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Transcending Boundaries Through Xianxia: Chinese TV Drama Consumption by Global Audiences in a Cross-cultural Context

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Abstract: In recent years, as more Chinese dramas have been streamed on international platforms and Chinese company-owned platforms, Chinese TV dramas have become increasingly popular in the global market. The discussion under the hashtag “#C-drama” has experienced a resurgence on social media. Among all Chinese TV dramas consumed by global audiences, the Xianxia drama, with its strong and unique Chinese cultural elements, combining Chinese mythology and culture with fantasy and action, is one of the most popular genres. In the context of global media flows long dominated by cultural imperialism and Orientalist representations, the rise of Xianxia drama exports marks a culturally significant case of contra-flow, influenced by intertwined global political, economic, and cultural conditions. To examine the transculturality of Xianxia dramas, this paper conducted an online ethnography to explore how Chinese Xianxia dramas attract global audiences with different cultural backgrounds, through the lens of media content likeability, audience agency, and audience reception. The principal data sources of this study are online posts and comments on Reddit – r/CDrama, which reflect the global audience’s perspective in the process of consuming and interpreting Chinese Xianxia dramas. The findings of this study demonstrate that cultural magnetism, audience agency, and cultural projection facilitate the process of transcultural communication of Xianxia dramas, sharing insights into this transcultural entertainment content dissemination in the age of media globalization. Such insights contribute to understanding the dynamics of transnational cultural flows occurring in contemporary Asia.

Keywords: cultural flow; Orientalism; Chinese drama; Xianxia drama; global audience

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1 Introduction

Chinese TV dramas have begun to go overseas since the 1980s, with the advancement of China's reform and opening-up policy and the development of globalization. During the budding era and growth era, they were usually used as a means of national cultural diplomacy (Zhang 2022a, 2022b). After the 2000s, recognizing that film and television dramas, as a major type of cultural product, have become an important force in building a new pattern of international communication and enhancing the country's soft power, and also recognizing that culture has become an important area of international trade competition (Lee 2018), the Chinese government has set several relevant policy documents, aiming to expand the export of China's high-level radio, film, and television programs, and encourage businesses to provide services such as translation, dubbing, editing, and post-production for film and television, animations, and games produced overseas (Chinadaily 2022). Consequently, driven by the "Going Global" Strategy, the export of China's film and television industry has made great progress in the past few years. By 2021, China's TV dramas had spread to more than 200 countries and regions around the world, and its annual sales revenue reached over 56 million US dollars, representing a 118 % increase from the previous year, including 714 TV series, more than 30,000 episodes, and a duration of about 25,000 hours (Yi 2023).

Among these, a new genre of Chinese drama, Xianxia, has been increasing in popularity in the global market. This genre combines Chinese mythology and culture with fantasy and action and has been well-received by global audiences, especially in Southeast Asia (Yap 2023). Xianxia drama is one of the most distinctive genres of Chinese film and television works, and has also become a major force for Chinese domestic dramas to export in recent years. *Eternal Love* (2017) has been well-received by international audiences since its release. As of August 2018, the cumulative views reached over 50 billion, making it the most-watched Chinese drama globally at that time. *The Untamed* (2019) continued to lead a new wave of global interest in Xianxia. With its availability on Netflix, *The Untamed* has quickly amassed over 10 billion views since its airing, becoming one of the most-watched series in Asian television history (The Manila Times 2022). During its broadcasting, #*The Untamed*# also became the top trending topic on Twitter, indicating substantial global attention and discussion among international audiences (Ogilvy and Mather 2019). On Rakuten Viki, it received 56,328 ratings, indicating strong ongoing international audience engagement (Zhang 2022b). Netflix's official statistics show that, among the top 5 popular Mandarin dramas on Netflix in 2022–2023, two are Xianxia dramas, with *Love Between Fairy and Devil* (2022) ranking 2nd and *Till The End of The Moon* (2023) ranking 4th (Paihangbang 2023). More Xianxia dramas have been broadcasting in multiple countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, while airing on multi-streaming media platforms, underscoring their international appeal.

With its remarkably rising global popularity, the value of Xianxia dramas has also translated into cultural intellectual property and driven a growing “pop” culture phenomenon worldwide. Many Xianxia series recommendation lists have been appearing on the internet. Such international hits as *Ashes of Love* (2018), *Love and Redemption* (2020), and all the dramas mentioned above have been widely recommended and discussed by audiences and fans outside of China and created a Chinese presence in the global entertainment arena. After the airing of *The Untamed*, its original novel, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, as well as other serial novels by the same author, soon gained widespread attention and were translated into multiple languages, further boosting their popularity. Following the drama’s success, a musical group formed by cast members, known as “The Untamed Boys,” embarked on a world tour and fan meetings in various countries, including Thailand, demonstrating the show’s international appeal. Additionally, after *Till the End of the Moon* was broadcast overseas, character figurine mystery boxes sold out within a week, becoming the most popular item at that time. Meanwhile, inspired by the elaborate clothing and makeup design in the drama, other official merchandise products, including character figurines, scented candles, and gemstone bracelets, were also available through international e-commerce platforms like Cpop Universe and KOITAKE. As a result, *Till the End of the Moon* achieved significant success in merchandise sales, topping the list for most merchandise sold in 2023 (Reddit 2023). Notably, Xianxia dramas have helped to promote classical Chinese dress in fashion, popular culture, and cosplay spheres.

So, why are Xianxia dramas, as a unique genre with strong Chinese cultural elements, welcomed by global audiences? What contributed to the global popularity of Xianxia dramas? Does the global popularity of Chinese Xianxia dramas arouse international interest in traditional Chinese culture and thoughts, including traditional norms, moral values, and beliefs, among global audiences? Do these dramas, as cultural products, help in building the image of China and contribute to national branding? These questions are worth discussing. With the concepts of cultural flow and audience studies as a basis, this paper aims to offer a cultural analysis of Chinese Xianxia dramas from the global audience’s perspective and explore the implications for global transcultural communication.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Imperialism as Dominant Flow

To better understand the dynamics of cultural products and practices in trans-cultural communication, we need to situate these transitions and flows in global

contexts, where the concept of cultural imperialism has received significant academic interest, indicating the sustained cultural dominance of Western nations.

Cultural flows around the globe have long been discussed and widely recognized as asymmetrical. Scholars like Herbert Schiller (2019) introduced cultural imperialism to indicate the domination of one culture by another, usually considered a set of processes involving the loss of cultural autonomy for the “dominated” nation and the worldwide growth of cultural homogeneity or “sameness” (Barker 2004). Cultural imperialism points out that, in global economic and cultural exchanges, certain nations and regions dominate the international flow of cultural products, resulting in a one-way flow of media content from the West to the rest of the world. This one-way flow of cultural commodities – films, television shows, music, and advertising – refers not only to the global situation resulting from powerful Western culture industries, but also to strategies and instruments to consolidate cultural and ideological influence in global capitalism and maintain existing power structures.

