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魔道祖师: An Exploration of Characterisation and Character Dynamics Between Two Cinematic Adaptations

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(Mó Dào Zǔ Shī)

魔道祖师

An exploration of characterisation and character dynamics between two cinematic adaptations

*Bard College
Film and Electronic Arts
Senior Thesis
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Acknowledgements

To Ed Halter,

My deepest thanks for being the advisor that I needed throughout this journey.

To David Shein,

For whom I have to thank for making this project possible.

You didn't have to break any promises.

Dedication

To My Love,

Thank you for always being by my side and cheering me on when I didn't think I had it in me.

You are the reason I have this much faith in love.

This is to you. And to myself. To us.

Preface

I would have never thought that a series could hold this much meaning for me. I thought that I had outgrown the “fanboy” in me long ago. But alas, here I am, taking the whole “Senior Project is a passion project” that I used to rave about as an underclassman to my tour groups, to heart. It really all happened by chance too.

(Sidenote: Due to a lot of the topics that will be discussed in this paper, I think it is paramount to the integrity of the language and understanding of the culture, that we address the fact that stylistically, this paper will be including the Chinese characters of relevant words as well as the pīnyīn, which is a romanisation of the Chinese language to reflect the phonetic pronunciation and tone, at the initial use of them. Any following references to the same anglicised pinyin will be written without the tones for a more fluid read.)

That chance let me to this Xianxia (仙侠; Xiānxiá) - genre, live-action web series title *The Untamed* or Chen Qing Ling (陈情令; Chén Qíng Líng) (2019), then it’s subsequent donghua (动画; dònghuà) - Chinese animation, series adaptation titled *The Founder of Diabolism* or *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (魔道祖师; Mó dào zǔ shī) which has many different translations, it’s most literal translation reads as 'Demonic Path Ancestral Master' and has been adjusting to most likely to reflect a more ‘lyrical’ translation. While my Senior Project is primarily using the two adaptations in conversation with one another, there are a number of other media adaptations of the text that was originally published online with the same name as the donghua, by renowned Danmei (耽美; dānměi) author, Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (墨香铜臭; Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù), often abbreviated as MXTX, and will also be used to refer to the author throughout the thesis. Danmei is a genre within literature that emphasises the romantic relationship between two men. Many Asian languages have a similar word for this type of genre or at least some form of colloquial slang, but this is the Chinese term. Now that all of the titles and some of the terminology has been introduced (fear not, this essay comes fully

equipped with a glossary, character cards with brief background information as well as some geographical clan maps and information in its appendix). Now, a brief (trust me, there could be a whole lot more) summary of what this project will consist of and why its topic, despite being very personal to me, is still relevant, relatable and required to persevere in this academic climate.

To start it off, I want you to imagine growing up in Singapore. In a society that was very conservative as a whole. Think about it rushing down, rather than a trickle, top-down model of disseminating group-thought, from the government to the commercial to the community to the individual level. But at the same time, still having some form of (relatively) unrestricted access to the internet and being surrounded by visibly (only in retrospect, I really was so clueless when I was younger) queer and liberal people. One could only imagine the kinds of media I had access to. However, even from a young age I understood that all of the characters and narratives that I was seeing in these blockbuster movies or shows were just not inclusive and more importantly, not meant for someone like me. All of the popular western shows were full of skinny, straight, cisgender, able-bodied white folks, and the majority of cinema is still like this to this day, albeit being ways better than it was before. All of the asian characters were used to fulfil the role of the comic relief, or the sidekick or best friend trope, or even all three. Or, to change things up, casted as the brainiac nerd or the mean popular girl/group. While it is not nearly as harmful as some of the other racist stereotypes the film industry choses to propagate, this isn't about the severity of the harm caused (it's a whole other discussion), and it detracts from having any sort of productive conversation on decolonising media and the industry, and greatly hinders attempts made towards moving away from eurocentrism and away from centering the white-american experience. Same goes for how non-heterosexual people are typecasted and stereotyped in films and in society. I would even go so far as to say that the industry is fueled by society and society is also

influenced by how the media portrays “the other”. While I don’t want to discredit the bountifulness of original thought that we as humans are capable of, and to also not stretch the truth in overstating the power that media, social media and the digital art that comes through all of its platforms has, but in reality the human mind can be so easily manipulated and swayed. Just take a look at the media and news that swept over the United States (and the rest of the world) during Donald Trump’s elections, during his presidency and all of the aftermath that followed. Not to say that the rise in mirrored sentiment to Trump was born out of thin air, but the point is to emphasise just how big a role the media played in expediting that progress and spreading a specific kind of rhetoric. A similar thing, on a smaller and slower scale, can be said about how films and television (fictional or not) can influence many different aspects of a person’s life (both positively and negatively).

Despite all of the ways film and media can be a vehicle for political or social gain or commentary, I don’t want the importance of activism and political thought to downplay the effect and weight that the artistry in and of itself has on evoking passion and change within people. And that ideology may be due to the fact that the main coping mechanism that I have sustained from a young age is the fact that I have always been drawn to in the boundless potential of the fantastical, supernatural, fictional worlds that are created through literature and film as a very explicit form of escapism, in regards to a purely personal means of enjoying the arts. However, that does not mean that I do not see or understand all of the commentary or references to the injustices in society, the economy, and the culture within those fantastical narratives. There is no way to Especially as I used to read a lot of fantasy novels as a kid. However, I stopped or at least slowed down because I started to have less and less time, and it felt like all of the new and exciting stories had been written already. Then I discovered films, and then even film adaptations of those books that I used to read. Both forms transported me to different places and different parts of the world that I could not

access on my own, even in the comfort of my own mind. To me, regarding the debate of book versus cinema (films and series), they will always be two differently coloured cloths that were cut from the same fabric. Both have their unique ways of showcasing and deepening different things. Where the syntax and diction that fill the pages of the novel can only explain so much, the eyes can only take in so much from each frame of film. All of that is to say that there are limitations to each method of storytelling but all forms of this are still forms of art. Even within the types of filmmaking there are elemental pros and cons that influence the direction of the storytelling even if it is the same story. For example, animation allows for absolute freedom and fluidity in the manipulation of character design, set design, etc with absolutely no need to be limited by such mundane issues such as gravity or the question of the existence/use of things like magic and mysticism. However, the stretch of freedom that comes with animation is not cheap in the money department, nor the department of time. That's where live-action can step in and take advantage of the opportunity to "go old-school". It also really speaks to the "humanity" of cinema where we as an audience are relying on the replication of the human experience and consciousness to transport us to an entirely different reality to a point where we may not even be able to separate the characters from the actors in the worst case scenario.

I will admit that I believe that when I was watching these adaptations, it truly was the first time that I had a sudden and immediate resonance with a film or series in my entire time here at Bard that actually made me believe I had found the cinematic sources for my senior thesis. I think it was due to the fact that it really was one of the first real mainstream examples of a relatively explicit gay chinese couple (explicit both in the sense that there are some explicit scenes in the original novel, but also explicit in the way that it is able to be labelled and consumed as queer media without it queer bating or alluding to the queer themes and characters outside of the narrative).

Another thing about what makes this piece of fiction so important to me, especially given the plethora of new-age queer media content that has been released and published within the last few decades, is that this franchise in the end has ultimately changed my expectations and standards for queer representation and narratives in the film industry. The way that the author has written such intricate characters and plot lines that not only showcase how normalised and how natural love and emotion can be between two men, but also illustrate how complex human relationships and dynamics are, especially when those dynamics are in conversation with themes (and maybe even obstacles) such as filial piety, lineage, loyalty, within the context of Chinese culture. It takes the questions of morality and ethics to a different level as many who may not fully understand why, within the framework and understanding of how Chinese culture and society works, there is so much diegetic backlash to the main character's way of cultivation.

