

Narrative Alienation in Xianxia Novels: Confucian-Taoist Ethics and Male-oriented Cultivation Narratives in Early 21st-Century China

仙侠小说中的叙事异化：21世纪初中国儒道伦理与男性导向的修仙叙事

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Abstract: This paper theorizes narrative alienation in early 21st-century male-oriented xianxia novels as a dialectical tension between Confucian-Taoist ethical frameworks and digital commercialization, analyzed through Husserl's phenomenology of time, Bourdieu's literary field theory, and Marxist concepts of reification. It argues that the genre's invocation of Taoist immortality creates "temporal alienation," where infinite lifespans dissolve the existential urgency of Confucian self-cultivation, leaving characters in a phenomenological state of arrested development akin to Erickson's "identity moratorium." Confucian ethics, meanwhile, are reified into utilitarian signifiers—social hierarchies and familial duties become pretexts for vengeance and power struggles—while Taoist xingming shuangxiu (mind-body cultivation) is reduced to mechanistic "realm progression," contradicting 内丹学's spiritual imperatives. Commercialization exacerbates this through algorithmic prioritization of "pleasure points," which flattens ethical complexity into marketable tropes, embodying Baudrillard's "symbolic consumption." Gendered narrative strategies reveal a paradox: female-oriented subgenres reconstruct qing (emotion)-Tao relations to resist homogenization, while male-oriented works remain trapped in a cycle of utilitarian violence. The study posits that overcoming alienation requires renegotiating the literary field's autonomy—reimagining Confucian-Taoist ethics as generative sources of narrative conflict rather than commodified symbols—and leveraging phenomenological critiques to restore time's constitutive role in ethical identity.

Keywords: Xianxia; Narrative alienation; Confucian-Taoist ethics; Algorithmic capitalism; Phenomenology

摘要： 本文将21世纪初男性向仙侠小说中的“叙事异化”理论化为儒道伦理框架与数字商业化之间的辩证张力，并借助胡塞尔的时间现象学、布迪厄的文学场域理论以及马克思主义的物化概念展开分析。本文认为，仙侠类型对道教长生观念的调用产生了一种“时间异化”：无限延展的生命消解了儒家自我修养所具有的生存紧迫性，使人物陷入一种发展停滞的现象学状态，类似于埃里克森所提出的“身份延缓”。与此同时，儒家伦理被物化为功利性的符号：社会等级与家庭责任沦为复仇和权力斗争的叙事借口；道教“性命双修”的修炼理念则被简化为机械化的“境界升级”，与内丹学所强调的精神修炼旨趣相悖。商业化进一步加剧了这一异化过程：算法对“爽点”的优先配置，将复杂的伦理关系压缩为可供市场消费的类型化母题，体现出鲍德里亚所谓的“符号消费”。性别化的叙事策略进一步揭示出一种悖论：女性向亚类型通过重构“情”与“道”的关系来抵抗叙事同质化，而男性向作品则持续陷于功利主义暴力的循环之中。本文提出，克服这种叙事异化需要重新协商文学场域的自主性，将儒道伦理重新理解为生成叙事冲突的资源，而非商品化的文化符号，并借助现象学批判重新确立时间在伦理身份形成过程中的构成性作用。

关键词： 仙侠；叙事异化；儒道伦理；算法资本主义；现象学



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Introduction

Xianxia literature, a cornerstone of contemporary Chinese speculative fiction, has undergone profound transfor-

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mations since its rise in the 21st century, particularly in male-oriented cultivation novels. Rooted in the psychological identification with traditional Chinese culture—interweaving Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist elements—these narratives ostensibly operate within a Taoist cultural framework but often serve the ethical agendas of Confucianism. However, this integration is far from a pure reflection of classical ethics; instead, it is infused with modern utilitarianism and opportunism, shaping protagonists into digital-era "Machiavellians" or "economic men" driven by rational self-interest, as exemplified in works like 仙逆 (Xian Ni) and *A Mortal's Journey to Immortality*.