This perspective has been taken up and further developed by contemporary scholars, who continue to investigate the complex historical processes behind the outcome of cultural imperialism, where the ownership of media communication corporations and facilities has received considerable attention. Recent work demonstrates that the commercial media system and networked entertainment industry in major western countries, especially the United States, lay the foundations for their dominance in global cultural influence (Thussu 2013). Meanwhile, despite regulatory cultural policies and national subsidies in many countries, economic globalization and trade liberalization have made it possible for developed Western media industries to constantly expand into local markets in other countries. “From news and current affairs (CNN, Discovery) through youth programming (MTV), children’s television (Disney), feature film (Hollywood), sport (ESPN) to the Internet (Google)” (Thussu 2006a,b), the US boasts the largest share of media and entertainment earnings for film, music, book publishing, and video games around the world, resulting in what is often termed the “dominant media flow” (Lu 2013). This leads to dominant influence of US-led Western media culture, conveying values and ideologies that align with the interests of dominant powers to global audiences.

Under these circumstances, Thussu (2013, 2021) introduced the concept of “Global Americana,” highlighting the dominance of Hollywood or Hollywoodized content in global media. This influence is particularly strong in Europe and Latin America, significant markets for Hollywood revenue, where Hollywood-style entertainment forms – including soap operas, talk shows, hospital dramas, and detective series – have gradually become a media “cultura franca” for audiences and consumers (Thussu 2021). Such cultural influences have also extended to Asian countries, a phenomenon some scholars refer to as the Hollywoodization of Asia. For instance, American action hero-inspired sequences have increasingly appeared in Chinese

martial arts films in recent years (Klein 2003). In the South Korean film industry, the integration of Hollywood action-thriller elements with indigenous cinematic styles has gained popularity since the 1990s (Rampal 2005). Moreover, the aggressive international content strategies of platforms like Netflix pose significant challenges to the development of South Korea's drama industry. Similarly, the Film Federation of India has expressed concerns about the recent trend in Indian filmmaking toward Hollywood-inspired styles, characterized by violence-oriented scripts within a pleasure-seeking cultural framework, as well as the frequent adaptation of popular Hollywood films (Rampal 2005).

2.2 Orientalism and Stereotyped Oriental Images on Screen

On the other side of this unequal cultural and power dynamic, Orientalism offers another theoretical framework to examine the cultural images of the East in global media content. Drawing inspiration from Marx's quote, "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented," Orientalism refers to the distorting perception of the Eastern world and its culture in Western nations, where the lens of the West is directed to the East, leading to the persistent othering of Asia and the dominance of Western imperial cultural ideology as a historical legacy of colonialism (Said 1994), with the "Western gaze" privilege of "seeing, without being seen" (Kaplan 1997).

This framework has been widely applied in the study of screen media to identify stereotyped representations of the East through motifs, imagery, narratives, and symbols. Looking at the history of the development of the image of the Eastern world in western film and television, it can be found that in the imagination of the West, the Eastern world is sometimes shaped as an Eastern paradise, sometimes it is turned into a hell and uncivilized land. It is like a pendulum, oscillating between positive and negative types. The early cinematic descriptions of the East and ancient Asia are filled with exaggerated claims and impossible tales, woven in with myth, tradition, and legend to accentuate the strange and exotic nature of this "Other" place. A representative example is *Madam Butterfly* (1993), which portrays in a stereotypical manner: "There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in cheongsams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally". Through the Western lens, the image of the Orient was not only backward, mysterious, and exotic, but also sexualized and even erotic (Syed 2021). It was always perceived and associated with femininity and passiveness, while, the Occident, on the contrary, has been viewed as masculine and intellectual (Li 2022). In Netflix's *Marco Polo* TV series, from a biased Western perspective of the Italian adventurer Marco Polo, the Chinese world was biasedly

regarded as a suffocating and venal state apparatus that crushes the common people, and although national commerce and trade are doing well, the highly centralized emperor is brutal and incompetent. At the same time, under the pen of the screenwriters, the narrative narcissistically constructs Chinese woman who meets the protagonist is always a charming but docile image, and will eventually fall hopelessly in love with Marco Polo.

In films and television, the Oriental images have also been visualized and represented through the roles of Asian characters shown on the screen. The typical Asian stereotypes in Western TV and movies can be categorized into four: The first image is of a vicious demon, which dates back to the screen image of Fu Manchu in the early 20th century. The second was of a martial arts (kung fu) master (Wang 2017). Representative Hollywood movies featuring Chinese martial arts, such as *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008) and *Shanghai Noon* (2000), enthusiastically utilize traditional Chinese cultural references and martial arts elements. The third representation is common in modern Western media, as Orientals are depicted as inferior, weak, sickly, and non-masculine, compared with Westerners (Said 2003). Such marginalized portrayals are also evident in the images of Asian characters in previous TV series, such as Han Lee in *2 Broke Girls*, who is depicted as short, sexually weak, and conservative. In addition to the three discernible stereotypes above, this article argues that there is an additional stereotyped Oriental image on contemporary screens: a chaotic pile-up of exotic elements. Representative example is Disney's *Mulan* (2020). From small symbolic items such as food (noodles and dumplings) to characters' appearances (martial arts costumes and poses), to traditional landmarks and exotic architecture (bamboos and temples), Oriental elements fill the entire film. The story also follows a biased cliché plot as the protagonist, who represents "truth" and "freedom," liberates a closed and backward Eastern empire and help it achieve "internationalization." Despite featuring an all-Asian cast, the core storyline and spirit remain rooted in typical American heroism and individualism. "*Yellow Skin, White Masks*" describes the Asian roles' characteristics in these movies (Chen and Tian 2021).

Recent studies emphasize that these stereotyped images still persist in contemporary media. With the commercial incentive to appeal to global audiences, more and more Asian faces are seen in Hollywood films, and some films even directly focus on Eastern settings. However, they are still critiqued for inadvertently (or intentionally) reinforcing Orientalist imagery through a Western lens, by prioritizing Western heroes while sidelining local narratives, or emphasizing their exotic appeal rather than local cultural authenticity. In response, there has been a growing call for authentic and self-representational practices in Asian media production that break these long-existing stereotypes.

2.3 Transcultural Flow as Consequence of Media Globalization

In the context of previous studies about imperialistic, Orientalist global cultural flow, the effects of cross-border media on transcultural communication have been highlighted by contemporary scholars (Bonfadelli 2017).

Media globalization, enabled by rapid technological developments and the rise of digital platforms, is a global phenomenon that has revolutionized the way information and media content are disseminated across geographical boundaries (Stasberger 2023). Traditional forms of media, such as print, radio, and television, have evolved alongside technological innovations. Meanwhile, the emergence of the internet and social media has accelerated this process, shifting TV content from TV sets to easier-accessible streaming platforms, further transcending physical borders and conveying information or entertainment programs to reach global audiences. The global distribution of Chinese TV dramas has demonstrated a similar digital and platforming shift. Over the past decade, the Chinese TV industry has made great strides in exporting TV dramas to international streaming platforms and expanding Chinese video platforms to overseas markets, which has played an active role in helping Chinese dramas reach audiences across languages and cultures (Zhang 2022b).

As a result, the process of media globalization leads to a worldwide flow of culture, going beyond national boundaries (Stasberger 2023). Since the development of global video streaming platforms has fundamentally changed the process of producing, distributing, and disseminating media products in the past decades, people around the globe are increasingly consuming culture produced by other countries (Jin 2020). International streaming platforms such as Rakuten Viki, YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, and international versions of regional platforms represented by ViuTV, WeTV, and Astro GO, have greatly facilitated the cross-border flow of TV content, in which Asian countries are playing an increasingly significant role in shaping global media landscapes (Thussu 2021). The traditional domination of Western media is being challenged by the availability of media from major non-western nations, such as entertainment from Indian Bollywood, Japanese animation, South Korean popular music and television dramas. These countries have certainly advanced their national images as some of the major contraflow powers in the realm of cultural production (Jin 2020). Therefore, in the era of digitized and globalized communication, the one-way vertical flow of media and mediated culture from the West to the East has given way to multiple flows that enhance global cultural dialogues (Thussu 2021), in which the narrative of cultural homogenization is challenged, while cultural expressions of unique local characteristics have been encouraged (Welsch 2001).