I really believe that there is a vacancy in the academic sphere of comparative analytical literature that deals with the more critical aspect of the nuances that come with critiquing queer media that is not only produced by but also originally, if not primarily produced for an eastern (re: asian) audience to consume. That is not to say that these kinds of works and topics are not meant for everyone, but just that due to the subtleties of the in-group culture, some things are more difficult to explain to “outsiders”. For instance, the fact that this piece of fiction in particular was originally published in Mandarin, the most commonly spoken dialect of Chinese language, on a Chinese web novel site (JJWXC) means that already there is an assumption of a certain level of censorship and barrier to accessing the content from a foreign perspective that is not necessarily just limited by the language barrier. There are certain kinds of social and class definitions and divisions that despite it being a work of fiction, still may be unusual or even difficult for others to understand right off the

bat. Let alone the fact that the genre alone is most likely something many foreigners have yet to be exposed to.

Part of the purpose and use of this paper is to not only address but to also open up a discussion to individuals on topics that often have to lead to a confrontation of personal biases and xenophobic rhetoric when it comes to Eastern/Asian media. As it is vital to fostering and furthering a productive discussion on cultures and works of art that haven't been covered or haven't been covered enough in academic circles. Through analysing the characterisation and dynamics/roles of the characters between the two cinematic adaptations of the same text, this project will be an exploration into how queerness and gender (roles) are subverted and adhered to within the greater cultural context it inhabits. For this essay, the focus isn't just on the relationship between the main gay couple, because that would be unproductive and reductive. I want to use this thesis as a means to explore and showcase the depth and breadth that this author has taken to cultivate deep and extravagantly authentic characters and dynamics. Because not only are we talking about character dynamics in a romantic/sexual way, we are also investigating the ways that platonic and familial dynamics are at work, especially given the sociocultural context of a (more ancient but 'progressive' society in certain ways) China. It is also important to note that the main comparison lies between the two different adaptations (one animated and one live-action) of the same original text. Additionally, the very important discussion of gender, as it both pertains to the topic of queerness and the portrayal of women (within a chinese context/narrative) will be explored to its fullest extent, not as a separate entity from the original conversation regarding the main characters/couple.

It may seem repetitive to some who have read many of my other academic works, when they see that yet again my focus is on queerness and gender, but it is because I believe that you can always have a new discussion and find more nuance in such topics. Especially

once you are introducing different kinds of cultural contexts into the mix. For instance, a specific reason why these topics are appropriate and relevant to these cinematic adaptations in particular, is because one thing that is universally applicable to every oppressed group, is that despite all of the bigotry and discrimination, the hypersexualisation and exoticification of those very traits have been deemed as “undesirable” or “too ____ (insert adjective here)” are then commodified and fetishised to a point where there is no longer a person behind all of those characteristics, and never to the benefit of the ones being exploited. I have found that through consuming a lot of queer media, or even “queer-coded” media, that this issue still reigns supreme. So much so, that is also where a lot of the discourse comes from when creating queer content (especially when it comes to the boy’s love, danmei, yaoi, etc genre), as most of the creators and fans/audience are straight cis women. While it is understandable, given the historical and continual treatment and oppression of women in society, finding a space where women themselves are not sexualised or even romanticised within the context of a relationship can be seen as very healing or even a necessity. However, given how there are just as many issues with how (especially in the past) gay men and their relationships are portrayed in the media, film and literature, and how especially the sexual aspect of the relationship has been grossly fetishised, it is vital to the discourse to understand why there is so much pushback from within the community (that many writers aren’t even apart of). Not even to mention the discourse that often happens when there is a queer couple (especially if both are attractive, as they typically get casted to be) or two characters that may or may not interact in a way that could be either read as queer(-baiting), and then having to deal with the audience/fanbase. The fanbase/fan culture is a whole other plate of discourse because a lot, and some may even argue that the majority of fetishisation comes directly from the fans/fan conduct. Such as the subsequent fanfiction, fanart, shipping, etc that usually comes along with any sort of media that is either geared towards or has reached internet audiences

teenage-aged and up. However, I have found that with this author in particular, not only regarding this series but as her other blockbuster novels/adaptations as well, (despite knowing very little about MXTX herself, which many assume to be due to obvious backlash she has received about being a woman writing this kind of content, as well as the great many censorship and anti-queer laws and sentiment that exists in China, her anonymity may also be due to a safety concern) the depth that she gives her characters and the intricacies that she weaves into her plotlines allow for a very refreshing and transformative take and view on the subject of queer men.

On the subject of queer men, I'll be honest when saying that it was the Netflix summary of the series that really got me hooked. I mean, as if two beautiful men dressed in traditional Chinese clothing (汉服; Hànfú), drenched in big fat drops of rain while helping the other stand upright didn't already peak my interest. Not only did it give off very beautifully queer vibes from that alone, but the fact that Netflix had to go and summarise the series with a lovely little "In a magical world of inter-clan rivalry, two *soulmates* face treacherous schemes and uncover a dark mystery linked to a tragic event in the past" gave me little to no reason to *not* start it. However, I do think it is also important that there is a disclaimer early on regarding the fact that the original novel, as well as any and all of its original adaptations are all in the Mandarin dialect of the Chinese language. Furthermore, a lot of TV/theatrical grammar and expressions, especially when it comes to the period pieces, are overdramatised. Not to mention that translation itself is difficult because then the job isn't just translating it word for word, you also have to translate the tone, the meaning and the cultural context as well (and you have to be considering *who* is doing the translating). That is to say that particularly with translating Chinese to English, there is so much that is just untranslatable and ineffective. For instance, it is very interesting how many english platforms and articles, taking Netflix as the primary example, have taken to translate the term Zhiji (知

己; Zhījǐ) used to describe the two main characters' relationship to mean soulmate in English. While others will use this term to mean confidant. However, due to the relatively ambiguous nature of the word, where it is originally used to mean an "intimate friend" or to denote an intimate relationship/exchange, there isn't anything inherently romantic, let alone sexual about it which in and of itself, has its pros and cons. Something that is maybe both a pro and a con is the fact that when facing more strict censorship laws with the production of the series (both animated and live-action), using the term in Chinese allows the audience to essentially see what they want to see and take what they want to take from it, whereas the English translation has more of a guiding implication depending on what word they chose. This essay will not be leaning too heavily onto the translation aspect as it isn't the main focus, but it will be scattered sporadically throughout the paper when further discussion or explanation is needed as there are way too many things to say regarding the issue and advantages to translations.

There will be a glossary that will be cited throughout the paper and attached at the end as a means to maintain the fluidity of the analyses and discussions. However, I believe that it is still important for my readers to have a basic understanding of the plot, as per the original text, because it is rather convoluted and complex to understand, and that's not even due to the cultural translations that will also be addressed throughout the essay. As many works of art and media choose to use a nonlinear narrative timeline, such as flashbacks and timeskips, like this piece, the use of vessels (in this case, it is the main character that is inhabiting another body for the majority of the plot) also assists in complicating the plot and often confuses the audience at first which speaks to the need for a brief summary of the plot.

In addition to the glossary and a preemptive attempt at giving a concise plot summary below, this project will also take on a more chronological approach to organisation as the primary focus of the essay is to compare and contrast the ways in which the characters are

portrayed in two different adaptations (animated and live-action) as the timeline itself isn't linear.

This portion addresses and does some house-keeping on the plethora of general terminology of the cinematic universe that needs a bit more context and explanation to make the actual content comprehension and analysis a lot smoother for the reader.

First things first, let us begin with a very brief summary of the plot. Then we can go more into the intricacies of the internal culture of the universe.