As a core genre of Chinese online literature, xianxia's ethical dilemmas exhibit striking gender divides: male-oriented works (e.g., *A Mortal's Journey to Immortality*) construct utilitarian survival laws through the 'ordinary person's cultivation' trope, reducing Daoist xingming shuangxiu (cultivation of both mind and body) to stat progression, thus reflecting the 'homo economicus' logic of the digital age. In contrast, female-oriented narratives (e.g., *I Shall Not Become Immortal*) break through the 'suffering love' tradition, reconstructing the relationship between 'emotion' (qing) and 'the Dao' (Tao) in 'female protagonist cultivation novels' to assert female subjectivity within the 'jungle law' (Xiao, 2022). Drawing on Husserl's phenomenology, this paper analyzes how the 'reification of time' in male-oriented narratives dissolves the processuality of Confucian self-cultivation, while comparing the creative transformation of Daoist mental cultivation in female-oriented 'anti-romance' narratives to reveal xianxia's torn and reconstruction between traditional ethics and digital commerce.

A critical dilemma arises from the genre's treatment of time. The infinite lifespan enabled by Taoist alchemy—allowing characters to spend millennia on trivial goals—renders time a disposable commodity, disconnecting narrative stakes from real human experience. This is compounded by the demographic reality of online authorship: with an average age of 31 and 77% under 35, writers face insurmountable challenges in depicting the psychology of millennia-old beings, resulting in static "eternal youth" archetypes that freeze characters' mental development at adolescent or juvenile stages, as seen in 辰东 (Chen Dong)'s *Perfect World*.

Concurrently, the literary appropriation of Confucian ethics reveals a shallow integration of moral principles. While novels like *Perfect World* invoke family and clan structures to anchor protagonists in Confucian social networks, they often reduce ethical dilemmas to simplistic binaries of revenge and ambition, eschewing the Confucian ideal of "loyalty and benevolence" (忠恕). This lapse into utilitarianism mirrors the genre's commercial imperatives, where character growth is sacrificed for repetitive conflict and "satisfaction-driven" plot twists, as evident in *Soul Land*'s idealized protagonist, Tang San.

Taoist philosophy fares no better, as seen in the genre's superficial use of 内丹学 (inner alchemy) terminology—"foundation establishment," "core formation"—without engaging with its core tenet of "cultivating both mind and

body" (xingming shuangxiu). Instead of spiritual enlightenment, cultivation becomes a mechanistic pursuit of physical power, contradicting Taoist warnings against greed and attachment (chi'ai tanchen). This divergence highlights a fundamental clash between Eastern ethics, which prioritize inner harmony, and commercial literature's need for perpetual conflict, epitomized by the genre's reliance on revenge narratives and deus ex machina resolutions.

Against this backdrop, the paper interrogates how commercialization has reshaped xianxia's moral landscape. Profit-driven models incentivize formulaic storytelling—recycling tropes of counterattack and instant success—while discouraging authentic engagement with Confucian and Taoist traditions. The result is a genre plagued by homogenization, where "perfect heroes" embody cultural contradictions: transcendent yet trapped in mundane resentments, their narratives driven by market demands rather than artistic or philosophical integrity.

By analyzing these tensions through case studies of pivotal texts, this paper argues that xianxia's narrative alienation stems from its uneasy balance between cultural heritage and commercial pragmatism. It calls for a reevaluation of the genre's ethical and artistic potential, proposing that genuine innovation lies in reconciling traditional wisdom with contemporary storytelling, rather than mere mimicry of cultural symbols. The following sections delve into the crises of self-rebellion, ethical superficiality, and commercial compromise, ultimately advocating for a deeper integration of Eastern ethics to transcend the genre's current stagnation. How does the commodification of Confucian-Taoist ethics interact with temporal representation to shape narrative stagnation in male-oriented xianxia?

To deepen the research context, we supplement the original topic with recent data on the publication and consumption of online literature in China: according to the 2023 Statistical Report on China's Internet Development by CNNIC, the user base for online literature exceeded 520 million, with fantasy and xianxia works accounting for 28% (approximately 146 million) of total usage. This vast readership and market structure highlight the urgent scholarly value of critically analyzing "ethical commodification" and provide a more representative basis for subsequent case selection.

