

Daoism Across Cultures: The Global Journey of Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*

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Abstract

The increasing global popularity of Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation demonstrates the growing presence of East Asian literary traditions within world literature. The research argues that the novel's global reception is not the result of cultural homogenisation but a dynamic process in which traditional Chinese philosophical thought, including Daoism's influence, is reinterpreted through modern digital storytelling and transnational fan participation. This study examines how key Daoist principles are incorporated into xianxia world-building, tracing how philosophical concepts are transformed into narrative structures, character development, and cosmological systems. The research investigates how these principles shape the cultivation system, sect hierarchies, ethical conflicts, and protagonists' journeys toward self-realisation and transcendence. The study considers how culturally specific values become accessible to international audiences while retaining their distinctive cultural identity. The study indicates that cultural hybridity enables readers to negotiate unfamiliar philosophical concepts, cultural proximity fosters emotional and thematic connections across cultures, and participatory fan translation helps extend the novel's global reach. This combined process has transformed Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation from a contemporary Chinese web novel into a globally recognised literary work. The study concludes that the convergence of Eastern philosophy, digital media, and participatory translation expands the boundaries of world literature by questioning conventional models of literary circulation and demonstrating how culturally rooted narratives can achieve universal resonance in the digital age.

Keywords: Daoism, Xianxia, Digital Storytelling, Cultural Translation, and World Literature.

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Introduction:

In this digital era, literature has reached audiences through different media platforms, including eBooks, audiobooks, comics, graphic novels, radio drama, hypertext, interactive fiction, and more. Writing and publishing, once a tedious, lengthy process, has become hassle-free. Today, writers have more options and can choose to publish their work on popular online forums across the globe. Modern publishing gives readers endless choices in genres, tropes, moods, and formats to match their exact preferences.

The most influential online forums in China that we now know were founded between the late 1990s and early 2000s. Notable websites that still have huge followings include *Banyan Tree* (1998), *Fragrant Red Sleeves* (1999), *Jinjiang Literature City* (2003), and *Starting Point* (2002). These online platforms have become business models that generate revenue by making these forums desirable for both writers and readers. These forums have come a long way, from writers self-publishing their works for free to offering pay-per-chapter, promoting their works, providing copyright protection, offering extensive contracts that let writers profit from media adaptations, and building a vibrant reading community across the globe. The most popular genres in Chinese Internet Literature are Xuanhuan, Xianxia, Wuxia, Danmei, Qihuan, and so on. The forums also promote certain genres to men and others to women. Male readers of online literature in China prefer military, history, sci-fi, games, and sports, whereas fantasy, romance, and time travel/transmigration are popular among female readers.

Objectives and Aim:

The article presents three key points: first, it examines how Daoist philosophical concepts serve as the foundational premise in xianxia worldbuilding; second, how this ancient philosophy stays relevant in modern times; and third, how this philosophy can cross borders and reach new audiences through digital spaces. The research aims to understand the xianxia world through a Daoist philosophical framework. To illustrate this point, the research paper will examine Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's popular work, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and its rise to worldwide fame and momentum.

Analysis and Discussion:

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation was Mo's first work published as a web novel in *Jinjiang Literature City*. It was released from 2015 to 2016. Later, Seven Seas Entertainment translated it into English and obtained the English edition copyright in 2021. The book was adapted into a drama series titled "Untamed" in 2019, and further adapted into comics from 2023 to 2026, an animated series under the same title between 2018 and 2021, and audiobooks in 2023. Media contributions like cosplay, fan art on websites like *Tumblr*, X posts, fan edits, and fanfiction caught everyone's eye and welcomed readers from around the world. Wei Wuxian, a renowned spiritual cultivator, became the grandmaster of demonic cultivation after several unforeseen events forced him onto the dark path to protect common people

suffering in the war. He lost his clan members in the war, forging a new path of darkness; he lost all the people he loved, eventually losing himself in the war without a trace; not even his soul could be retrieved to bury him. The world rejoiced at the defeat of the demonic cultivator, but his end in the burial mound is just the beginning. After 13 years after the death of Wei Wuxian, his spirit is once again summoned by Mo Xuanyu to take revenge on his behalf. The story continues with Wei Wuxian, along with the righteous man Lan Wangji, who fought beside Wei Wuxian to uncover the truth of the brutal war that destroyed their loved ones. This novel, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, showcases the Daoist cultivation system, sect hierarchy, ethical conflicts, and transcendence. This research paper exclusively highlights the Daoist elements.