The series follows the rise, fall and rebirth (through the process of transmigration) of the exceptionally talented and controversial main character Wei Wuxian (魏无羡; Wèi Wúxiàn). Who unintentionally becomes the founder of what is deemed as the 'demonic path' or 'demonic cultivation'. Most of the series finds him in a new body and with the company of rival turned friend, Lan Wangji (蓝忘机; Lán Wàngjī), from his past who after many years, may be the only person who sees him for who he is and may or may not be (he is) harbouring more passionate feelings now after thirteen years of grieving than he is letting on.

The Past, Present and Future

If you have read, listened to or watched any iteration of this work of fiction, or anything else by the same author, it should come as no surprise that there are more than a few morally grey characters in the front lines of the cast. Protagonists are also not excluded from this. Which is a characterisation choice that many wouldn't dare to try their hand at. Even with a spike in villain origin stories that cast the titular villains as the 'protagonist', they are still usually set in the past as it is often used as a method to aid in the narrative of a descent into villainy. The transition and contrast from a pure and innocent person, to a malicious and evil villain/beast is often so black and white that there is no room for any sort of mobility within the ethical and moral spectrum that dictates 'right' from 'wrong'. As it is also usually dealing with scenarios and issues that are not usually very nuanced and offer the audience little need to examine or reflect on the perspective and reasoning behind the villains actions or responses. A lot of this has to do with a lack of depth to the characters. How is it possible to see the 'good' in people if there is no 'bad' to juxtapose it, especially if it is within the character itself as I believe that no one is only 'good' or only 'bad'. The conflict and resolution or even transition of the two is what I believe makes characters, these characters in particular, so compelling and corpulent to study. Not even the minor characters in *The Untamed* or *The Founder of Diabolism* are even remotely close to being flat.

The purpose of this essay is not to get into a heated philosophical debate on the ethics and morals of these characters. But what I will be doing is to give some context for why in this cinematic universe, there is such a collective backlash to the actions of Wei Wuxian, as it pertains to the issue of ethics. For starters, there is a very clear reason that is tied to faith and spiritual practices inside and outside of the show, that relates to past and current Daoist and even some Confusionist rhetoric which can account for the severity of hatred that the public

has for Wei Wuxian. That reason is due to the fact that with his manipulation of the resentful energy that is drawn out of corpses and ghosts- beings that have already died, goes against such a deeply rooted cultural practice of respect and worship for the dead, more importantly it is the peace of ones and others ancestors being disrupted that is an inconceivable sin. This is something that is not directly addressed in the works but it is an important piece of cultural context that hopefully aids in helping an audience that may not fully understand the severity of the damage that Wei Wuxian takes to his reputation and what chaos it stirs up within the cultivation world of the series. It is also paramount to the discussion that we address the fact that even though Wei Wuxian is constantly ostracised for straying away from the ‘righteous’ path of cultivation and for founding demonic cultivation/the demon path or Mo Dao (魔道; Mó dào), the technique he actually developed and uses is called the ghost path or Gui Dao (鬼道; Guǐ dào). This is significant because this universe makes a very clear distinction between the types of creatures and beings, so much so that there is a canonic difference between what is deemed ghostly and what is deemed demonic. The distinction is that technically, the demonic path uses living beings and turns them into corpses to do their bidding, whereas the ghostly path uses the resentful energy from the undead or from ghosts and manipulates that. So from a technical standpoint, Wei Wuxian has only ever technically used the ghostly path, despite his infamy spreading his demonic doctrine. He also only refers to himself or his latent cultivation practices as ‘demonic’ (Mo Dao) in the opening sequences as a reference to what he has been called by. This only strengthens the point that despite some of the questionable and regrettable things he has done in the past, it was never as bad as it was made out to be. While it is not as frequently referenced in the dialogue in either adaption as one would think, A scene in the second episode of the second season of the donghua (this season is titled Xian Yun Pain (Xiàn Yún Piān; 羡云篇) which more literally translates to admiring or envying clouds, but it is also translated as “The Reborn”) where the focus is on processing the

present-day plot, and Lan Wangji is using the term Gui Dao to refer to the type of cultivation Wei Wuxian practised in the past, all the while defending him by stating that despite the path he chose, “he has principles” and wouldn’t have put a curse on Jin Zixun (Jīn Zixūn; 金子勋). Let’s also not forget that in this scene, Lan Wangji refers to Wei Wuxian as Wei Ying which is his birth name and is a direct way of not only addressing another, but it also explicitly demarks the intimacy of their relationship to outsiders. The first chapter will go into a little bit more depth regarding the significance of names and the ways they are used not only in the actual works to illustrate specific tones and relationships, but also more generally how they are used grammatically and socially. On another note, getting back on track regarding the reason why the differences between Mo Dao and Gui Dao is important, it is vital to understand that Wei Wuxian was the most convenient scapegoat for many greater sinister plans for the cultivation world from many different people. The fact that he was incredibly talented and reputable from a young age made it so that there was an even bigger target on his back as his unconventional ideas and approach to just about everything made him the perfect agent for disharmony and chaos for all of the clans.

Another thing that ironically ostracised him even after his death and into his reincarnation, was the fact that the body of the man he is now occupying is a renowned ‘lunatic’ and is canonically homosexual. The parallels from the different adaptations between the vessel (Mo Xuanyu) and the occupant (Wei Wuxian) are strikingly similar as both are harassed for actions that, though stemming from a grain of truth, are then blown out of proportion as a means to alienate and exile them. The manipulation of their true actions causes them to lose their credibility and no longer have any sort of reputable stance in the cultivation world. By making both seem so insane, and either incapable (Mo Xuanyu) or overly capable of evil (Wei Wuxian), that no one save for a very select number of people will take them seriously. It is also interesting to see just what the adaptations have chosen to focus

on when it comes to the root of the issues. Because even a slight change can shift the entire plot or even the basis of their character motivation or arc. For instance, due to the censorship laws in place in China, when introducing Mo Xuanyu's character, he is referred to as someone who pursues men and beasts in the donghua. Some of the other discrepancies between the adaptations also have to do with downplaying or redirecting the focus to _____.

One thing to note in the opening sequences of both adaptations, is that after some much needed background exposition, the audience gets introduced to the main character in his original body. After a thirteen year time jump, you are then introduced to a new character, Mo Xuanyu who has conducted a blood sacrifice and has given up his body for the late Wei Wuxian. It is difficult at first to discern exactly what has happened as Mo Xuanyu is played by the same actor (Xiao Zhan) as Wei Wuxian in the live-action and is illustrated in a very similar manner to the original Wei Wuxian in the donghua (most obvious changes made were details such as their height, build and hair). Other than their outwardly different behaviours (most of it is an overdramatisation as Wei Wuxian attempts to appear more similar to the original Mo Xuanyu), there is not much known regarding the reasons why little changes and little change was made but most likely it was a creative decision that makes the narrative easier to follow and doesn't have to blow an already limited budget on an entirely different actor. While both versions are relatively similar in terms of following the source material, the animated series does make it more explicit that Wei Wuxian is trying to maintain the illusion of behaving like Mo Xuanyu than in the live-action version. A lot of it may have to do with the fact that there is less censorship put upon the behaviour and characterisation of the animated characters as there would be less backlash from the press, audience and government than if the same script were to be played out with real actors. I mention this because the vessel that Wei Wuxian inhabits is canonically discriminated against and bullied for being a "cutsleeve" which is a "Chinese idiom, '斷袖之癖' /tuan eiou tɕɿ pʰi/ (the predilection of the

cut sleeve), comes from a historical account wherein an emperor's male lover fell asleep against his sleeve, so the emperor cut it off lest he disturb him. The idiom has then bore the signification of homosexuality. However, traditionally, this was never a source of identification for ancient Chinese men who engaged in homosexual behaviors" (Wang Ping-Hsuan). However for the purpose of this fictional world, it serves as a pejorative term and is used as such. Most likely due to issues of censorship, the animated series makes reference to Mo Xuanyu's collisions with not only other men, but also with beasts which is discussed during Wei Wuxian's interaction with Jin Ling during the cultivators conference. Along with the fact that Mo Xuanyu's harassment of Jin Guangyao (which is true to the novel) which emphasises Mo Xuanyu's lunacy by doubling up on the taboos he has been rumoured to have committed (that being incest and bestiality) on top of being homosexual. Although it is most likely used to take away from the homosexual alligations and shifts the focus to arguably worse things. Whereas the live-action series only really emphasises the fact that he was crazy and shunned for speculating to harass his brother Jin Guangyao's wife Qin Su, rather than his brother himself.

