

Resonance as Selling Point: A Multidimensional Examination of the Product Placement in Contemporary Chinese Screen Media

Cai Xie*

Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, China
xiecai409@126.com

Abstract: By reviewing the brief history of product placement in Chinese film and television since the reform and opening-up, this paper reveals the evolutionary characteristics of content marketing: the placement model has shifted from "wild product placement" to "autonomous product placement," and the type of placement has gradually evolved from "necessity-based" to "social-based" and "knowledge-based." The so-called "wild product placement" refers to the early stage of Chinese film and television, where after broadcast, the shows unintentionally triggered purchasing behavior among audiences. These phenomena were typically accidental, lacked commercial planning, and their success models were often not replicable. In contrast, "autonomous product placement" refers to the proactive planning and deep integration of marketing by production teams and brand sponsors before broadcast. This transformation reflects the path of China's consumption upgrading and the commercialization of the film and television industry: film and television works are no longer merely content for consumption but have become bridges connecting products, culture, and social scenarios. In the future, the product placement model of Chinese film and television works is likely to continue developing in a direction that emphasizes greater cultural depth and more precise groups of target audiences.

Keywords: content marketing; celebrity endorsement; content-based selling strategy

1. Introduction

“Dài Huò” (literally “product placement” or “Influencer marketing”), originally a colloquial expression widely used in Chinese live streaming and e-commerce, can be defined in academic and business contexts as a process in which the influence of specific content, personalities, or scenarios stimulates consumers’ attention, interest, and purchase intention toward certain products, ultimately leading to actual purchasing behavior. Its essence lies in trust transfer—the consumer’s trust in or affinity for the endorser (e.g., celebrities, influencers, or characters in a TV drama) is converted into consumption of specific products.

In recent years, the product-promotion power of popular Chinese TV dramas and films has repeatedly exceeded our expectations. The kinds of products that can move from the screen to the market are remarkably diverse—ranging from scarves, lipsticks, and bracelets to The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions—anything has the potential to become a viral hit. When we attempt to review the brief history of product placement through film and television since China’s reform and opening-up, a clear trend emerges: the product placement model in Chinese screen media has undergone a transformation from “wild” to “autonomous”, and from “necessity-based-driven” to “social-driven” and “knowledge-driven”.

In the early “necessity-based-driven” model, consumers’ purchase motivations were straightforward and simple—mainly to meet basic living needs. In the currently dominant “social-driven” model, buyers value the sharing attributes of products and the sense of community identity they bring. In the “knowledge-driven” model, consumers are attracted by the cultural connotations and spiritual value of the products.

2. Stage One: The Embryonic State of the "Experience Economy"

At the beginning of China's reform and opening-up, platforms such as television, newspapers, and radio were all scarce media resources. Consequently, brand information conveyed through these media

also naturally meant scarcity. During this stage, users' decision-making costs for purchases were relatively low. One could say that any brand or product, once it gained exposure on the media and achieved a certain level of recognition, was guaranteed to see sales. At that time, ordinary Chinese audiences had few sources of information to judge product quality, making it easy for them to follow the crowd and buy.

This was the 1.0 era of product placement in China's film and television.

In the 1980s, as the Hong Kong TV drama *The Bund* became a hit across various television stations in Chinese mainland, large quantities of pirated "white scarves same as Xu Wenqiang's" appeared in shops nationwide. More than four decades later, white scarves bearing the keyword "Xu Wenqiang same style" are still sold well on e-commerce platforms.