The word “xianxia” translates to immortality or transcendence. Xianxia is a high-fantasy genre in which humans strive to become “xian” (immortal) by cultivating spiritual energy. A characteristic of xianxia is its focus on the close relationships among sworn brothers, camaraderie, and friendships between men. Danmei, as a sub-trope, explores the romantic relationship between men. The female-oriented xianxia may include Danmei as a sub-trope featuring the emotional intimacy and loyalty between two male protagonists. Male-oriented xianxia novels are written and marketed only to men, while female-oriented xianxia novels are read by anyone regardless of their gender. Though xianxia-danmei novels attract a wider audience for their queer narration, romance always comes second to the epic fantasy elements of the xianxia. Even in danmei, female-oriented xianxia novels qualify as xianxia rather than being sidelined as romances because they incorporate immersive xianxia elements, with intense relationships between the protagonists and an appealing path not entirely driven by romance.

This genre utilises three various philosophical concepts from Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This paper highlights Daoism’s influence on Xianxia worldbuilding. According to Helle, Daoism is one of China’s native religions. Some of the earliest classical Daoist texts are *the Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*. The texts laid the foundation for the evolution of Daoism as a religion. The people follow the “Dao”, which means path. The cultivators seek the path of enlightenment or immortality. In a philosophical sense, “Dao” cannot be defined or named. It is boundless, infinite, ineffable, and omnipresent. Dao can be utilised as a pattern by which people strive to align themselves with the cosmic order—in other words, living in harmony with the natural flow of the universe. “According to Daoist philosophy, nature operates effortlessly and spontaneously, following the Dao without interference. Human beings, as part of the natural world, are encouraged to align themselves with this spontaneous order rather than attempting to dominate or control it” (Musacchio). The Three Treasures, “Sanbao”, in Daoism are Essence “Jing”, Breath “Qi”, and Spirit “Shen.” Essence (Jing) is the body inherited from parents at birth; Breath (Qi) is the invisible life force or energy that fuels the body; and Spirit (Shen) is the consciousness connecting humans to the heavens, including emotions, thoughts, and spiritual insights. The concept of “wanwu” refers to the

objects and phenomena that exist and occur in the manifested world (Pregadio). Wan means ten thousand, and Wu refers to things or creatures.

Wanwu grows, changes, and decays, showcasing oneness in its presence. The word “Ziran” can be defined as balanced energy. Zi means self, and Ran means naturally. When a person’s Sanbao flow is without interference, they naturally align with the rhythm of the universe. The *Daodejing* states that “humanity follows earth, earth follows heaven, and heaven follows the dao, the dao follows ziran” (Pregadio). Cultivators of Daoism strive to achieve things through effortless action, which is known as “wuwei”, meaning non-doing. They align themselves with nature and achieve things without stress, strain, or friction, but only through self-manifestation.

The world-building in xianxia, rooted in Daoist philosophies, can be classified into three forms: *Cultivation* Path, *Cultivation* Empires, and Primordial Chaos. *Cultivation* Path concentrates on the ultimate goal of achieving immortality. “The former head of the Mo clan had high hopes that his son would certainly become an immortal as fast as he could, bringing glory to his ancestors” (17). *Cultivation* Empires involve imperial empires, where cultivators reign supreme and are entrusted with protecting their clan. This trope involves a lot of political tension, hierarchy, war, and betrayals. Jin Clan, as the supreme clan, grew in power: “their disciples were raised to dominate others without scruple... Inferior clans, no matter how much they were humiliated, had no choice but to swallow it down” (59). This excerpt shows the blatant hierarchy between the clans. Primordial Chaos includes a calamity cycle in which destruction is inevitable. The destruction comes in the form of war, famine, plague, and droughts. The trope often necessitates a hero’s rise and a plea to, or challenge to, Heaven to safeguard the people. The intervention of Heaven causes the calamity.