-Names

Additionally, it is important to note that the way names and titles are used in this cinematic universe are intentionally used as tools to demonstrate things such as formality, social class and the dynamics of a relationship, in a much more subtle way that has more to do with the culture inside and outside of the work of fiction than merely just being attributed to the function of language. And this paper will also use this as a means to explore and

understand how the names and titles of these characters are used and why. Especially given that there are so many varying circumstances that dictate the reasons why characters are addressed in a certain way. For instance, there is a scene in the second season of the donghua that depicts a memory from Wei Wuxian's past, where he attempts to refer to Jiang Yanli when speaking to Lan Wangji after he defects from the Jiang Clan. Wei Wuxian historically has only exclusively referred to Jiang Yanli as his shi jie (Shījiě; 师姐) which is a term used to address an elder female student whom you share a teacher or a sect with, otherwise referred to as a 'martial sister' in English. Despite the fact that both consider and treat each other like siblings, due to the fact that they are not related by blood, it would be incorrect and inappropriate for Wei Wuxian (especially as a man and as the one who is of outside blood) to address her as jiejie (Jiějiě; 姐姐), jie (Jiě; 姐) or a-jie (Ā Jiě; 阿姐) like the way Jiang Wanyin does. However, as Jiang Yanli is older, it is appropriate for her to use the a- prefix when addressing Wei Wuxian a-xian (Ā Xiàn; 阿羡) as it is an endearing way of giving a sibling or a small child a nickname. It is a way to denote proximity of one's relationship to another. With that being said, the scene I am speaking about in the donghua was so jarring because Wei Wuxian physically stops himself as he is about to call her his shijie, and quickly corrects himself to calling her Jiang Gu Niang (江姑娘; Jiāng Gūniáng) which is the most formal we have ever seen him address her. The physical distance that he has put out of respect for her and Jiang Wanyin, even when he is just in the presence of a very close friend (Lan Wangji), particularly through the way he has deliberately chosen to address her. Something that is also interesting to note is that save for the Jiang disciples and other clan members/leaders who address Jiang Wanyin as 'Sect Leader Jiang', Jiang Wanyin is almost always addressed as Jiang Cheng, which is his birth name, rather than his courtesy name. This phenomenon is especially evident between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin. For Wei Wuxian only ever calls him Jiang Cheng, much like he only ever uses one term to address

Jiang Yanli. Except for one heavily bitter scene in the live-action series in episode forty-six, where Jiang Wanyin is berating him once again, but this time it is not only in front of his ancestral altar, but also about and in front of Lan Wangji. To which Wei Wuxian uses Jiang Cheng's full courtesy name as he attempts to get him to stop insulting Lan Wangji and to get him to apologise. This is the first and only time he is addressed this way and the fact that it was even after the sixteen years post the fall of the Yiling Patriarch. It is also evident that in the case where Wei Wuxian's insistent use of Jiang Wanyin's birth name denotes familiarity, it could also be seen as (from an outsiders point of view) a intentional and arrogant way of showing disrespect to his status as heir to the Jiang Sect and as his peer, Although from the way he treats and loves and priorities Jiang Wanyin (although that is not how he views their relationship), it is clear that at least from Wei Wuxian's intentions, that he addresses his marital brother as such because he feels familiar and close with him. Even after all of the conflict and turmoil the two face throughout the series. Conversely, the one to use Jiang Wanyin's courtesy name in the animated adaptation is actually Lan Wangji. One who has rarely spoken to Jiang Wanyin or at least directly addressed him throughout both series. Let alone address him in such a way that means he has intentionally broken social norms and etiquette in order to disrespect and get the attention of Jiang Wanyin. It makes sense that it is under the exact same circumstances that made Wei Wuxian use his courtesy name in the live-action series version of the same scene. In the animated adaptation, it is Lan Wangji who is warning Jiang Wanyin to not say things that he will regret, out of shame and anger towards his marital brother. That despite all of the tension and conflict that in one way or another is caused by the issue of "choosing sides" (from Jiang Wanyin's perspective), that puts Lan Wangji as a partial catalyst for the conflict between the two brothers, his main concern above all else, is the preservation of Wei Wuxian's relationship with his martial brother even if he is too weak to bare witness. Not only is that clearly something that stems from his own

experience with having a sibling (albeit a very different relationship than the two Jiang clan brothers), but it is also something that Wei Wuxian himself could never be able to fight for or explain. Even when Wen Ning explains how Jiang Wanyin can take out Wei Wuxian's locked and sheathed sword in both adaptations, it is something that is very difficult for him to come to terms with. In the animated series Jiang Wanyin's aggressive outburst is what causes Lan Wangji to resort to his courtesy name. Additionally, throughout these two examples of deviations of his routine, it is paramount to the discussion of character and narrative that we talk about the fact that Lan Wangji was present and directly involved with both instances in some way, shape or form. It is a testament to the fact that despite how much we are constantly made aware of just how much a priority his family (especially his siblings) are to him, because just about everything he has done is for the intended benefit for his clan, there are still instances where you can see and understand just how much these two characters mean to one another. This is also important to point out that it is less so about pitting filial piety and blood against love and marriage, but more so to give way to the concept that both can and do have different ways of illustrating the same point of importance in one's life.

Another thing that I could go on and on about also has to do with names. And it is a little bit more romantic than what we have been talking about previously. It has to do with the way that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji address and refer to one another. Note that there are typically three categories of names that most characters in the series (many other shows/films of a similar genre and era also) possess. Although all three (not including additional prefixes, nicknames and other aliases that can be used for characters) have traditional and appropriate rules that dictate the appropriate and respectful ways and times to use these various forms of address, it should also be stated that like any other language, there are always exceptions to these regulations that typically will serve a purpose, whether that is to tease, insult or even to endear. The first category is the given or birth name. Which is comprised of a surname (姓

xìng) first and a given name (名 míng) second in the Chinese language. Traditionally this is reserved for very close kin, older relatives and your significant other, if anyone. Although many westerners may not understand that it is not the same as simply calling someone by their first name, it is culturally significant and vital to a deeper understanding of the narrative to realise that despite the fact that it would seem that using one's birth name in this setting would denote an intimate and familiar relationship, it is typically very rude and overly familiar to use it as a form of salutations. More often than not, some formal suffix is used as a way to address one another. This leads to the second category of names that is one's courtesy name. Typically once someone receives their courtesy name in this cultivation world, that is the name their peers and any elders will use most frequently outside of formal titles such as 'master/mistress' 'sir/madam/miss' which are almost always prefaced with a surname. Finally, the third type of name that is seen in this world is the official titles. Many of the prominent cultivators have some sort of title that is separate from the formal and generic means of addressing a peer or superior (either in rank, class or age). These titles are typically a way to illustrate some form of achievement or prowess they are known for. As previously mentioned, the tone and context matters greatly if not the most, when it comes to understanding why a person was addressed in a certain way, as discussed briefly above in regards to the Jiang siblings. In the cases above, deviating from the typical way Wei Wuxian addresses these two was to put some distance between the two in terms of delineating the sacrifices made and the impact on the relationship. Names in this series can go both ways when they are used with the intention to insult the owner. For instance, due to the fact that it is considered taboo and very rude to address another by their birth name if the proximity of your relationship deems it inappropriate (not close enough, not related, younger than the owner, etc), one may use it as an insult. Especially if the most polite and correct way would be to use a suffix, let alone using their courtesy name. Inversely, the use of someone's official