The 1980s and 1990s marked the golden age when Hong Kong films and TV dramas flooded into Chinese mainland. This period can be regarded as the 1.0 era of product placement, and also a time when intellectual property awareness was just beginning to take shape in China. The industrial chain linking film and TV drama IPs with their "peripheral" products had not yet been established. The creators of popular TV dramas, whose works inadvertently boosted certain products, were unable to reap greater profits from the show's popularity. This was the "wild" (wild product placement) model. In the 1.0 era of product placement, "necessity-based-driven" was common, mainly involving products closely related to people's daily lives, such as clothing and food. For example, the Xu Wenqiang-style scarf not only allowed people to strike a pose but also provided warmth, with practical value. Similarly, the 1996 hit historical drama *The Prime Minister Liu Luoguo* not only made a relatively unknown actor famous but also boosted the popularity of Lipu taro (an edible agricultural product). This kind of consumption behavior, driven by the storyline, stemmed purely from the natural overlap between the audience's emotional projection onto the characters and their real-life scenarios. At that time, there was no precise algorithm recommendation or mature commercial ecosystem to support such consumption. The popularity of these products relied more on the social effect generated by word-of-mouth among ordinary viewers in front of their TV sets. By imitating the outfits of characters (or celebrities) or tasting the same food, viewers gained a sense of psychological satisfaction and identity that transcended the screen. Although this simple and spontaneous "wild product placement" lacked systematic commercial operations, it genuinely reflected the subtle influence of mass culture on consumption. Such consumption behavior also laid the initial mass foundation for the further commercialization of film and television IPs.

In the era of "wild product placement," limited by the underdeveloped productivity and purchasing power of the time, not every hit TV drama had the capacity for content marketing.

However, while economic conditions could restrict fans' purchasing power, they could not restrict their imagination. In the 1990s, at various tourist destinations across the country, one-stop services for renting ancient costumes and taking photos emerged. In an era when consumerism was not yet encouraged, Chinese fans were enthusiastic about trying "celebrity-style looks" that might not necessarily suit them. The underlying motivation was a combination of admiration for others' beauty and a compensatory psychological need^[1]. This was the early version of the "experience economy".

3. Stage Two: From “Seeing” to “Emotional Resonance”

3.1 The Evolution of TV/Film Product Placement and E-commerce Live Streaming

The second stage of the "experience economy" in China developed hand in hand with the rise of e-commerce. It was in 2003 that e-commerce truly entered the lives of ordinary Chinese people. That year, the famous Chinese e-commerce platform Taobao burst onto the scene. The emergence of e-commerce greatly enhanced the purchasing experience of Chinese consumers and provided more possibilities for the implementation of "content marketing" in film and television. In this sense, the 2001 Chinese New Year film *Big Shot's Funeral* (directed by Feng Xiaogang) was ahead of its time. Through its absurd plot, it foresaw the distorted development of the cultural industries after capital entered the field of cultural production. In Feng Xiaogang's film, we see that advertising space at a celebrity's funeral is incredibly expensive—even the few square centimeters on the host's microphone are not missed by advertisers. Ironically, the top influencer in *Big Shot's Funeral* is the silent protagonist of the funeral—the deceased famous director Tyler. And the product categories forcefully inserted by sponsors at the funeral are outrageous, including furniture, mineral water, bust-enhancing cream, and other items that have almost no connection to the deceased.

What *Big Shot's Funeral* predicted was the 2.0 era of content-driven commerce in China's film and television industry: sponsors and brand logos were almost ubiquitous, and the product placement in films, TV series, and even variety shows was deliberate and heavy-handed. But there is no doubt that after entering the 21st century, China's film and television commerce was undergoing a comprehensive upgrade from "wild product placement" to "autonomous product placement."

As shown in *Big Shot's Funeral*, brand owners wanted their product logos to achieve high-density exposure in films and TV shows, even if it meant doing so in an absurd or exaggerated way. This emphasis on brand presence reflected the level of intellectual property awareness among most Chinese companies at the time: brands wanted to be seen by more people. The companies that aggressively sought presence in *Big Shot's Funeral* were a microcosm of the sponsors in the 2.0 era of film and TV commerce. The products exposed on various carriers were mostly closely related to the public's daily necessities—clothing, food, housing, and transportation. And because the products themselves lacked distinctiveness, they needed to be loudly promoted. At that time, brand owners believed that "being seen" was success; whether the audience remembered the brand or made a purchase was left to fate. In this stage, films and TV series were "one-way transmitters," and sponsors pursued exposure rather than conversion rates. Even if the audience saw the brand name, they lacked the channels and motivation to make an immediate purchase. After all, when *Big Shot's Funeral* was released in 2001, there was almost no connection between the creators of Chinese film and television works and e-commerce platforms.