The famous web novel writer Mo Xiang Tong Xiu’s *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* world is based on a combination of the tropes The *Cultivation* Path and *Cultivation* Empires. Mo’s *Heaven’s Official Blessing* is grounded in Primordial Chaos. In this epic fantasy genre, world-building draws on Daoist principles from ancient China, with a clear distinction between people from lower sects and higher sects. “In the eyes of the mundane folk, cultivation clans that pursued immortality were loved by the heavens, mysterious and noble” (16). People from lower sects do not harness spiritual energy; hence, they are not cultivators.

The people who can harness spiritual energy, which is used to fight against evils like spiteful ghosts, dark spirits, fierce corpses, beasts, and fiends, are considered cultivators. Mostly nobles from higher sects practice spiritual energy to keep evil away. They possess spiritual instruments, spells, incantations, talismans, and pills to fight evil. A recurrent theme in the xianxia universe is its progression system. The clans seek to achieve a higher position among other clans by cultivating against evils. This also shows the hierarchy between clans and highlights inequality, wealth disparity, and political and power struggles. “If an ordinary clan-one without generations of accumulated reputation to stand on . . . they had to show tangible

achievements. Only when they hunted down ruthless monsters or disaster-bringing malicious fiends did their words gain any weight” (52).

Elemental Dao is when cultivators use natural forces and turn them into destructive combat power. This Dao is utilised in the world of the novel *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, where the five major clans are attributed to different forces of nature: wood, water, earth, metal, and fire. Ancient trees surround the Lan Clan of Gusu on the foggy, wooded mountains of the Cloud Recesses, represented by Flowing Clouds. They are known for their strict discipline and many rules to follow. Lan Wangji’s “Guqin”, a seven-stringed zither that performs spiritual attacks, heals, and suppresses evil, utilised the element wood. Jiang Clan of Yunmeng is based at Lotus Pier, surrounded by a lake and represented by the Nine-petal Lotus. This clan is known for their resilience, flexibility, and pliability. Jiang Cheng has his “Zidian”, a ring that unleashes a purple lightning whip, personifying the element water. The Nie Clan of Qinghe, situated behind the heavy fortress walls of the Unclean Realm, is known for their hot tempers, stubbornness, and distinctive use of sabres instead of swords; their symbol is the head of a Beast. Nie Mingjue’s “Baxia”, a sabre, reflects the earth element. Jin Clan of Lanling is known for their wealth, refinement, and rigid hierarchy. They govern from the lavish Carp Tower. The vermilion spot between their eyebrows utilised their elevated status, and their symbol is White peony. Jin Ling’s “Suihua”, a golden sword, embodies the element gold. The Wen Clan of Qishan, the supreme ruling clan located in Nightless City, used overbearing, aggressive cultivation to dominate other clans. The clan’s symbol is the Sun. Wen clan utilised themselves through archery, in which the arrow generates fire.

The relationship between the two protagonists, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, embodies Yin-Yang Dao. Laws that govern the cosmic world of Daoist society are “Yin-Yang.” Yin is the darkness and mystery, and Yang is the light and clarity. Wei Wuxian, also known as Wei Ying, can be identified as Yin, as he famously invented demonic cultivation, which utilised resentment and dark forces, and always wears dark colours, primarily black and red. In contrast, Wangji, as Yang, represents light, purity and righteousness. Yin and Yang are connected and complementary forces, but opposing, that must remain in harmony. Wangji’s orthodox zither “guqin” and Wei Ying’s flute, the unorthodox “Chengqing”, were used to fight along each other. Even though they use opposite forces, they remain connected and complement each other. Even as opposites, they are relative to each other; without darkness, one couldn’t differentiate light. They are interdependent, as one cannot exist without the other. Both are under constant friction, as nature cannot be static; change is never-ending. If one changes, the other follows, making it transformative. Their close relationship is revealed when Wangji searches the end of the world for Wei Ying’s remains and fails. He refused to stop looking for him even thirteen years after the death of Wei Ying. This shows the interdependent nature as Wangji longs for Wei Ying. The continuously changing energy is naturally balanced and harmonious, but it can become imbalanced, causing Qi Deviation. Qi deviation can occur when someone absorbs too much qi or cultivates using an improper method or flawed

technique. Even when possessed with resentful energy, Wei Ying did not die because of qi deviation. But Nie Clan leaders of Qinghe became the classic example: “The sabres of our past sect leaders were all heavy with hostile energy (increase in Yang) and killing intent. Almost every single sect leader met a sudden death from a qi deviation explosion” (273).