title, when someone is largely known for using a more informal name may also be used as an intentional way of showing disrespect as it is mocking the use or more neutrally, it can be used as a way to relate to others who use a more formal title for the person. All of this is to help the readers to better understand the significance of the way that something as simple as the way one character calls another, especially in the context of a show where censorship heavily impacts a lot of the narratively ability to not only stay close to the source material but also further develop the quality of a queer romantic relationship. Let's take a look into the progression of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's relationship through the lens of the names they use to address one another. After watching the live-action series many times, and finding a video compilation of each time the others' name is spoken, it is clear that Wei Wuxian speaks enough for the both of them. He is very quick to switch from "Lan-er gongzi" which is a formal way of referring to Lan Wangji as he is the second son of Lan (the first being his brother). He is the only character to use Lan Wangji's given name, at all let alone with the frequency and diversity of emotion that he possesses. He is most often referred to as "Lan Zhan". A name that not even Lan Wangji's own beloved brother uses (who often uses "Wangji" as a way of addressing him). It is clear that Wei Wuxian started off using his birth name as a way to try and shake the impassive and immovable mask of the stoic Lan Wangji. However that very quickly shifts to a more harmless and general way off trying to get his attention or simply because he feels they are close. Usually it is met with a stern and disapproving expression from the man himself, in both live-action and animated form. However, it is also important to pay close attention to the tone and emphasis behind the way the name is said. Especially since Wei Wuxian seems to constantly call out for "Lan Zhan" in the live-action series, a lot of the subtext of their relationship lies in the subtleties like that. Because at some point, it no longer just to show the world that they are close, but it actually comes back around and shows each other exactly what they mean to each other. Moreover,

the contrast of Lan Wangji having very little dialogue either way, makes each time he utters “Wei Ying” bare all the more weight. Similarly, very few people ever call Wei Wuxian by his given name. Most likely it is due to the fact that people are usually trying to mock or at least dismiss his merits by using a more familiar name. Many of the elders, cultivators and leaders, even in a more formal setting will use his courtesy name to address him or talk about him. Additionally, the frequent use of his birth name once he has received the title “Yiling Patriarch” from clan leaders and other officials is a way of showing blatant disrespect towards him, rather than a means to illustrate familiarity. Conversely, Jiang Wanyin is often seen using his courtesy name with an angry or exasperated tone, which is purposeful as a way to not only create the distance between the two that he clearly feels (in terms of competency, talent, skills, etc) despite being so close. Despite the distance, his love for and need to protect Wei Wuxian is evident in his characters actions, less so his words, and that’s what makes his ‘betrayal’ all the most heartbreaking (for both of them). Additionally, the one time that Lan Wangji uses Wei Wuxian’s courtesy name in the live-action series is after they reunite following the torture and death of Wen Chao. This is the first time Wei Wuxian calls him by *his* courtesy name. It only happens one other time in the series, and it is again at a time where he is upset at Lan Wangji. The animated series makes a lot more use of Lan Wangji’s title “Hanguang-Jun” (Hánguāng-jūn; 含光君) when Wei Wuxian refers to him. This is most likely due to the fact that the donghua has made more attempts through his actions and words to show that Wei Wuxian is actively trying to maintain the illusion of being Mo Xuanyu. As his vessel is canonically a few years younger than Lan Wangji and is technically not familiar with him, it makes sense that he would resort to using the title. Wei Wuxian in both adaptations also tends to use Lan Wangji’s title when talking about him to the younger disciples as well.

The episodes in the third season of the donghua that follows the main characters' journey to Yi City in the present day are relatively similar to the live-action in terms of the more important aspects of the plot. However, a difference in the animated series that is very subtle but shows just how much Lan Wangji has grown and how the understanding between him and Wei Wuxian has only grown, is the scene where they finally meet the ghost girl that was following them and helping to guide the junior disciples that got captured and lost. It is important to note that Lan Wangji is not present in this part in the live-action and A-Qing is alive as well rather than being a ghost. The live-action series makes very little, if any, use of ghosts which is most likely an issue of a lack of budget for the special effects rather than due to an intentional attempt to change the narrative. Going back to the animated version of the same scene, despite the scene is only less than a minute long, it shows Lan Wangji stepping into the frame, jostling a standing Wei Wuxian as he physically steps forward to offer to open up the coffin, as per the young ghost girl A-Qing's (Ā-Qīng; 阿箏) request. Which causes Wei Wuxian to smile. Lan Wangji then proceeds to reverently touch the coffin before he utters a very formal apology (with the Chinese language there are many different ways to convey an apology and it depends on the time period as well as what kind of formality and emotion you are trying to convey in addition to an apology). This small act of offering to be the one to open up and ultimately desecrate a coffin is no small deal as it was mentioned previously that due to cultural norms and practices inside and outside of the work of fiction, that tampering with the dead or essentially affecting their spirit and body's rest after death is a very taboo thing. One might question that if it is so taboo, and if Lan Wangji's character and reputation is to be consistent, then why would he offer to do such a thing. It is clear that due to the relief and fondness expressed by the smile Wei Wuxian gave after Lan Wangji offered, it is clear that when it comes to Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji would rather be the one to commit

such an act in order to preserve the amount of taboo acts that his beloved needs to do. This not only shows just how much Lan Wangji has changed, but it also shows how Wei Wuxian has changed. For in the past, every time Lan Wangji has offered to help or tried to stop Wei Wuxian from taking the less righteous path, he has been met with outrage as he originally presumed that the righteous Lan Wangji disapproved of his choices (choices that he was forced to make) because it is against his clan's rites and that he didn't think he was capable of controlling the resentful energy, although he has always stated, in both adaptations and the source material, that he is worried that it is bad for his temperament, that demonic cultivation is hard and damaging to the mind and body, though he does find it cruel and is adverse to its practice. A quote from chapter fifty of the novel posted online originally states that Wei Wuxian's inner dialogue agrees that "[w]hen everyone feared him and flattered him, Lan Wangji scolded him right in his face; when everyone spurned him and loathed him, Lan Wangji stood by his side". Showing that when the world only cared about his reputation and what skills he could bring, Lan Wangji was the only one to show him that he cared for none of that. That Wei Wuxian was seen for who he was, rather than what he can do. Never one to believe in rumours or anything without sufficient evidence. That trait is something that is exemplified through the exchanges between the present day Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji in the animated series as whenever the two are presented with speculations or new information, when asked for his opinion, Lan Wangji will not offer it and will not speak out judgement before having enough evidence to make a claim. That part is relatively consistent to his character from his youth as he was the only one to not fear Wei Wuxian, even after he turned to demonic cultivation. Simply believing that from the basis of which he already knows Wei Wuxian's character, that certain rounds of gossip are simply untrue and out of character. Or if it was true, that there would be a reason and justification for it. Even going so far as to come

to his defence when people are discussing Wei Wuxian's business in front of him in both the adaptations.

One thing that this essay is trying to show, is that despite editing and cutting out almost all of the explicitly romantic ventures of this work of fiction in attempts to adhere to the censorship laws that are in place for homosexual and other explicitly sexual content of any kind in China, there are still so many ways that the directors have managed to translate (linguistically and artistically) the subtext from the original source material. Having the ability to follow the original narrative as best as they can even under the strict conditions while still able to showcase even a small percent of the beauty and intimacy of the relationship between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian is no easy feat. Because not only does the fact of working around censorship laws cause the expression of queer romantic love to take on a more subtle approach, but also the fact that culturally, it can be expressed in a more subtle way regardless. A similar thing goes for the discussion of familial and gender dynamics within the context inside and outside of this cinematic world. Where due to a lot of other kinds of society constraints, the way characters can, do and are expected to express their feelings and their relationship with one another are also held to a more subtle degree than what a lot of similar (if such a thing could even exist) works in the film/television industry in the West would be achieving.