Arguably, transcultural flow is regarded as the communicative consequence of media globalization, and digital platforming and internet culture interventions have played a significant role in the “going global” process of Chinese dramas. It is therefore increasingly important to use media and cultural flows to understand the consumption patterns of Chinese Xianxia dramas.

2.4 Active Audience that Boost Cultural Contraflow in the Contemporary Era

Cultural contraflow, an important concept in transcultural communication, refers to the cultural movement of media content and products from peripheral non-western countries and regions to dominant Western markets, challenging the dominated status of Western media in the global market (Thussu 2006b). The reception and consumption of media in a cross-cultural context has long been a complex and controversial area of academic inquiry, in which audiences and fans have been increasingly examined, especially in response to questions of why cultural contraflow emerged.

Audiences choose and use media as active subjects to satisfy their needs, and prior studies have identified audience agency in media selection and consumption. Stuart Hall's (1980) audience reception theory pointed out the possibility that audiences may resist dominant ideology. For this reason, audiences resist mainstream media due to skepticism and cultural resistance (Tsftati and Cappella 2003) and turn to other media content that aligns with their interests. The act of resistance in media consumption itself produces pleasure (Fiske 1987). Hawkins et al. (2001) demonstrated that in the process of “active” television viewing, audiences' actions of TV viewing and channel surfing are influenced by individuals' gratifications, expertise, and need for cognition. So, in this perspective, the fun of media use and the “popularity” of popular culture can be seen as a result of assertions of independent freedom by audiences, allowing audiences to understand the world on their own terms.

The notion of “active audience” research has been expanded in the age of the interactive audience, identifying that the flow of media and cultural content across various media systems, media markets, and international boundaries relies significantly on the active engagement of consumers (Thussu 2021), especially in the dissemination of cultural contraflows. This has also been demonstrated in previous studies through case studies of fan-powered cultural communities and platforms. For example, Li (2021) researched the role of fan-based translation in popularizing online Wuxia literature, and (Zhang 2022b) pointed out that Viki, as a video streaming site for Asian TV content, relies heavily on the emergence of its online global user

communities. The digital convergence of media and the transnational flow of culture gives rise to a global fandom network that allows individuals and organizations to access content, engage in global conversations, and share perspectives (Hills 2018; Stasberger 2023).

Therefore, active audiences, facilitated by digital media, play a pivotal role in boosting contraflow in transcultural communication. With their dual role as both passive consumers and active participants, audiences and fans actively shape global cultural dynamics and narratives, which contextualizes the rise of Chinese Xianxia dramas.

2.5 Martial Arts and Xianxia as “Pop” Culture Presenting China

For the contraflow of cultural influence from China to the West, the popularity of Chinese martial arts since the 1970s has long been regarded as the representative example by many scholars (Bowman 2021; Klein 2004; Teo 2009; Wu and Chan 2007). Kung fu was first introduced in the 1950s, then developed and popularized in the 1970s and 1980s. After Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan’s popularity, many Chinese Hong Kong kung fu films were shown in the US in the 1980s, resulting in martial arts fight scenes becoming commonplace among global audiences and gradually growing as a standard feature in Hollywood action films (Klein 2004), further expanding its international influence. Such international hits as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hero* (2002), and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) have firmly set a Chinese martial art presence in the global entertainment arena, establishing it as globally recognized and celebrated Chinese popular culture.

Berry and Farquhar (2006) once discussed how martial arts cinema has embraced cultural identity to project “a mythic, cultural version of Chineseness for Chinese and non-Chinese audiences” in *China on Screen*. Based on the concept of “Cultural China” (Wang 2017), they further developed it as three cultural universes including societies populated by ethnic Chinese, overseas Chinese communities, and people whose common interest in China transcends national boundaries. Therefore, for Chinese global audiences, some scholars then pointed out that, with its “Chineseness” and “Cultural China” as common identities, martial art films created imagined worlds that connect disparate peoples, mainly indicating overseas Chinese communities (Coe 2018; Eperjesi 2004). However, for non-Chinese audiences, Eperjesi (2004) assumed that kung fu movies, represented by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, appealed to American audiences through exoticism, which is still situated in the tradition of American romantic Orientalism.

As for the recent Xianxia (immortal heroes), developed from the basis of Chinese martial arts, it derives its name from two words, Xian (immortal) and Xia

(hero). Xian broadly refers to gods, goddesses, magical creatures, spirits, demons, and fairies within the Chinese mythological realm, while Xia refers to the hero-warrior figures. Rooted in Chinese literature and folk culture, Xianxia has its own world setting, hierarchy, and cultivation system. The Xianxia fantasy genre, with its Daoism-influenced martial arts style and elements of magic and supernaturalism (Hoesly 2022), first reached the global market in the form of web novels, and has received a dramatic rise in readership overseas in the past decade. Online websites, like WuxiaWorld and NovelUpdates, played a significant role in fostering growing international communities and fanbases, allowing enthusiasts to discuss, translate, and share Xianxia novels among them (Yang 2020). Then, with Chinese streaming media platforms entering the global market and widely cooperating with international media companies, Xianxia dramas, usually adapted from Xianxia novels, have recorded a spike in exportation demand in the past and upcoming years (Yap 2023).

Xianxia “popped up” as a unique genre blending Chinese culture, and has gradually become one of the representative Chinese “pop” cultural products that contribute to China’s soft power and shape global perceptions of Chinese culture. The “pop” cultural flow of Xianxia can be attributed to its integration into mass media, as well as active audience agency. Therefore, the case of Xianxia dramas can enable us to further delve into the global culture flow from an approach of transcultural and intermedial communication while examining cultural product production, global audience interaction, and transcultural consumption practices.

Thus, this paper aims to examine what aspects of Chinese Xianxia dramas attract global audiences with different cultural backgrounds and the global audience’s role in this process of consumption and dissemination, as well as how global audiences interpret and construct meaning from the messages. Based on the context of the literature reviews above, the following research questions are related to the research concerns:

Q1: What appeals to global audiences in the consumption of Xianxia dramas, compared with media content produced under Orientalist perceptions?

Q2: What roles do global audiences play in the process of the popularity and contraflow of Xianxia dramas, in the global context of dominant Western media flow?

Q3: From the audience’s perspective, how do Xianxia dramas fare in terms of transcultural media reception? What cultural images do Xianxia dramas build? Do they shape global understandings of Chinese culture?

3 Methods

This study used online ethnography to gain an internal perspective of the cultural community through long-term, immersive, participatory observations. Specifically, it analyzed English-speaking audiences' online discussions on Reddit–r/CDrama, a main fan group and forum for global audiences of Chinese dramas.

3.1 The Virtual Field of Reddit – r/CDrama

Reddit, an online discussion platform, is ranked as the ninth most visited website in the world, and fifth most visited in the U.S. as of February 2025 (Similarweb 2025). By October 2023, Reddit had become one of the most prominent social platforms on the web, with more than 70 million daily active users and over 100,000 active communities worldwide, known as “subreddits” (Reddit 2024).

