



Research Paper

## The Art of Adaptation: From the pages of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* onto the screen as *The Untamed*

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### Abstract

This paper studies the popular 2019 Chinese television series “The Untamed” adapted from the famous Danmei novel named originally called “Mo Dao Zu Shi,” in Chinese, whose English translation is *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, written by the Chinese author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, also known in short as MXTX. This Research focuses on the adaptation from the novel onto the screen and the changes made due to censorship. The series is set in a fictional world called Xia Xia, a Chinese genre of fantasy that includes adventure and is influenced by Chinese mythology and Martial arts (Carvalho). It tells the story of the main protagonist Wei Wuxian who gets swayed away from the conventional practices and invents an unconventional path of demonic cultivation. This paper investigates how adaptation from web novel to live-action drama transformed the plot, characterization, and themes under the constraints of censorship and audience expectations, particularly the re-framing of homosexual subtext into “brotherhood.” Further in the story, the main character also develops a romantic relationship with another male character, Lan Wangji, the love interest of Wei Wuxian in the novel. The original novel is based on a Danmei novel, which is the Chinese novels that centers around the romantic relationship between male characters. It is similar to the term BL or boys’ love which is used to represent the same in countries like Japan (Starr). But, in the Chinese entertainment industry, there are certain rules imposed by the government and one such rule is the ban on direct portrayals of queer characters on the screen. So, the adaptation further illustrates how the queerness is coded, implied and subtextually maintained without being too obvious and leaving room for interpretation to the audience. It further highlights the interplay between fantasy, morality, justice, destiny and politics in the story.

**Keywords:** *The Untamed*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, Danmei Novels, Xia Xia.

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### I. Introduction

*The Untamed*, adapted from the Danmei novel *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (Mo Dao Zu Shi) by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, has captivated audiences worldwide. Translated by Suika and Pengie, it reinterprets the novel through a live-action blend of fantasy and Chinese historical elements. It captures human emotions such as love, loyalty, and morality with its plot and characters. The Danmei novel, which refers to the male-male relationship is set in a fantastical world that involves cultivators with supernatural powers who practices conventional methods to protect and balance the world from evil cultivators and to transcends from mortality and also fuses Chinese myth and Chinese culture along with the series. The central plot on the novel revolves around the protagonist Wei Wuxian from his prime time to his downfall and his romantic relation with his former classmate Lan Wangji but due to the restrictions of the open portrayal of queerness in the industry, the series has to tone down and make some changes and make it ambiguous. Therefore, the drama has to be toned down and shaped to fit the standard to the norms of the Chinese entertainment industry. Many scenes from the original novel’s plotline must be cut or altered due to censorship restrictions. So, *The Untamed* is labelled as a friendship or brotherhood genre instead of its original LGBT or BL (boy’s love) label. The story also weaves the

threads of modernity and elements of fantasy with the Chinese culture and philosophies of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian that serve the audience the entertainment they desire and the need to understand the deep philosophical spheres of life. The characters and their personality also represent the different approaches and ideologies mentioned, which becomes relevant as the story develops and their different approach to conflicts are showcased.

The original novel originated as Chinese fiction and in 2021, its English version got officially published, it has been translated into different languages. Apart from being adapted as *The Untamed* as a live-action series, it has been adapted to other multimedia adaptations such as webcomics, an audio drama, and an animated series. Through the live-action Chinese series, *The Untamed*, which is considered one of the successful adaptations and a fan's favorite among the other media adaptations. The series is widely praised for its intriguing plots and captivating characters, unique story telling which made the actors famous and the series a global phenomenon and bag multiple awards and nominations in mainland China. The series starring Xiao Zhan, who played Wei Wuxian and Wang Yibo who played Lan Wangji rose to fame not only in China but internationally through *The Untamed* for their brilliant performances that gave justice to the characters in the original novel and captured the hearts of many fans in the world.

## II. Literature review

In the book "Queer TV China", Jun Lei wrote "The Untamed is one such trendy adaptation that helped the BL genre and fandom to chuquan -that is, to bring a niche genre to a mainstream audience and other fandoms who had no prior knowledge of it" (105). Mo Xiang Tong Xiu is one of the celebrated authors who have published in mainland China and who have sold more than one copyright of their works. (Yu Yue, 11)

Liang Ge in her article entitled "Dual ambivalence: *The Untamed* girls as a Counter public" argued that the untamed girls' participation as a popular feminist project is, however, constantly intertwined with an assumption of heteronormativity and an internalised misogyny, where these seemingly empowered women are simultaneously reaffirming a heterosexual regulation of sexual desires and devaluing women when they celebrate the male-male romance embodied in such a drama series. (1021)

The review by Global Times says that "The show's respect for the original novel and, more importantly, the way the performers have continued to interact outside the show has drawn in fans and helped promote the show" (1). Shaikh in his research on "Reimagining Queer Asia: Performativity, Censorship, and Queer Kinship in the Fandom of Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation and the Untamed" wrote that *The untamed* demonstrates that contemporary Asian queerness does not have to be loud to be proud. Rather, Queerness is a personal journey: it is not a hidden personality trait nor is it the singular focus of the storyline as often seen in the dominant strand of queermedia.(1)

### Objective

To analyse the adaptation process and the changes made from the novel *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* into *The Untamed* on the screen

## III. Methodology

This research paper is based on qualitative research and the primary source is the English translated version of Mo Dao Zu Shi which is *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, originally written in Chinese and the Chinese drama *The Untamed*. The research also takes insights on the Adaptation Theory by Linda Hutcheon which emphasises the reinterpretation of adaptation rather than just copying it as it is. The selected novel and series will be interpreted and reinterpreted from adaptation theory.