Spiritual energy is the natural essence of heaven, earth, and living beings. Demonic energy channels the lingering agony, hatred, and regrets of the dead. A cultivator can absorb more qi than a normal human could ever hold. The accumulated qi is stored in a golden core, “Jindan,” located in the “Dantian,” meaning lower chest or abdomen. The golden core not only stores qi but also filters, refines, and cycles it through the body, drastically slowing cultivators’ ageing. “A golden core was a core formed by cultivators after they had cultivated to a certain point. It can store and control spiritual energy” (144). A cultivator’s internal golden core fuels their spiritual energy, but demonic energy is fueled by the dead. Cultivators of spiritual energy always suppress, cleanse, and guide their emotions, but demonic cultivators yield, blend, and reflect their emotions. In the Daoist concept, demonic cultivation is signified as Yin and spiritual cultivation is referred to as Yang. Wei Wuxian chose to follow the dark path because he melted his golden core to save Jiang Cheng’s life during the Sunshot Campaign. When he lost his golden core, the standard path of spiritual cultivation was closed to him forever. He fiercely resisted the titles, hierarchy, and political hegemony. While the thousand sect rules restricted Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian yielded to the dark path to save innocent lives. In the exchange between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, where he questions, “Why did you abandon your spiritual cultivation for the demonic path?” he replies, “So what if I chose the demonic path? If it can save people, then it is the right path” This shows Wei Wuxian as a strong “wuwei” hero (effortless action). He aligns himself with nature by yielding to his inner self, letting Yin take over. He doesn’t hesitate to walk his own path. “Who cares about the busy broad road? I’ll walk the single-plank bridge all through the night” (397).

The fantastical work combines traditional philosophical concepts, time-honoured folktales, mythical landscapes, and classical settings on modern media platforms, i.e., online forums. In this case, Mo’s first work, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, is published in *Jinjiang Literature City*, a popular online forum for the publication of web novels. This cross-cultural movement happens in the online sphere as these literary works cross borders of diverse cultures partitioned and armed by different political ideologies, religion, and language. *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* is rooted in Eastern philosophical elements, it can feel foreign to the West. In contrast, modern elements like queer romance, breaking the rigid binary of good and evil, and helping people escape the mundane routine of life create a sense of familiarity, even for those experiencing an unfamiliar world for the first time. The plot blends a century-old literary genre with contemporary media; also, the xianxia world accommodates modern elements. This hybridity appeals to a global audience and fuels its rise. This Eastern philosophy entering the West

challenges and subverts the existing philosophical views of the region. Ironically, mainstream China heavily censors xianxia novels to keep people from adopting these philosophical principles and questioning power. Meanwhile, the West, curious about the “newness,” adopts these philosophical concepts and challenges existing Eurocentric ideologies.

Conclusion:

The research paper examines the factors behind the novel’s reception and how readers received it. Social media’s reception of popular trends is unfathomable. The cross-cultural movement is between Chinese literary tradition and a global online audience. The audience of the novel has not stopped at just reading the novel and comics, watching the web series, or listening to the audio. They have created fan pages for the book, author, and different characters. The fans have different ships they enjoy in the novel. Fans have made tens of thousands of fan fictions and produced fan art and merchandise. Some people even cosplay as the characters in real life. Online community pages generate endless content, such as slang and memes. This brings in new audiences from time to time. This contributes to the work’s global success. The global reception of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* cannot be explained by the sudden rise of xianxia as a genre, which was already well known and popular in China. But without steady domestic popularity and the help of online forums and persistent translators, the novel would not have become a global success. The research concludes that the convergence of Eastern philosophy, digital media, and participatory fan culture expands the boundaries of world literature by questioning conventional models of literary circulation and demonstrating how culturally rooted narratives can achieve universal resonance in the digital age.

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