For instance, one of the biggest cuts to the original plot that neither adaptation would have been able to include, is the fact that the two main characters are canonically married and are officially cited as cultivation partners. Not even to mention some of the explicitly sexual scenes that are depicted in the original novel. But where the live-action series didn't have as many allusions to the marital rituals as the donghua, they still managed to make some small references to such a thing throughout the show in very subtle ways that if you were not familiar with certain Chinese marital traditions, it would have most definitely gone over one's

head. For example, one of the most important scenes later on in the show where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are back in the main part of Yunmeng where the Jiang Clan resides for the first time since Wei Wuxian defected from the clan show the two offering incense to the Jiang ancestral altar together. The act of offering the incense along with what is usually the three bows or kow-tow's, one to the heavens, one to the parents/ancestors and the final bow is to each other. In both adaptations you only see the two bow twice. This is most likely due to the fact that completing the third bow would have been too explicit of a reference to traditional marriage customs. However it is important to note that in the original text, the third bow is done at a later date and in a more private setting. Another beautiful reference to Chinese marriage customs that is unfortunately only seen in the animated series, is during the second siege of the Burial Mounds where many clan members are trapped inside of the cave Wei Wuxian dubbed Fu Mo Dong (伏魔洞; Fú mó dòng) which roughly translates to Demon Subdue Cave. The scene that takes place depicts a very risky last resort attempt to stop all of the fierce corpses from attacking the weakened cultivators where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji where they are using a spirit-attraction flag on themselves to attract the spirits to them and divert their attention so the others are able to escape. Although the same thing happens in the live-action series, one difference that makes all the difference is the fact that once they lay down the talisman, with Wei Wuxian using his own blood, the ritual uses that blood to (temporarily) turn their robes and head/hair ribbons a bright blood red. All red robes are traditionally used as marital garments. Their transformation is emphasised by aligning Wei Wuxian in the first third and centering Lan Wangji beside him, with a full-body shot that allows the audience to see their robes in its entirety for the full effect. Furthermore, both



adaptations follow a very similar production of the famed sequence where Lan Wangji accidentally gets drunk and steals chickens to give to Wei Wuxian. Many fans believe that this serves as a reference to the act of a groom providing offerings and a dowry for his bride-to-be. It is also interesting to note that this happens after Wei Wuxian wins a bet with the innkeeper and teasingly informs him that his last name is Lan. Despite it being a joke and for the purpose of messing with Lan Wangji as well as his reward for winning the bet (where the innkeeper states he will change his last name to whoever can finish one bottle of homemade liquor), it also serves as a foreshadow and allusion to the fact that the two will eventually marry and he will eventually take Lan Wangji's name. While the two main characters are obviously a gay couple, there are still subtle ways that the author, directors and writers have carried out certain scenes and narratives that still allude to the ways that Wei Wuxian is not only seen as more feminine or adopting more traditionally "bottom" characteristics (in reference to the preferred sexual position between two men in a sexual relationship) which are also inherently feminised and regarded with references to heteronormative couples, many of his other qualities and the give and take of their relationship also help to support the fact that this isn't a very traditional or ordinary story or character. Despite being literally illustrated (especially more so after the transmigration/blood sacrifice) with a body that is slimmer, shorter in stature, larger/rounder eyes and even having more emotionally expressive or driven behaviour, all of these things that would and could be seen as ways to feminise a male character in order to fit a more stereotypical portrayal of a more submissive character, it is clear that his actual character does not conform to these standards nor is his counterpart expecting or wishing that of him. As much is clear from how he is treated throughout both adaptations. Additionally, circling back to the sequence of drunken adventures, the return to the inn in the adaptations and original text have all taken different turns. For instance, in order of increasingly censored material, the original novel

finds the two back in the inn where Wei Wuxian offers to bathe a still inebriated Lan Wangji which then leads to some more explicit exchanges and then a heartbreaking misunderstanding between the two before the final showdown. Whereas the animated series has Lan Wangji use his own head ribbon (which is a coveted practice amongst the inner Lan Clan disciples that stipulates it not be removed or touched by anyone other than one's fated person) to tie Wei Wuxian's wrists together to bring him back to the inn. This scene exemplifies the fact that just about everyone else is aware of Lan Wangji's intentions with Wei Wuxian at this point in time, except Wei Wuxian himself. Especially given the rigidity and strictness of the Lan Clan's practices and principles, seeing this side of Lan Wangji is very touching. Furthermore, the live-action version of the scene has their return to the inn interrupted by a thief.

-Women

Although the positions and roles that the women in this franchise may seem few and far between, this section of the paper aims to show some exemplary examples of what some of the more unconventional but arguably well-rounded and multifaceted female characters can look like. No matter how much or how little screen time they are given.

The first woman I would like to introduce in a more official and grand capacity into this paper is of course the marital sister of our beloved main character, Jiang Yanli. She is a character that, depending on which adaptation, is more prominent in one than the other. She's given significantly more screen time in the live-action adaptation as she is shown to follow her brothers to Cloud Recesses during their year-long exchange with the Gusu Lan Clan as seen in the flashback of the past. This is an interesting addition to the series as not only canonically, but even in the dialogue present between the lecturer and students, it is clear that there is a distinction between the male and female cultivators and students in how and where they hold their lessons. Citing how inappropriate it is to have a male student alone in the

presence of their female counterparts. Not much is mentioned regarding why this is the case, but it is clear that the directors and writers of the live-action series have made intentional attempts to include more women in their cast when possible. Such is also seen during the casts time in Cloud Recesses (in the past) where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji accidentally find a hidden cave in the cold springs where they meet and talk with the spirit of an acclaimed female Lan cultivator. This is a character and a scene that is not present in any other adaptation or text but it was also clearly used to help move the narrative along and give a bit more exposition and insight into the past of the clan itself. Inversely, the first time we are actually formally introduced and see Jiang Yanli on screen in the animation or hear any sort of dialogue from her in the novel comes when Wei Wuxian is sent back home to Yunmeng. Despite what a lot of social protocol and norms dictate when it comes to how men and women should be interacting in this world, and how many disapprove of the way Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli interact despite acting and treating each other like siblings, it makes a lot of sense for a lot of the dynamics and expectations placed upon the characters to give way to why their protectiveness of each other causes a lot of tension amongst other clans especially. However, every interaction the two have or if Wei Wuxian is talking about Jiang Yanli, it is clear that he becomes more childish and shows her one of his more vulnerable sides (in a very different way that he does with Lan Wangji) that if you are or have a younger sibling, is a testament to just how safe and comfortable you can feel with a sibling. I personally really resonate as an older sibling, with the relationship between the two of them as the protectiveness and need to take care of one another never wavers and especially if we are considering how turbulent and traumatic of a childhood Wei Wuxian had (orphaned at a young age, living on the streets alone for an undefined amount of time before being found and taken in by Jiang Fengmian - the leader of the Jiang Clan, and friend to his father and father to Jiang Wanyin & Jiang Yanli). The fact that all of the flashbacks of when Wei

Wuxian was little involve depictions of how kind, nurturing and protective Jiang Yanli is of him. This also puts her in a position where she unintentionally causes some tension between the two brothers as she often ends up taking care of Wei Wuxian. However, it is clear by the way her younger brothers look up to her and look out for her that she is not the one to bear the fault and ill will.