### Analysis

*The Untamed* is a fictional story set in a fantasy world that not only serves as entertainment for the audience but also calls for a deeper delve into the different aspects, philosophies and ideologies life has to offer. The themes and motifs of the drama are worth taking note of as it is both symbolic and put carefully to bring them to light to the audience. The "Adaptation Theory" by Linda Hutcheon stated that the adaptation process is of two ways: a product and a process, and as a production, adaptation cannot remain faithful to its original text (Kinney). Keeping this in mind. *The Untamed* adaptation is one such result of the theory, the changes made to follow the censorship rules while not disrupting the flow of the original plot, even though it did not entirely remain faithful to the original novel.

With few changes made due to the censorship rules in China, the series mostly gave justice to the original plotline and characters. There are certain scenes that have been cut or altered to adhere to the rules, but these changes did not have much effect on the original plotline of the novel. The series begins when Wei Wuxian dies and the time skips after 16 years, but due to an incident, Wuxian is reincarnated and when Lan

Wangji finally meets him, the story goes back to their past and shows what happened before. It is done in the form of flashbacks into their lives and when Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji meet each other for the first time.

The romance between the two male characters has been kept subtle and termed as bromance or friendship rather than a homosexual relationship in the novel, but there are certain scenes when their relationship is questioned and discussed. For instance, in episode 6 of *The Untamed*, when Lan Wangji ties Wei Wuxian's wrist with his sacred ribbon while in the Cold Spring Cave in Cloud Recesses; the home to Lan Clan, Wangji himself mentioned that the ribbon is sacred in his clan and only their parents and his significant others are the only ones that is allowed to touch. (Tencent Video- Get the WeTv APP) It can be a foreshadowing technique used by the director of their relationship as they do get involved romantically with each other in the original novel, and even though there was no explicit wedding scene, the audience assumed they did get married. There are other scenes similar that have been hinted to the feelings of the two main protagonists of each other, one is when Wangji composed and sang a song in the Mount Xuxi when they were trapped and Wei Wuxian asked the name of the song and when Wangji says the name of the song, the scene slowly blurred out but sharp fans have quick to take in discussions that the blurred out of Wangji faced mouthed which look like something he said "Wangxian" which is the portmanteau of their courtesy names even though it is not clearly shown but it is one of the most discussed topic among the fans and a very popular scene which again slightly hints their relationship. (Episode 14, *The Untamed*)

In *The Untamed*, "the relationship between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian centers on an oath they swore when they were teenagers: to stand with justice and live with no regrets. Their complete trust in one another emphasizes how their pure emotions function to shift focus from the carnal nature of their friendship while still emphasizing their queer bond" (Shaikh). In episode 25, Wuxian said to Lan Wangji "I once took you as my lifelong confidant," and Wangji replied, "I still am," which further proves the underlying queer bond that they have." (*The Untamed*, Tencent Video- Get the WeTv APP)

The two main characters of the drama also tie with the philosophical aspects as Lan Wangji represents the Confucian disciplines and collective morality while Wei Wuxian embodies Taoist spontaneity and resistance against the rigid order, thus creating a balance and portraying the yin and yang. In the novel, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, the character of Wei Wuxian is portrayed as a morally grey character as he blurred the lines of being justifiably right and leaving the audience condemning his character, but in *The Untamed*, his character is portrayed as more of a hero who is misunderstood and finally gives room to clear the misunderstandings.

Philosophies of Taoist balance, Confucian ethics, and Buddhist karma are prevalent throughout as the story goes, and it also lies with the different characters and their personality. As in ancient China, the above three are considered the main philosophies and religions in the country, these three philosophies have influenced society alongside each other, and at times blended together (National Geographic Society). The different characters represent various ideologies in both the novel and the drama. The character of Lan Wangji embodies the ideologies of disciplined morality and Confucian ethics; meanwhile, the character of Wei Wuxian is the complete opposite of Lan Wangji as he represents a resistance towards the existence of social norms and defies them. The difference is also visually evident through their outfits, as Lan Wangji wore only light colours like white and sky blue and so does the entire Lan clan which signifies their emphasis on moral values and discipline. It also represents Lan Wangji's purity and his belief in law and order. Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian is seen in dark colours of black and red, which symbolise his mystery and rebellious passion. Wei Wuxian is a free-spirited character in the series and doesn't follow blindly with the norms that existed before; he raises questions about the pre-existing norms and rebels against it. And he was outcasted and also admired for his bravery at the same time by the other people, he was the symbol of courage and bravery to rebel against social conformity. In episode 29 of *The Untamed*, Wuxian says, "In this world, everyone has their own things to do, their own paths to walk. Who cares about the crowded, broad avenue? I'll stick to my single-log bridge till it's dark" (Tencent Video- Get the WeTv APP). This highlights the character of Wei Wuxian and his act of rebelling against the pre-existing norms and questioning them instead of just blindly following them.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

*The Untamed* is a remarkable piece of literary work that blends philosophy, history, and entertainment. The series goes beyond than just a fantasy Chinese series and through its complex characters, symbolic motifs and narratives, the story challenges the viewer to reconsider the boundaries between good and evil, and conformity and individuality and also helps the audience to think deeper and analyse the ways of life. Even with heavily censored scenes, *The Untamed* manages to preserve the emotional depth of its source material, using subtle gestures, music and symbolism that transcends language and culture.

In conclusion, *The Untamed* demonstrates the human pursuit of truth and justice, compassion and morality in a world constrained by rules. By blending ancient philosophy, modern narrative art and global resonance, the series stands as a significant work in contemporary Chinese media.

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