Since 2003, with the rise of domestic e-commerce, the way of content marketing in Chinese films and TV series gradually changed. Some brand sponsors began to pursue product placement that is "silent and subtle" (like a gentle rain that moistens plants without a sound). For example, the mineral water drunk by An Di (the female lead) in the TV series *Ode to Joy* (2016) and the bag carried by Gu Jia (the female lead) in *Nothing But Thirty* (2020) both triggered spontaneous searches and purchases of the same products by audiences on e-commerce platforms, thanks to their high compatibility with the characters' images and personalities^[2]. In this stage, e-commerce platforms (such as Taobao and JD.com) had become widespread in China, and audiences could achieve a "what you see is what you get" conversion through the search behavior ("watch and buy"). However, the problem of content marketing in films and TV series still existed: the jump from "watching a film or TV show" to "purchasing on an e-commerce platform" still relied on the audience's active search, and the conversion gap between emotional resonance and purchasing behavior remained large.

3.2 The "Soft Implantation" of Scenes and Emotions: TV Dramas Turn into "Tourism Promotional Videos"

In the 1980s and 1990s, the popularity of TV adaptations of China's Four Great Classical Novels—*Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West*—pioneered the phenomenon of TV dramas inadvertently becoming "tourism promotional videos." Structures such as the Grand View Garden, the City of Three Kingdoms, and the Water Margin City were built from the ground up, becoming tourist memories for an entire generation. However, this content marketing model relied heavily on the inherent traffic of classic IPs. For the vast majority of ordinary film and television works that do not have the endorsement of literary masterpieces, whether the filming location could "generate its own reputation" and attract tourists remained a persistent challenge.

Then came a turning point.

In 2023, the hit TV drama *The Knockout* (Kuáng Biāo) unexpectedly brought Jiangmen tourism into the spotlight, prompting a reexamination of a long-unresolved question: how TV dramas can drive tourism?

In the past, TV dramas adapted from Chinese literary works achieved success in driving tourism essentially through the "victory of landscape restoration." Audiences spontaneously visited the Grand View Garden to see with their own eyes the Xiaoxiang Lodge and the Hengwu Courtyard described in the novel—a tangible confirmation of their literary imagination. However, this model is non-replicable: it requires the original work to have a massive readership base, and the filming location's scenery must closely match the scenes described in the original text.

In contrast, *The Knockout* popularized the city of Jiangmen, where the drama was filmed, by taking an entirely new path. The numerous "iconic scenes" in the drama were not famous tourist attractions, but rather the streets, arcade buildings (Qilou), and old factory areas of Jiangmen's old city. The key to inspiring tourists' desire to visit these locations lay in the integration of plot and setting. The male protagonist Gao Qiqiang's confrontation with An Xin in the old factory street, the female lead Chen

Shuting slowly walking out from under the arcade building — these "iconic scenes" left a deep impression on the audience. Tourists did not visit the city because "this is a famous scenic spot," but because "this place carries the fates and emotions of the characters in the drama." Unable to become the characters themselves, tourists can at least feel the emotions of the story. This shift from "landscape worship" to "emotional resonance" is the core element in upgrading the tourism-driving capability of film and television works.

4. "Upgrading" of Merchandising Capability: The Integration of E-commerce Live Streaming and Cinematic Narrative

Since 2020, China has fully entered the era of e-commerce live streaming, and the traditional logic of film and television content marketing has been completely transformed. Live streamers often recreate the "iconic scenes" from movies and TV shows in their studios — for example, when selling the same edition of *The Art of War* that appeared in *The Knockout*, they would first play a clip of the male lead discussing the book, then recount the character's story, and finally push the product link. This model bridges the "emotional resonance" that films and TV dramas evoke in audiences with the "immediate conversion" of e-commerce sales^[3]. Films and TV series are no longer "passive advertising slots"; instead, they have become "content material libraries," and live streamers have transformed into "secondary interpreters" who directly convert the emotional potential of the drama into purchasing momentum.