For example, while one may have the sense to argue that any relationship between two men where the two are incapable of either keeping the peace or being civil without the help of a woman are just feeding into the ideas of toxic masculinity. Where relationships between men (romantic or platonic or familial) are depicted to resort to more primal means of communication rather than addressing the feelings and experiences of one another in a more ‘traditionally feminine’ way. Or need the help of a female counterpart to guide them. As is the case with the relationship between Wei Wuxian and his Marital Brother Jiang Wanyin (Jiāng Wǎnyín; 江晚吟). The role that their elder sister Jiang Yanli plays is actually much more important than simply being used as a means to address unsustainable male posturing habits. She ends up, in both adaptations, being the glue that is holding the remnants of the Jiang Clan together. Much like many other strong female characters that are depicted through family dynamics. But what I think is very important to understand is the fact that despite often being treated by her own family and those around her like she is too delicate and too fragile, her etiquette, pose, timidity and soft-spoken nature are not only showcased in a positive way, but she still has key scenes where the values and beliefs of her clan shine through and she shows just how much she does not need nor want to be coddled. That much is seen even in her last moments in both adaptations which are presented through flashbacks of the past. Despite the fact that she is still tired and drained from mourning the loss of her husband, she finds her way to the battlefield in attempts to find and protect Wei Wuxian. It is ultimately her words that actually and immediately hold Wei Wuxian’s attention. Some

differences occur between the two adaptations where the live-action series relies on Lan Wangji breaking Wei Wuxian's dazed and frozen position by reminding him to use his flute to control the corpses to protect her as he shields him against ongoing attacks until she is then wounded from behind. This also another demonstration where specific to Lan Wangji and Jiang Yanli, the two understand just how important the other is to Wei Wuxian and don't have an inferiority complex or insecurities when it comes to the issue of priority between family and a significant other, unlike Jiang Wanyin. Whereas in the donghua, Jiang Yanli is the one who, after getting hurt, directly asks Wei Wuxian to stop the corpses, which he does, only to have her push him out of the way of a sword in order to protect him. Although both adaptations include the fact that he is pushed out of the way, the live-action series is the only one to have a brief but important dialogue between Jiang Wanyin and Wei Wuxian about his inability to control the corpses, thus breaking his promise.

The scene in both versions where Jiang Yanli is standing up for not only Wei Wuxian, but also for herself, her stance on her relatively brittle and public engagement with Jin Zixuan, and her clan/family name against that of other Jin clan members and her betrothed himself, along with his cousin and mother, after being insulted, was one of the most 'bravo' moments in the show. It shows that one can be respectful and still stand up for what they believe is right. That using the truth to combat irrational and unjust insults do not make her any weaker or incapable of resolving a disagreement than if she were to use a sword.

Despite being soft-spoken, her poise and diplomacy when it comes to her skill with redirecting conflict and easing tense situations, not just between her brothers but between her mother and others is absolutely noteworthy. While her interactions with her mother are less intentional in the live-action, the animated series allows for many other chances for her to showcase those calming abilities. For instance, in order to deescalate her mothers wrath

towards Wei Wuxian for being punished and sent back home from Gusu early, she calmly explains just how well Jiang Wanyin is doing there as well. This causes her mother to pause and take a breath to calm down and send her appraisals for her own son instead. Between her and her mother, the personalities that are shown in the adaptations, especially the animated version, are so vastly different but also very complimentary to showcasing two very different types of women. Inclusive of portraying their own faults and also how they still have many other strengths although in very different places. Where Jiang Yanli is very reserved with showing anyone, even her brothers, even Wei Wuxian, her true feelings regarding her betrothal and how she is treated in that regard, her mother is very open about her dislike for her own husband and their marriage.

This segues nicely into talking about the famed character herself, Yu Ziyuan. The wife to Jiang Fengmian of the Jiang clan. This character is probably one of the most interesting female characters I have seen in a long time. For she doesn't have to be the main character, or have had the most screen time to make such a lasting impression. I will admit that at first, I was very put off by both the animated and live-action version of her when I first watched it. She came off as ruthless and needlessly cruel towards just about everyone she meets. However, after watching through the series multiple times, and doing research and being able to take a step back and look at her as a character to analyse and understand, it opened my eyes. Let's take a look at the animated version of her first. The way the scene she has with her husband was shot was so cinematic it threw me for a loop. They are talking with each other in the darkness of what seems to be her private pavilion. Not only does it seem that the animators are using their physical distance to illustrate the emotional distance between the two, there is also an entire table between them. The staging for the majority of the sequence has the couple facing and seated facing directly away from one another. As if they were back-to-back. The pavilion itself is shrouded in a bright red haze created by some sort of

insect swarm. But it is only on Yu Ziyuan's side of the pavilion. When her husband steps into the pavilion, after a close up shot of her drinking and a brief frame that shows a side profile of her agitated expression at her arrival, the next shot is a super wide-angle shot that centers the pavillion. With her husband clearly standing on the left-hand side and he sitting on the right facing forward. As mentioned previously, this shot shows how she is clearly the master of her current domain and the one with more control and power between the two. This in and of itself is a very stark contrast to any of the other dynamics shown in the show. Especially between two that are tied to one another. This shot also has the aforementioned use of the red haze predominantly on her side of the frame as well as her side being illuminated by the half covered full moon. Given their conversation later on about Wei Wuxian and how far his troubles will take their clan and the rest of the world down with it, this specific shot is one of the biggest pieces of foreshadowing we have regarding the main characters' demise. For she is the one that is enlightened to the reality of the world. That fact is emphasised by the mass of lotus flowers that have almost all bloomed completely in the foreground of her side of the frame. Whereas Jiang Fengmian is standing in the dark, both literally and figuratively as he is naive and his judgement is clouded. The foreground on his side of the frame has very little lotus flowers, at all let alone bloomed. At first many would most likely side with the way Jiang Fengmian treats Wei Wuxian, especially in contrast to how Yu Ziyuan treats him. However, the discussion is not about who has the better parenting style. Especially as the woman, mother and wife in this relationship and family and scenario, all of that conventionally soft and nurturing demeanour and actions and words are expected of her (she is expected to behave the way her daughter does). But when you sit down and really listen to the conversation they are having, not only are all of her concerns regarding Wei Wuxian very valid from many perspectives, but she was also one of the few people that spoke about what potential for calamity and chaos Wei Wuxian has if he continues to behave the way he does.

While we should also understand that this doesn't mean that he shouldn't have done what he felt was just and right, it just means that she foresaw what his actions could lead to and both things can be true at the same time without the argument being about who is more correct. It's also interesting to note that when she mocks her husband and says that all of her worries and grievances will be solved because Wei Wuxian has the clan leader there to clean up after his mistakes. Not only is it ironic because both of them lose their life in the fight during the massacre of lotus pier, but as Jiang Wanyin is forced to take up the mantle of clan leader in the wake of their death, he, as the clan leader also ends up having to clean up and make excuses for his behaviour (although he arguably was already doing that from a young age). I think that at first I didn't take this scene seriously because as their argument between spouses gets more heated, you have more and more tilted and unconventional angles and framing that make the content of their dialogue seem so absurd and trivial and even a bit manic. However, this is also most likely how and why many didn't take Yu Ziyuan seriously as well.

Additionally, the way she exists the pavilion is so incredibly intense. As she passes her husband, intense and cold string instruments start to play and she doesn't even meet his eye but her eyes are leveled and her head is held high which indicates that the lack of acknowledgement was her act of defiance and disrespect and her not backing down on her words, rather than being too ashamed or shy to meet his eye. It also then cuts to an extreme low angle that has her centred and stepping into and on the camera causing it to black out into an upside-down shot of her back retreating. Then the final shot zooms out to an extreme wide-shot that is still upside-down and shows her putting even more distance between her and her husband as he hasn't moved since she left. I would speculate that this is also a foreshadowing of not only the fact that they will soon be underground (died), or that even in death that distance still remains, but also that this marks the start of the tables being turned and the things in the dark coming to light.

