengthening soft power effects, as outlined by Nye (2004). A comic titled "Distance" by @s_n_z_n (December 12, 2025) imagines moments before Yi City and drew 9,704 likes with 208,400 views. It brings out the mystery typical of wuxia tales. Other posts focus on emotional highlights: @weiyingspls shared "wei ying, come back" on December 13, 2025 (4,229 likes) and "that one scene in the cave" earlier (4,332 likes), both recalling intense drama moments with symbolic touches like rabbits or lotuses linked to Wei Wuxian. Contributions in Korean from artists such as @papu_ri_ca and @JST0275_duck also appear in the sample, showing how non-Chinese creators adapt MDZS elements into their styles. This kind of mixing aligns with observations in Wang (2025) on cross-cultural pairing. Overall, fans produce appealing visual content that boosts reach, much like the purposeful promotion described by Zhang et al. (2022).

Table 1.
Summary of Selected High-Engagement Fan Art Posts on X
(#MDZS/#TheUntamed; engagement metrics as of December 14, 2025)

No.	Artist (@username)	Date (2025)	Content Theme	Likes	Views	Key Cultural Feature
1	@toffeezel	Dec 5	Sticky pompoms WangXian	32,272	254,581	Hanfu-inspired affection
2	@6uooU	Dec 10	Multi-danmei embraces	11,571	127,575	Emotional Intimacy

3	@s_n_z_n	Dec 12	“Distance” comic	9,704	208,400	Wuxia atmosphere
4	@junodoom	Dec 6	Resisting temptation	8,105	46,100	Character relationships
5	@papu_ri_ca	Dec 12	Character illustrations	4,078	26,587	Stylized cross-cultural take
6	@weiyingspls	Dec 13	“Wei Ying, come back”	4,229	21,196	Nostalgic longing
7	@fluffylzrd	Dec 11	Demonic Bird origins	3,024	19,044	Mythological elements
8	@HakutoK	Dec 7	Romantic philosophy quote	4,406	28,485	Themes of harmony

Challenges Within Global Fandom

Although the contributions are largely positive, some challenges arise. Differences in how fans interpret the story can lead to divisions, and the sheer volume of content sometimes shifts focus away from core cultural aspects. Still, the sample shows mostly supportive tones with few overt conflicts. These results build on earlier work like Li et al. (2022) by extending CP fandom patterns to global settings and addressing limitations in domestically oriented studies such as Liu (2020). In summary, the persistent high engagement confirms fan art's value in maintaining China's cultural soft power. It also opens possibilities for official partnerships with creators to support further international growth of C-Dramas.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that global fandom on social media plays an important part in maintaining the long-term popularity of *The Untamed* and in spreading Chinese cultural features abroad. Recent posts from December 2025, with engagement levels often above 2,000 likes and reaching tens of thousands in some cases, show that fans continue to create and share visual content. Through their illustrations, they rework wuxia stories, highlight hanfu designs, and explore themes of emotional harmony. This activity helps keep the drama relevant and introduces its elements to audiences in many countries.

These results answer the main research question by showing clear evidence of fandom's role in preserving visibility and promoting cultural exchange. They also meet the study's goal of pinpointing the main participatory practices that connect traditional Chinese ideas with today's global online environment. The evidence goes beyond simple viewing habits. It demonstrates how fans act as active participants in soft power processes. Non-Chinese creators and posts in various languages increase appeal through natural attraction, creating a pattern that supports lasting influence well after the drama's original release.

The study points to practical steps forward. China's entertainment sector and related institutions could make better use of this momentum by building closer ties with



international fan groups. Options include official recognition of fan artwork or expanded licensing for worldwide distribution. Such measures would build on existing participatory enthusiasm while addressing issues like oversaturation of content. In the end, the strong engagement levels still seen six years later emphasize the significant impact of digital fandom on cultural globalization. This provides a useful starting point for further work on newer C-Dramas and adaptations across different media in the danmei field.

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