With 95,000 members, placing it in the top 2 % of subreddits by size, r/CDrama offers a space for fans of Chinese dramas, TV shows, web series, and actors/actresses. The content in this community includes discussions and reviews of favorite shows, recommendations for other viewers, and topical issues about all aspects of Chinese dramas, from pre-production to post-production. Fan art and memes are also important visual materials conveying communication among members. Discussions on Reddit are primarily public, in that anyone, with or without a Reddit account, can view content (with the exception of private subreddits). Users can “vote” on original shared content and discussion comments, which determines their visibility (Proferes et al. 2021). This, along with high online participation, provides a rich source of data for this research.

3.2 Data Collection

Beginning in 2024, the author entered r/CDrama as an anonymous fan and conducted online ethnography, observing user comments, visual materials posted by fans, and relevant discussions, while taking detailed notes. In March 2024, as an early stage of the study, the author primarily explored the Reddit platform to become familiar with the community norms and cultural concepts of r/CDrama, such as a large number of abbreviations, homonyms, and ciphers. April to May 2024 was the main period of data collection, and the author was immersed in the community with an average of 6–8 hours a day. During the day, relevant posts were searched and browsed using keywords and hashtags, while posts were saved and

notes were taken. At night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., new posts and discussions were browsed using simple random sampling, coinciding with the airing of the Xianxia drama *The Legend of ShenLi* (2024). Later, in July 2024, the author began participatory observations in r/CDrama due to the broadcast of *Lost You Forever Season 2* (2024). From July to August, the author recommended this show everywhere in the comment sections and participated in discussions. In this process, the author also accumulated enough karma points to be allowed to post freely. From October to December, due to the need to revise the paper, the author continued the previous immersive observations and posted questions related to the research concerns in the community to further improve the accuracy of the analysis.

To ensure the representativeness of the collected data, the author created a primary dataset of relevant keywords that are frequently mentioned in Xianxia dramas with theme categorizations, according to the most highly-cited glossary of terms in Wuxia, Xianxia & Xuanhuan Novels compiled by fans on Reddit – r/noveltranslations (HuanXu 2016). Then, through searching, scouting, selecting contents sampled with the keywords in dataset (see Table 1), and web crawling and scraping, data were collected and saved through handwritten observation journals and Python from the Reddit platform. In addition to targeted searches and scrapes, manual observation was also conducted by following topical themes and specific conversations via hashtags such as “culture,” “recommendation,” “discussion,” and “meme,” to ensure data diversity and gain various perspectives.

Data collection was followed by data integration that combined analysis and interpretation, which mainly focused on textual analysis and cultural analytics through coding and content categorization to find recurring key themes and concepts within the data. The theoretical framework and coding were constantly adjusted and revised according to new discussions and posts, in order to improve the inclusiveness and representativeness of the findings.

Table 1: Example of a basic keyword feature list in categories when sampling.

Theme	Setting	Scene	Story	Others
<i>Xianxia</i> , <i>Wuxia</i>	<i>jianghu</i> /martial world, <i>shenxian</i> /immortal, <i>xuanhuan</i> /fantasy, <i>sanjie</i> /three realms, <i>zongpai</i> /sects	Art design, clothes, dress, architecture, <i>fabao</i> /magical items, <i>faqi</i> /magical weapons	Plot, character arc, reincarna- tion, karma, <i>xiulian</i> /cultivation, adventure, cases,r omance, brotherhood	Culture, daoism,m ythology

4 Findings and Analysis

Media accessibility, user agency, and global cultural background attributes are deeply intertwined in the consumption of Chinese Xianxia dramas. Following the main research concerns of this paper, the transcultural consumption of Xianxia dramas is examined through the lens of intercultural communication, encompassing media selection, usage, and reception, with a focus on meaning construction. Analysis of content on Reddit – r/CDrama covers various views shared by users in terms of content likability, cultural acceptance, as well as user interactivity and connectivity. This section presents an analysis of the collected data related to the research concerns.

4.1 Xianxia Elements as Attractive to Global Audience

To understand what attracts global audiences to consume Chinese Xianxia dramas, we can examine discussions about first-time viewing experiences, personal reactions, and so on. The elements in Xianxia dramas that audiences find attractive usually revolve around the design of story worldview, plots, characters, and core values, and can be categorized as the following aspects.

4.1.1 Worldview Setting

The worldview setting in Xianxia dramas establishes its unique position in the Chinese TV industry and even the global media market. Xianxia dramas usually have a rich and grand worldview, involving elements of martial arts, magic, and creatures from Chinese mythology. However, though most concepts are regarded as common knowledge, every Xianxia drama can still create its own fantasy world by adapting details based on the default settings, which indicates the potential for creativity and possibilities for Xianxia drama productions. As one audience member noted:

“Chinese dramas have so much potential, especially Xianxia where the settings are in mythology so there is even more room for creativity.”

Rooted in Chinese mythology and based on Daoism and Buddhism, Xianxia dramas are usually set in a fantastical version of ancient China. Their worldviews combine a set of three realms, usually Shen (immortal), Ren (mortal), and Mo (devil), in which all beings can cultivate and feishen (ascend) through xiulian (cultivation) to gain immortality and magical spells. Under this broad background, various sects, factions, and professions then appear as derivatives. All these components form a grand picture of the Xianxia world that differentiates it from the Western fantasy world:

“China is amazing because it has its own fully developed fantasy tradition that is TOTALLY different from Western fantasy. It’s so wonderful to put aside the wizards and the knights and warring feudal kingdoms, and to plunge into new worlds full of cultivator sects, wandering martial artists, and imperial courts.”

“... [Xianxia] it’s fantasy—meaning magic/immortals/demons exist in that world... in a world where everybody has 1200’s level technology ... magic doing all kinds of wild stuff, like reviving the dead, flying, shooting fireworks out of their hands, and crafting impossible weapons ...”

To succeed through cultivation and improve their power, all beings must go through training and trials, which are connected with karma, reincarnation, and enlightenment. As a result, the concept of “three lives” is a very popular and common setting in Xianxia dramas, which also attracts the attention of global audiences:

“... I like the multiple reincarnation concept and the fact that we can see multiple lives of the main characters, and this way we have a lot of stories in one ... watching [X]ianxia dramas is never a waste of time because they add more scenes to my imagination.”

In the Xianxia world, animism is a fundamental belief, where it is assumed that all beings can cultivate. Meanwhile, there is another common understanding that all things have energy in Xianxia, so magical items and weapons are also an essential part of the Xianxia world. The main representative of this is the sword, and sometimes there are lists and rankings of swords in some Xianxia dramas.

“... animals too can cultivate and achieve a humanoid appearance based on their cultivation. However, their true essence remains that of the animal they were. As such, they carry the character traits or archetypes of the animal they are...”

“I’ve watched *The Untamed* ... where there is a focus on most characters having their personal named swords and I find that very interesting for some reason... I find customized sword designs very cool and interesting!”

All these fantasy settings with unique Chinese culture and philosophy not only provide a foundation for characters in Xianxia to adventure and push forward interesting plots, but also attract global audiences to explore the Xianxia world, as one comment concluded:

“I really like the [D]aoist philosophy that’s incorporated: the idea of cultivation, the idea that everything is sentient (plants, rocks, animals) and evolving, and the idea that moral paradox and personal growth are important to good stories.”