That darkness is marked by the way the animated series depicts the massacre of Lotus Pier. This scene was already one of the most tragic arcs regardless of which form you read or watch or listen to it. It was hard to listen to the argument between Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian and Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin. But the exposition this scene gives is so pivotal as it sets the stage for Wei Wuxian's oath to Jiang Wanyin. This oath is what repairs their relationship and it is also what shatters it in the future as this is what seals the hatred that has been stoked and fed within Jiang Wanyin especially once he feels like Wei Wuxian's actions have betrayed that oath. This scene leads directly into the beginnings of the massacre of Lotus Pier. Not only does Yu Ziyuan show that she is more than capable and actually holds the power and authority to address such issues with the Wen clan without the need of her husband (so much so that his absence is not even mentioned), but it is clear that even mid-fight, her son (and even Wei Wuxian) are her top priority. This is especially important because a lot of the stereotypical ways a woman is expected to be maternal and nurturing are not seen through her character in a very conventional way, and many would think even she isn't a good mother or role model. However, it is clear that through every conversation she has had with another character, she is only ever thinking about her children. The fact the scene of her last goodbye with Jiang Wanyin was so well staged brings me to tears. The backdrop of their farewell is the burning embers of their ancestral home. Instead of a goodbye, her last words were telling him that he is a good son. The scene of their final hug was so severe that it was repeated using four different angles. The first being an eye level two shot of their side profiles as she grabs him by the back of the head to bring him in for an embrace instead of responding to his question if she is coming with him. The second shot is a birds eye view of the same moment and the third one is a shot of their legs where Jiang Wanyin is pulled forward towards her. The final shot in this sequence is a wide shot placing the two figures in the dead centre of the frame. The two are surrounded by the dark earth at

their feet and bright, blazing, burning fire at their heads and sides. The element of fire that is seen throughout this final sequence just overwhelms the audience and serves as another and constant reminder of the destruction and calamity that was caused. Caused as she puts it, by Wei Wuxian. Furthermore, despite her strength (emotional and physical), the next frame shows her letting a single stream of tears run down her face. Although her son does not see this. And while it may seem strange and anti-climactic for her goodbye to be replaced with a praise, especially if these are the last words she says directly to him,

When Jiang Wanyin desperately tries to tell her that Jiang Fengmian will return and they can face this together, it is also very moving that Yu Ziyuan's response, moreso to herself than to her son, is that it doesn't matter if her husband is here or not, can she not live without him?

More as a question to herself and it's a clear strengthening of her own resolve. Although this scene didn't progress the same way in the live-action show, it makes it no less heartbreaking.

Their deaths are also very different between the two adaptations. In the animated version Jiang Fengmian dies upright, kneeling and without his golden core, and the hairpin he tried to gift to Yu Ziyuan lying between him and her slumped over body. A fallen piece of a flag falling to cover her face, but nothing to cover his was a very interesting and meaningful artistic choice. For he is not granted the same kind of respect as his wife was after their death.

Wen Zhuliu is the one to stop Yu Ziyuan from any further insult to her corpse, while no one objected to the shaming of Jiang Fengmian. More interested in commenting on how he could not protect his own body or his people. This is a very different scene depicted than from the one found in the live-action where he is seen to come in and protect Yu Ziyuan, even though he is then stabbed right after. Their last moments are spent crawling towards one another and their dead bodies are later shown to be on their sides facing each other, hands intertwined in the middle of the hall where it all started. Both ending and positionings illustrate very different approaches to understanding and showcasing their relationship with one another.

Another recurring female character in this series is named Luo Qingyang, or more commonly referred to as Mianmian. It is clear that female cultivators are not very common in this world. Although not many sexist remarks are made regarding that, it is still evident that there is a reason why. Many other women in this series are either only given a title, nickname or courtesy name. She has been shown to follow the entourage of Jin Zixuan and does not shy away from making her voice known. One of her more memorable moments in both adaptations consist of her speaking up about the way other clan members and leaders are exaggerating the crimes that Wei Wuxian has committed. She and Lan Wangji at that time and for the most part of the series, are the only people to have publicly made any sort of disagreement with the claims made against Wei Wuxian or any attempts to defend him. Although she does defend him, it is more so due to the fact that his crimes are overexaggerated and less so to do with her agreeing with his actions. And not only does she stand up for Wei Wuxian in front of the prominent clans of the cultivation world, but she also stands up for herself when people start to discredit her argument by stating she is swayed by her past interactions and using the fact that she was flirted with by Wei Wuxian as a reason for why she is swayed to be on his side. She is also then ridiculed by her own clan members by saying that these are just words of an emotional woman. One thing that caught my eye with the animated version of this scene was when someone says “women will be women”, her response is quick in saying she is telling the truth, and what does that have to do with her being a woman. I think it is always easy for people to retaliate when sexist comments are made, be it scripted or in the real world. However, her words were steady and true. A very interesting and well written way of addressing a sexist comment without having to make one in return. The way her hands are shaking in the scene and the frame is focusing on a close up shot of her grabbing her robe and slamming it on the table, and the way her hands are clenching it tightly before letting it go, just goes to show that this was not an easy sacrifice

for her. Especially as I have mentioned before how few female cultivators there seem to be. It was also a very pleasant surprise to see that her story does not end in the past. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji end up meeting her in the present day era when they unexpectedly come across a family and their attention is caught by hearing her old nickname used for her daughter.

I feel like it is also important to mention the two women that come forward towards the end of the series to speak out about Jin Guangyao, who is the true mastermind behind everything. One is a sex worker named Sisi who used to work with Jin Guangyao's mother and has defended her in the past which is the reason why she was originally spared by Jin Guangyao when he killed all of the witnesses to his crime (using sex workers to kill his father to succeed him as leader). However, in the animated series, she is killed on her way to the Burial Mounds (where the live-action has her alive and also the two meet all of the other clan members at Lotus Pier after the second siege of the Burial Mounds). These two women, although only have one scene, arguably carry the most important information. Without their collective testimonies, there wouldn't be anyone else that could have reliably told the cultivation world of these crimes. Not only is it because the only other person who has any knowledge of what they divulge is Wei Wuxian himself, who no one would have any reason to believe, but also the fact that these two women occupy rather low position in society (unfortunately this is still how the world inside and outside of this show operate, for the most part). Because of the positions Sisi and Bicao, who is a handmaiden to the lady Qin Su (Jin Guangyao's sister and wife), hold, and especially as women, the systemic sexism and oppression of women actually serves to be beneficial (hear me out). As they are often not taken seriously, people tend to let their guard down and as seeking the company of sex workers is still very much a taboo despite how many noblemen follow suit, they are able to occupy a space where they can fall under the radar. Which meant that they were able to

collect this kind of very sensitive information. It is through their words that help to spur on the clan leaders and members to agree to make a move against Jin Guangyao.

After taking in everything that has been addressed in this paper, it is still not even scratching the surface of what can be talked about regarding this work of fiction. Ultimately, I want people to take what they have read, and use it to think deeper and try and take a step back when it comes to “foreign” art. For this is not simply just an adaptation or two or three of four of some piece of literature. It gives me hope for the future that goes beyond creating more in-depth and non-western pieces of queer art, it is simply also setting the bar so high for creative works in general. It was very difficult to try and figure out what needs to be included in what ended up feeling and being like a cultural translation of a series of works that honestly changed my life. It constantly made me see and think and rethink my opinion of each and every character, no matter how big or small their role was. I leave you with what I feel like is a steady sample of the ever changing way my own mind likes to consume and dissect works of cinematic grandeur. Thank you.