This type of content marketing is something that Feng Xiaogang could not have foreseen when he directed *Big Shot's Funeral* in 2001. We can call it 3.0 era in Chinese film and television industry's merchandising.

With the development of mobile internet in recent years, smartphones have gradually become another organ of the human body. As education has become more widespread and the cultural level and purchasing power of smartphone users have increased, the new generation of smartphone users, when consuming cultural products, pay more attention to the acquisition of cultural knowledge or the improvement of professional skills. They exhibit an upgraded demand for "poetry and the distant horizon." Audiences not only want to experience the items used by characters in the drama and see the landscapes they saw, but also want to buy the books they read, showing a stronger willingness to pay for knowledge and sentiment. The driving force behind these consumption behaviors corresponds to the "self-actualization" need described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

In film and television dramas, and even in online shopping live rooms, a knowledge-based merchandising model has emerged. But problems have also followed: how exactly should the goods be sold? Intentionally showing the books the characters read, the paths they walked, and the songs they listened to in the frame is a common form of merchandising today. However, beyond this, are there more imaginative and creative ways to sell products?

Knowledge-based merchandising sounds advanced, but in the end, its goal is still to sell products, and it must ultimately return to the product itself. How to organically integrate the pragmatic "commodity attributes" with the refined "cultural tone" is a pressing issue that cultural industry workers need to solve.

A noteworthy case is the classic IP of Xuanzang, which emerged in response to China's "Belt and Road Initiative" in recent years. The derivatives developed around the Xuanzang IP, including films, TV series, documentaries, books, tourism products, and animation, have opened up new ideas for the traditional model of film and TV merchandising, refreshing people's imagination of "cultural merchandising." The classic novel *Journey to the West* continues to be sold well, and the domestic online game *Black Myth: Wukong* has remained at the top of download charts. In addition, multilingual documentaries related to Xuanzang are being produced en masse and promoted globally. Some obscure ancient books have also unexpectedly become popular; for example, the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* published by Zhonghua Book Company had a print run of over 100,000 copies in 2020, shattering the conventional wisdom that Chinese ancient books "usually have a print run of no more than 3,000 copies." "Retracing Xuanzang's Journey" has become a blockbuster IP in both academia and tourism. The related academic works and travel guides are readily available everywhere. The "Xuanzang craze" has, to some extent, promoted the upgrading of the film and TV merchandising model, endowing film and television works with richer spiritual value beyond mere entertainment.

During the period of 2025–2026, Chinese film and television dramas continued to contribute several successful cases in merchandising. These cases exhibit diverse characteristics, covering long-form dramas, online short dramas, and IP derivative development. The "long-tail effect" of well-known IPs

has also been further amplified. Take the TV series *Mysterious Lotus Casebook* as an example. Although it first aired in 2023, its astonishing long-tail commercial value demonstrated in 2025–2026 makes it a model of merchandising in screens. Its derivative sales include card blind boxes and posable figures, and these peripheral products have remained extremely popular, with cumulative sales exceeding 250 million RMB. The cross-industry and co-branding marketing of *Mysterious Lotus Casebook* has also been equally successful. The co-branded drink with the tea brand Guming achieved daily sales of over 10 million cups, with GMV of 300 million RMB. In terms of cultural tourism integration, iQiyi Paradise in Yangzhou created an "immersive zone of *Mysterious Lotus Casebook*" themed around the series, successfully converting online traffic into offline experiential consumption.

In summary, when the creators of films and brand sponsors shift from "showing presence" to "building trust," it actually reflects an upgrade in enterprises' understanding of consumers: consumers are no longer satisfied with "knowing about a certain drama or having heard of a certain brand." Instead, they need to feel that "this drama matches my personality and belongs to the world I yearn for."