There is a humorous discussion post on Reddit, saying, “Anyone else started wondering if you’re an immortal just going through their mortal arc? I’ve genuinely told myself this sometimes when life gets rough.” Many people shared similar

viewpoints from the perspective of Xianxia's worldview after watching these dramas:

"Hahaha I do think I'm facing the 7 bitterness of mortal life important to become an immortal. It helps I've watched [E]ternal [L]ove!!"

"My spirituality resonates with lots of material in Xianxia which is one of the reasons why I was initially attracted to it. Although, I believe that we are all part of something bigger and we come to planet such as this to experience, learn, grow, and create. So even the tough times contribute to what we come here for."

"I think xianxia may become my new official religion."

Therefore, Xianxia dramas' worldview setting creates a metaphorically realistic but also somewhat idealistic and romantic fictional universe. Building upon the aesthetic and narrative traditions of Xianxia games and novels, the open world of Xianxia dramas offers global audiences the opportunity to explore a virtual world with limitless imaginative possibilities. Compared with the simplified and often reductive Chinese fantasy world from the perspective of Orientalism, which tend to be superficial assemblages of stereotypical Chinese cultural elements fused with Western-imagined Chinese social structures and relationship dynamics, the worldview setting in Xianxia dramas offers a much richer cultural imagination.

4.1.2 Aesthetics Design

According to discussions on Reddit, the visual aesthetics in Xianxia dramas are usually the reason global audiences begin their first episode and "go down the rabbit hole of Xianxia dramas":

"A gif with some sexy masked dude rocking his fan made me watch Love and Redemption."

Based on the comments on r/CDrama, the most attractive aspect of Xianxia dramas is their overall aesthetics and visual presentation. Among these, costume, hairstyle, CGI, and battle scenes are key aspects that appear most frequently in discussions of content appeal:

"... I just love the costumes, visuals, stories, that long flowy hair, ... All the awesome fighting choreographies too! Movement of actors seems to be on a different level, they always seem so graceful ... I often joke that I'm here for handsome men with long hair and black robes :P ..."

"... her [Shenli in *The Legend of Shenli*] with the phoenix wings behind her back, or the scene where she 'dies' above the sea and her power transforms into a huge fire phoenix that dyes the whole sea red and even shakes the sky ... were absolutely gorgeous"

The costume design in Xianxia dramas often combines traditional Chinese historical costumes with Chinese artistic aesthetic elements. At the same time, based on Chinese culture, Xianxia costumes are also in continuous innovation, such as the creation of the costume and makeup design of *Till the End of The Moon* (2023) inspired by the Dunhuang flying art style, the use of gorgeous headdresses, flowing shapes, and high saturation of colors (Shi 2023), forming the unique bright Chinese aesthetics in this drama, which also captured the attention of global audiences:

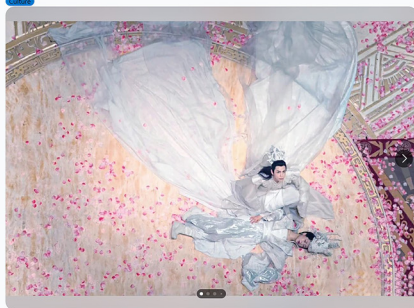
“... the colorful wedding outfits ... because the embroidery on the red and green wedding dresses is so gorgeous and really stands out.”

“Using ancient Chinese period drama type clothing is also part of the aesthetic look. You traditionally had deities with flowing and floating others like in the paintings at dunhuang.” [in discussion of *Till The End of The Moon*]

“Bai Lu’s [actress of female lead in *Till The End of The Moon*] costume and makeup made her look enchanting with all the blings. She was sparkling and angelic.”

On Reddit, there are also discussions about their favorite wedding looks featured in Xianxia dramas, in which *Ashes of Love*, *Destined*, and *Till the End of the Moon* are frequently highlighted. There is even a post summarizing and compiling all the classic white flowy hair in Xianxia dramas by an audience who is “very much obsessed with beautiful white/light grey hair flowing around in dramaland” (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, the design of props and sets in Xianxia dramas is also a popular topic among audiences’ discussions. For example, people expressed shared appreciation for the use of fans as weaponry during fights, finding it “elegant” and “graceful.” Viewers who enjoyed Xianxia dramas with adventure plots requested recommendations for

White weddings dress - predominantly wore in Xianxia weddings



Xianxia and white flowy hair....

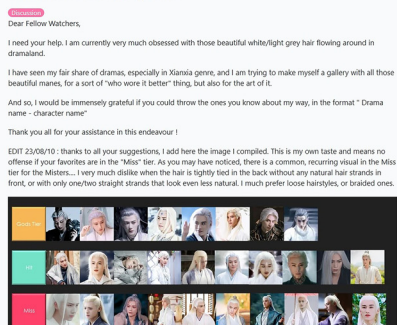


Figure 1: Discussion related to Xianxia’s aesthetics design (Reddit 2023).

similar shows, expressing a fondness for outdoor exploration and travel through ancient Chinese towns and cities with traditional architectures, as experienced through the characters' perspectives.

Xianxia dramas have created their own Chinese-style aesthetics and unique high-context traditional cultural atmosphere, incorporating Chinese aesthetics and crafts into the details. With the assistance of CGI and special effects, Xianxia creates a beautiful and fantastic world, based on beautiful natural landscapes and ingenious Chinese architectural sets.

"I just love the 'traditional' vibe... like the clothes and the hair and the setting seems so pretty and dreamy. It almost feels like a fairy tale..."

"When I hear that flute playing at the beginning of a drama I know I'm where I'm supposed to be. The concepts and premises are cool. The aesthetics are amazing. I love [d]aoism being incorporated. And it fulfills a niche that you can't really get anywhere else..."

All these things contribute to the unique Chinese aesthetic design of Xianxia dramas, and have been well-received by global audiences. Therefore, the aesthetic paradigm of Xianxia dramas, through the inheritance and development of classical Chinese aesthetics, creates the overall picture of a rich and beautiful Chinese fantasy world, rather than a simple stacking of stereotyped exotic elements.

4.1.3 Narrative Form

From the perspective of global audiences, the coherent, nuanced, mild, and multi-layered narrative style is another highly attractive characteristic of Xianxia. This is presented in the drama through plot development, character growth, and action design.

With godhood being the ultimate position, driving the story forward, the pattern of plot development in Xianxia dramas follows the basic storyline of "cultivation." Then, with this main clue, the story with multiple plots unfolds, in which characters experience challenges and may even fall into the "three lives" trail (as subplots).

The characters in Xianxia dramas usually bear the responsibility and obligation of saving the common people (Fan 2023). Often, groups experience the growth of friendship and love, and finally overcome hardships to become saviors who take on great responsibility:

"... It started out the main characters as a mortal who go through such an emotional & lengthy journey to finally be able to ascend to godhood." [in discussion of *Till the End of the Moon*]

"a solid story from start to finish with elegant execution, the little meticulous details they have spread like breadcrumbs throughout the drama ... The relationship had growth,

understanding, devotion, affection, and more importantly they chose each other. Again and again. Against fate. Against all odds.”

Or the characters have great magic and power from the beginning, shouldering the mission of the immortals, appearing at critical moments to protect the people, and can even sacrifice their own personal interests for the sake of the common people:

“The FL [Shen Li] is one of my favorites, she is very powerful (in terms of powers, but also mentally), stubborn, intelligent, confident, independent, a little cold, has very high martial arts skills and is also beautiful. Shen Li carries the safety and survival of her people on her shoulders without ever wavering or complaining, she is even ready to sacrifice her life and her happiness...” [in discussion of *The Legend of Shenli*]

The former has the chivalrous spirit of “my destiny is up to me, not the heaven” in Chinese culture, while the latter has the Daoist idea of “taking the common people of the world as their own responsibility.” Therefore, one recurring theme in Xianxia is the idea of fate versus free will. This macro narrative philosophy, which is different from individual heroism in the West, has formed a unique core value of romantic heroism, which sets the tone of the narrative of Xianxia dramas.

Within this narrative tone, heroism, rescue, growth, friendship, and love are among the typical story themes explored in Xianxia dramas. Characters in Xianxia can defy fate, but there will be corresponding consequences later. As a result, the logic of cause and effect in the past and present arcs is emphasized in Xianxia, which not only ensures the progression of storylines through foreshadowing but also further enriches the character images. For example, since different arcs in the “three lives” are like alternate universes, the mortal arc is usually portrayed as a carefree journey for the immortal characters, in which audiences can see another dimension of the characters’ personalities. Therefore, the group portrait of multiple protagonists in Xianxia dramas can be very complex and multilayered:

“... love the mortal arc of LBFAD [*Love Between Fairy and Devil*] because we were able to see God of War’s other side. I mean, xhang ling he’s character was a happy go lucky guy in mortal realm. Also we were able to see Dong Fang Qing Cang play the ball. They just don’t have responsibilities.”

Just as analyzed in a love letter to *The Longest Promise* (2023) posted on r/CDrama, the character arc in Xianxia dramas follows the concept of nonduality in the Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang, in which “there are always two sides to something, not everything is as black and white as it appears. This Yin Yang analogy is about the coexistence of opposite elements creating perfect harmony and this aspect will be reflected in various ways within the story.” Good and evil, the diversity of human

nature, the survival of groups, and the importance of choice – all these metaphors give Xianxia dramas a deeper meaning and plot depth:

“I do appreciate that there aren’t set ‘all good guys’ and ‘all bad guys’. One thing I liked about LBFAD [*Love Between Fairy and Devil*] is that everybody had their own motivation for doing what they did... even the nastier characters had reasons of their own for doing what they did. And it’s also true that people in groups can do stupid, awful stuff.”

“The story-telling, to me, is more layered, complex, and nuanced than what I’ve seen in comparable US productions ... Loyalty, trust, and relationships matter. The ‘bad guys’ tend to be more nuanced, often with backstories... for what I’m looking for in meaningful entertainment, Xianxia offers more than any other genre I’ve ever seen.”

“The villains are complex and multi layered, and you see why they do what they do. We aren’t told the protagonist is a genius, we are shown he is, and how!”

Romance and love are the most common themes in Xianxia dramas. For global audiences, Xianxia dramas offer different and nuanced narrative forms about love, compared with Western content. In Xianxia dramas, relationship development takes time, mutual pining can be implicit, confession of love is poetic – all these details of plots and narrative styles evoke emotional responses from audiences:

“I’m American, born and bred ... it’s nice not to have to wade through gun violence, profanity and gratuitous sex all the time... They take more to develop characters and relationships between characters.”

“... scenes like stolen glances, accidental touching, desire, attraction, angst and such. A romance that will have me anticipate what’s coming next and have me screaming even at the smallest acts lol...”

“... Love is depicted as...love. No gratuitous sex to tell us characters ‘love’ each other. The love shown, its myriad of expression, between best friends, comrades, spouses, siblings and lovers, are virtually poetic, and deeply moving because they all ring so true...”

It is evident that, Xianxia dramas have their own behavioral motivations, character missions, and narrative rhythms. Inspired by Chinese societal culture, mythology, and philosophy, this narrative form of Xianxia dramas offers a refreshing alternative to the “Orientalist dilemma” in mainstream Western narrative models, showcasing a multilayered and imaginative storytelling.

4.2 Active Audience in the Transcultural Communication of Xianxia

It is impossible to discuss cultural contraflow like Xianxia without noting the role that participatory culture plays. The audience, facilitated by media globalization, is

crucial in the transcultural communication of Xianxia dramas, particularly as active prosumers (Bird 2011).

Media globalization and digitalization have made global media content more accessible than ever, as content spreads across various sources and platforms, including major official streaming services such as Netflix, WeTV, and iQIYI, as well as smaller or freely accessible online platforms. This has further empowered audience agency and promoted grassroots movements, enabling a global audience to consume cultural contraflow like Xianxia. For example, one user noted that a characteristic of being a Xianxia fan is subscribing to numerous obscure streaming services. On Reddit, users forward, share, and exchange information about these streaming sites to access Xianxia drama content. Thus, fan communities serve as hubs for global audiences who share tastes and interests, collecting and compiling relevant information.

“... because of the lack of information on Wikipedia and the lack of translation of novels. I’m interested in *Ashes of Love*. With help from this subreddit, I found a translation of the book but only the first 25 chapters ...”

Despite the transformative innovations in the global circulation of content and information brought by media convergence, language remains a significant barrier to cultural understanding. Overcoming language barriers can greatly facilitate cultural exchange among people with diverse backgrounds, and this is an area where active audiences contribute significantly to the transcultural communication of Xianxia dramas. For instance, Viki, a leading online platform offering free Asian TV shows and movies, originated as a student project aimed at providing free translation services. Subtitling support, provided by fans, has significantly influenced the wide secondary editing and dissemination of show content, particularly for content without commercial translations, which relies heavily on this grassroots communication model.

“I have been subbing for many years (my profession is closely related). My objective has always been to ‘build bridges’, to open the vast universe of these wonderful dramas to people with no idea of the language.”

“... long live subbers, basically... i am grateful for their efforts because it allows me to partake in something that would be out of reach otherwise.”

“Subbers are the unsung heroes of making dramas global... Thank you so much!”

On Reddit, while users may not directly translate Xianxia dramas, they actively proofread mistranslations and collect, explain, and share Xianxia terminology to enhance understanding of the unique concepts and cultural contexts. For example, when a member inquired about the origins of holdings in Xianxia bags, a user replied:

“I saw a drama recently where they show the inside of the bag and it seems like another dimension where the items exist in that dimension but still fit in a teeny bag, where even people can fit inside. This website [with link to a fan-made glossary] described everything you’ll ever want to know about all the elements of [X]ianxia, Wuxia, and xuanhuan. It will help beginners understand so much of what the hell is going on.”

Numerous posts ask and discuss the concepts and cultural elements within Xianxia. For instance, searching for the differences between Xianxia and Wuxia on r/CDrama, a frequent source of confusion, yields several pages of posts and countless explanatory comments. To comprehend these unique cultural aspects, such as the Xianxia worldview, audiences on Reddit often use their familiar Western fantasy works, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*, to compare and analyze, then understand the setting in Xianxia dramas:

“... *The Rise of Phoenixes* is a historical costume drama with normal human being. *Think of Game of Throne* as equivalent. While *Ashes of Love* is Xianxia dramas with God, Goddess, Magical Creatures, Spirits, Demons, Fairies, etc. *The Lord of the Rings* as the [W]est equivalent.”