5. Conclusion

Currently, China's e-commerce platforms (such as Douyin and Kuaishou) are integrating the narrative techniques of film and television dramas with the algorithmic recommendations of e-commerce. Some brands are even funding the production of short dramas themselves, making the product the core of the plot, allowing viewers to directly click on the shopping cart and complete a purchase while binge-watching the series. The boundary between television dramas and e-commerce has become completely blurred. Content marketing is no longer an "added value" to film and television works but has become the very purpose of content creation itself. In the future, with the popularization of AI-generated content, virtual streamers, and immersive shopping experiences, the integration of film and television and e-commerce will become even more thorough. Perhaps one day, when Chinese audiences watch a drama, every single frame could be directly converted into a purchase link, and "merchandising" will no longer be a subsidiary function of film and television but one of its core narrative logic. However, no matter how content marketing strategies evolve, what truly moves people on screen remains characters, stories, and emotions — only when audiences are willing to invest in "feelings" and "emotions," and are willing to pay for "resonance," can merchandising truly succeed.

In the field of content marketing, China's film and television industry still has enormous development potential in the future. For the creative side, optimizing content marketing strategies is important, but the most urgent task is to proactively construct the underlying logic of "cultural embedding."

First, when shaping characters, film and television dramas need to imbue them with deeper cultural connotations. For example, the image of Xuanzang not only signifies that he was a great historical figure who truly existed, but also represents spiritual symbols such as "faith," "the pursuit of truth," and "cross-cultural dialogue." These symbols inherently possess merchandising potential. At the same time, the character image must be authentic and credible, as this is the emotional foundation for tourism-related merchandising. Audiences are willing to visit a filming location essentially because they have established an emotional connection with the characters in the drama. Xuanzang's stubborn persistence in his journey to the West to obtain Buddhist scriptures makes the audience willingly "project" this character onto specific locations, and they are willing to travel to China's northwest to retrace the "Xuanzang Road" through the desert.

Second, the driving force of production at the creative end needs to be further adjusted — shifting from "merchandising" to "promoting culture." The fact that *The Knockout* made *The Art of War* popular demonstrates that knowledge-based merchandising has gradually moved from an occasional phenomenon to a normal state. Audience consumption trends show that they are no longer satisfied with buying the same lipstick, bracelets, bags, or clothing that appear in TV dramas; instead, they are more eager to gain emotional value and intellectual inspiration by consuming certain cultural products. This requires film and television works to not only provide entertainment but also take on the functions of "knowledge dissemination" and "value output." Merchandising in the future may place greater emphasis on "spiritual value" — for example, a drama can popularize a certain entrepreneurial idea, a philosophical system, or a lifestyle.

The ultimate form of content marketing in film and television may well be "equal emphasis on cultural dissemination and commercial conversion." When a drama can make an ancient city, an obscure academic discipline, or a set of ancient books popular, its commercial value is no longer limited to advertising revenue; it becomes the "engine" of the entire cultural industries' chain. This requires film

and television production companies, broadcasting platforms, publishers, and cultural tourism institutions to establish closer collaborative mechanisms, embedding product designs and marketing plans related to the storyline from the initial scriptwriting stage. In the future, Chinese audiences will no longer be passive consumers; instead, they will participate in the inheritance of refine culture through "knowledge-based consumption," gaining more life experiences beyond the entertainment act of "watching." This may be the inevitable path for China's film and television industry to transform from "traffic dependence" to "value supply."

References

- [1] Sandra Arrivé. *Selling Dreams or Products: A Study of Brand Content Strategy Through the Lens of the Economies of Worth Theory – The case of Louis Vuitton*. *Decisions Marketing*[J]. 2021(10-12), 145-162.
- [2] Linda D. Hollebeek; Keith Macky. *Digital Content Marketing's Role in Fostering Consumer Engagement, Trust, and Value: Framework, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications*. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*. Vol 45, 2019(2), 27-41.
- [3] Logan, Elliott. *Over and Over: Performance, Time, and Resonance in Serial Television Drama*[M], Rutgers University Press, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978817029>