“... I never took them as being earth historically. More an eternal fantasy realm. Like Tolkien’s world.”

Audiences also understand Xianxia props by comparing them to modern technologies:

“Mirrors in ancient China, not only they were actually highly reflective, they also can be used for FaceTime (ok maybe only in Xianxia world)” [with a still of *Eternal Love*]

Furthermore, community interaction enhances the viewing experience. Users create fan art, including pictures, fiction, and videos, to express their appreciation for specific dramas and characters. For example, a fan video on r/CDrama compares magical spells from *Harry Potter* and *The Longest Promise*, and some posts indicate authors planning to write Xianxia fiction, seeking ideas from fans. Fan-created memes (see Figure 2) are also widely shared, fostering interesting discussions about Xianxia among audiences. Under a discussion of “What I’ve learned from Xianxia,” humorous conversations emerged:

“Can’t sacrifice yourself to save the world without an awesome hairdo! That’s why mastering qi-hairstyling is foundational.”

“And using said magic to somehow be able to sleep in those hairstyles on the universe’s crappiest pillows.”

“You forgot the blood spitting. You must first spit blood 32 times before you qualify for divine cultivation.”

And another topic “Signs you are addicted to Xianxia”:

“You suspect people who’ve been hit by lightning are secretly immortals. And are weirdly jealous of them.”

Therefore, the active audience plays a significant role in the transcultural understanding of Xianxia dramas. Although Chinese Xianxia dramas possess a strong, high-context traditional Chinese cultural background in terms of folk customs, mythical origins, and moral norms, which initially presents a certain threshold for new viewers (Lustig, Koester and Halualani 2017), based on the reactions of overseas audiences, these traditional cultural elements have not hindered acceptance and understanding. Instead, they have stimulated audience interaction and recreation, offering engaging cultural perspectives for global audiences.

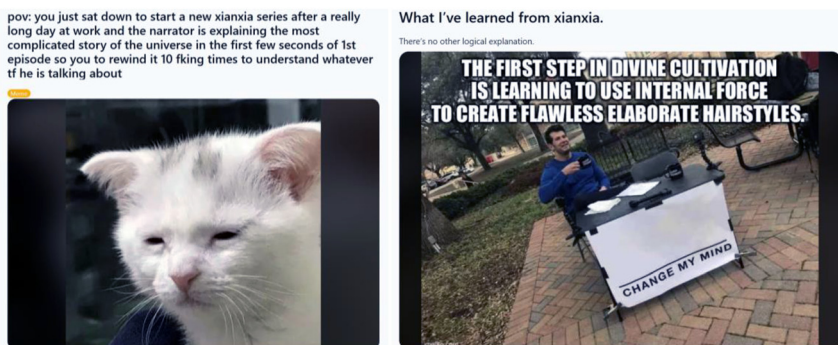


Figure 2: Fan-made memes in discussions related to Xianxia (Reddit 2023).

4.3 Audience Reception along with Cultural Images Built Through Xianxia

Drama, as an art form, is characterized by reproduction and performance, which involve the interpretation and transcendence of real life. Cultural representations, such as drama, convey the identity of a particular nation or culture through symbolic symbols, constructing perceptions and imaginations of others about that culture (Weststeijn 2007). As a fictional genre, Xianxia fully integrates these characteristics.

Audience positionality is crucial in examining transnational, cross-cultural media reception. Jenkins (2004) identified two representative audience positions in consuming transcultural media content in the age of global convergence:

cosmopolitan audiences and diasporic audiences. Both are results of audiences' rising global consciousness and cultural competency. Compared to traditional viewers who consume only easily accessible mainstream media content, cosmopolitans explore the novelty of unfamiliar pop culture for "crossover purposes," aiming to escape the constraints of their local culture, or expressing their open mind and transcultural affinity (Yoon 2022). Diasporic audiences, on the other hand, engage with transnational media from their homeland or ancestral origin as a way to negotiate their ethnic and cultural identity. These two distinct audience types are reflected in the composition of overseas consumers of Xianxia dramas.

For individuals unfamiliar with Chinese cultural backgrounds, escapism is a widely acknowledged reason for consuming Xianxia media content, as it creates a world distinct from modern daily life:

"A lot of us watch to escape, to take a break from the humdrum of daily life. Genres like fantasy and history are great for that. And Chinese fantasy/history stories are an even bigger escape because they come from a very different culture. We grew up with wandering knights and wizards and dragons, we read about the bickering kings of Europe in school. But we didn't grow up hearing stories about wandering xia and cultivators and long, and our history classes didn't go into the court politics of Imperial China. So Chinese fantasy/history feels even more exciting than Western fantasy/history."

Other frequently mentioned reasons for choosing Xianxia include curiosity about different cultures, nuanced stories and depth, elaborate aesthetics, and the fantasy worldview:

"... I know they are fiction, but they still offer windows of insight to a world I have never seen, and I am really happy about that."

"... the difference is part of the attraction. I'm already very used to western-style fantasy, so it's an absolute delight to discover a different fantasy tradition with new tropes, archetypes, traditions, etc."

"... I know for a lot of others the main reason is the costuming itself and the detailed representation of fantasy elements in Xianxia/Wuxia dramas ... set a high standard for creating beautiful costumes, sets, and makeup, and the presentation of Chinese mythology ..."

Ethnically Chinese overseas viewers, on the contrary, watch Xianxia dramas primarily to discover Chinese culture, navigate their identity construction, and learn the Chinese language:

"I feel a fierce sense of pride seeing the more traditional stuff of my culture, like yes, that's my culture right there! That's how rich my culture's history and traditions are!!"

"Watching Cdramas with Chinese subtitles really helped with polishing up my Chinese again."

However, cultural differences can lead to controversy and misunderstanding. For example, filial piety in Xianxia dramas is a trope that some audiences struggle to understand:

“...what I can’t stand is characters ... that stick up for their father or mother or brother and be like ‘but he family’ after his brother tortured some dude to be his evil zombie puppet or something. Most famous one for me is ashes of love ... However I think xu feng is aware of his dad’s bad behaviour and he just brushed it off.”

Another important concern in this research is the construction of cultural images through Xianxia dramas. In the context of global media flows long dominated by cultural imperialism and Orientalist representations questions regarding audience reception of local media content in the international sphere often focus on whether a national cultural brand garners derivative international reputation or cultural influence (Athique 2016).

By recognizing the symbols and meanings of cultural elements in foreign film and television works, audiences can understand the culture of a country and form an impression of its national image. However, this “image” is an imagined representation of a culture or society, encompassing both fictional dream worlds and objective reflections. Audiences, as decoders, actively interpret the information they receive, choosing their own meaning-making pathways and preferred interpretations. This research explored whether global audiences, through consuming Chinese dramas, particularly Xianxia, form and consolidate positive impressions of Chinese cultural images.

The answer was found in a previous discussion post concerning global audiences’ impressions and interest in China. Part of the responses indicated a positive change in perception, with participants describing Chinese culture as “lovely,” recognizing China’s rich history, and even overcoming negative stereotypes:

“At first, I despised Chinese tourists, thought of China as low quality, and had many negative Chinese stereotypes ... but now, I want to go there.”

“Yes, I’m ethnically Chinese so watching cdramas made me appreciate my culture more :)”

The others expressed resistance, by responding with statements such as “not really” or “I don’t know,” as they viewed it as fiction unrelated to the nation as a political concept or because of their prior experiences with China:

“... No, country is a country, drama is a drama.”

“I don’t, at the end of the day it is fiction, whether i like it or not.”

However, most respondents expressed an increased interest in the Chinese language and culture. Some participants initiated their study of the Chinese language and its historical background, while others expressing a desire to visit China and see the scenes from the dramas one day:

“... I’m currently looking into Mandarin lessons locally. ... On a more meta scale, it’s sparked a genuine interest in Chinese culture and history... watching these dramas prompted me to start looking up various people and concepts—it gave me an ‘in’ to Chinese history.”

This indicates that once global audiences become captivated by the spectacle of Xianxia, they are likely to become involved in the history and cultural aspects that contribute to the story. Consequently, the consumption of Xianxia dramas promotes cultural engagement and stimulates related consumer behaviors involving Xianxia items and derivative products:

“... The Analects and the [Dao De Jing] is on my to-read list now, and I will probably start buying Chinese history books in the future.”

“Can anyone tell me where can I buy earrings inspired by Xianxia or Wuxia?”

“... I love being ‘transported’ back to these experiences, ... I’ll drink fresh dew tea and eat plum orchid cakes any day ... haha”

“I started with *Eternal Love* few years ago. Now, I have VIKI, iQIYI, Prime, Netflix, YouTube, etc. to immerse myself with soulful recreation. On top of that, I started listing a few places to visit in China to complete this immersion program. Of course, I will be in full gear with wigs, hair accessories, Hanfu, and whatnot. Kai Xin [happy]”

It is worth pointing out that beyond arousing emotional responses, prompting personal interpretations, and influencing audience behavior, some viewers have even engaged in in-depth reflection on global anti-Orientalism through their engagement with Xianxia dramas. They sought to dissociate themselves from Orientalist stereotypes and contemplating the implications of this transcultural media consumption. They critically reflected on Western conceptualizations of the Chinese cultural image, rejecting the narrative of cultural “Other” constructed in the world conceptual order of Orientalism:

“... I want to emphasize that I don’t view China as some fancy exotic wonderland that exists for my entertainment. It’s a country like any other, full of regular human beings, and it always has been. While I find cdramas refreshing because they’re different from what I grew up with, I know that this feeling is 100 % a reflection of me. There’s a long and nasty history of Westerners treating non-western cultures like toys, and I really don’t want to be one of those people.” [from a longtime viewer of Xianxia dramas]

5 Conclusions

To a considerable extent, Xianxia drama represents a successful case of cross-cultural communication achieved through cultural entertainment consumption, exemplifying the dynamic process of transcultural media flow. The rich and diverse cultural connotations of Xianxia texts, evident in their worldview settings, aesthetic designs, and narrative forms, are key to achieving influential dissemination and acceptance in the global market. Through unique culturally metaphorical elements and a utopian fictional world constructed as a textual space, Xianxia challenges previous portrayals and narratives of the East, particularly within the global context of cultural imperialism and Orientalism. In doing so, it establishes its own Chinese cultural images as a form of “cultural contraflow.” However, the significant role of active audience as a cultural intermediary cannot be overlooked. They shared information to improve media accessibility, broke language barriers through voluntary fan-made multilingual subtitles, and achieved emotional resonance through community discussions, engaging and interacting with media consumption, content interpretation, and cultural imagination – a process that is complex, situated, and multifaceted. Although people from different cultural backgrounds have various consumption needs, Xianxia dramas are still well received by the global audience due to their cultural uniqueness, stimulating communication that transcends national and social boundaries and inspiring more diverse cultural narratives on a global scale. Therefore, while the dissemination of Chinese dramas was primarily influenced by political and economic factors in past decades (Su 2019), the popularity of Xianxia dramas can be seen as a result of transcultural communication enabled by the combination of cultural magnetism, audience agency, and cultural projection within the context of media globalization.

The power of fantasy is evident in the global appeal of Xianxia dramas. Xianxia creates a fictional fantasy world detached from social reality, where media content ideology is weakened while the agency of exploration and imagination is significantly strengthened. Consequently, the transcultural entertainment content consumption of Xianxia dramas creates a “third space” (Bhabha 2012), which encourages cultural interactions and dialogues that transcend cultural differences and biases through its unique fantasy world. This fictional narrative not only encourages audiences to engage in the interpretation of the Xianxia mythical world but also provides people around the world with a new perspective to interact with Chinese culture and its societal context, promoting cultural understanding and sparking cross-cultural exchange.

This research also found that, although Chinese Xianxia dramas may not significantly contribute to constructing a positive national image, they contribute to

shaping the national brand associated with “Chinese Fantasy.” For instance, a post on r/CDrama titled “So I noticed that most people/fans who joined this subreddit are fans of historical dramas, Wuxia dramas and Xianxia dramas, am I right?” reflected widespread agreement. During the research period, the author also witnessed r/CDrama personalizing the status “members” and “online” on their webpage to “Jianghu heroes” and “cultivating,” indicating the important position of Xianxia among overseas Chinese drama fans. This aligns with the 2023 China Drama Development Report, which predicts that “costume dramas (including Xianxia dramas, Wuxia dramas, historical dramas, etc.) are forming brands.” Meanwhile, as Xianxia dramas portray China in a positive light and foster an idealized perception, they also stimulate people’s interest in exploring the origins of culture and visiting China after watching these dramas, indicating the international cultural tourism value of Xianxia dramas. Considering the significant economic and cultural contribution of the *Harry Potter* IP to the UK, this study assumes that Xianxia dramas have immense potential in international communication capacity with a distinct cultural identity.

In this research process, we also realized areas where Chinese Xianxia dramas can further improve from the perspective of the global audience. For example, people are confused about the phenomenon of frequently using voice dubbing instead of original voices and find that mistranslations can be inaccurate. The low quality of CGI in some dramas really affects the viewing experience, as do lengthy episodes that make the storyline tedious. International audiences also find the stylized, infantilized female characters in Xianxia dramas unacceptable, while repetitive and formulaic production of plots and themes is frustrating. Finally, they also suggest airing dramas on global platforms simultaneously with China, and building cooperations with international streaming media could further boost the spread and global enjoyment of Chinese dramas.

This research has its own limitations. One major limitation is that the time range for this research was not concentrated and long enough, and there was insufficient data on Reddit to conduct in-depth analysis. Most discussions on r/CDrama focus on simple topics about Xianxia dramas, as many audiences are newcomers. For example, besides the 8,620 results with the searching keyword “Xianxia,” there are over 6,500 recurring posts discussing recommendations for dramas and explanations for differences among Xianxia, Wuxia, and other concepts. Another major one is that this field is still quite new, and we could not find abundant relevant articles to support our study. Xianxia dramas became popular among the global audience only in recent years. Former research usually discussed cultural export and national image building through martial arts and films, with only a few focusing on Xianxia dramas. And they also generally used the perspectives of media platforms or policymakers to discuss the achievements and impact of Xianxia export, seldom from the eyes of audiences.

The internationalization of Chinese cultural products always involves the tension between the self-gaze of Orientalism and the self-cognition of anti-Orientalism. Thus, future research could be conducted from these perspectives to offer a more nuanced discourse surrounding China's global cultural presence and consumption, within the larger context of media platformization. Future research should also seek to understand how this contributes to the counter-flow of global cultural products, or whether this entertainment popularity is another form of post-Orientalism.

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