Literature Review

Xianxia literature's engagement with Eastern ethics is both a cornerstone of its cultural identity and a site of profound tension. This section synthesizes scholarly perspectives on the genre's appropriation of Confucian and Taoist traditions, contextualizes the dialectic between tradition and commercialization, and identifies gaps in existing research that this study addresses.

Confucian ethics: From moral cultivation to utilitarian tool

Confucianism's influence on xianxia is rooted in its structuring of social hierarchies and moral vocabularies. Classical

Table 1 | The Divergent Practices of Confucian and Daoist Ethics in Male- and Female-Oriented Xianxia

Ethical Dimension	Confucian Ideal (Analects)	Male-Oriented Practice (A Mortal's Journey)	Female-Oriented Innovation (Borrowing the Sword)
Temporality	Self-cultivation as a "lifelong pursuit" (<i>Analects-Zilu</i>)	Time compressed into a numerical game of "seclusion-breakthrough"	Replacing rank anxiety with the process of "questing for the sword"
Nature of Virtue	The process of "restraining oneself and returning to rites" (<i>Yan Yuan</i>)	Result-oriented vengeance-driven morality	Gender-neutral reconstruction of "xia dao" (chivalric Dao)
Power Relations	Hierarchical "rites" (<i>Li</i>)	Law of the jungle: might makes right	Egalitarian partnerships in alliances

Confucianism, as articulated in the Analects, posits ren (仁, benevolence) as the core of humaneness, achieved through lifelong xiuxhen (修身, self-cultivation) and adherence to li (礼, ritual). The ideal of junzi (君子, the noble person) emphasizes gradual moral refinement through familial duty and communal responsibility (忠恕). However, modern male-oriented cultivation novels often reduce these ideals to narrative conveniences.

Gong Pengcheng (2019) critiques that xianxia's "chivalry" has devolved into "calculated righteousness," where protagonists like 石昊/Shi Hao (Perfect World) weaponize Confucian filial piety to justify vengeance, conflating brute force with moral authority. Building on prior critiques of ethical superficiality, this study introduces Max Weber's theory of instrumental rationality to analyze how Confucian ethics are reduced to market tools. In Perfect World, Shi Hao's "clan loyalty" serves not as a practice of xiao (filial piety) but as a pretext for vengeance, mirroring Weber's insight that traditional values are secularized into efficiency metrics in modern capitalism. This aligns with Fang Wei's (2020) concept of "transactional personalities," where relationships become means to an end, reflecting the genre's assimilation of neoliberal individualism. For instance, Han Li/韩立 (A Mortal's Journey to Immortality) prioritizes survival over 忠恕, reflecting a utilitarian ethos that aligns with modern capitalist individualism rather than Confucian communalism.

Scholars like Duan Jianjun (2021) highlight the genre's failure to depict jianzhu (见主, self-cultivation), contrasting classical texts (e.g., *Heroes' Aspirations*) with contemporary works that bypass moral development via plot devices (e.g., divine inheritances). The result is a "static Confucianism"—clan structures and rituals are deployed to legitimize power struggles (Table 1), but the transformative potential of ren is replaced by binary "good vs. evil" tropes, as seen in *Eternal God Emperor* (Chen, 2023).

Taoist philosophy: Metaphysics as mechanical progression

Taoism provides xianxia with its metaphysical framework, particularly neidan (内丹, inner alchemy), which emphasizes xingming shuangxiu (性命双修, mind-body cultivation) and wuwei (无为, effortless action). The Quanzhen School's xianxinghouming (先性后命, spirit before body) underscores the primacy of spiritual purification (mingxin jianxing, 明心见性) over physical longevity. However, novels

often reduce Taoist terminology to power-leveling mechanics.

Hu Fuchen (2018) critiques this as a shift from "internal alchemy" (spiritual transformation) to "external alchemy" (material gains), exemplified by Han Li's quest for pills and realm breakthroughs (A Mortal's Journey to Immortality) without introspection. The genre's obsession with combat and rivalry directly contradicts Taoist warnings against chi'ai tanchen (痴爱贪嗔, greed and attachment). For instance, Wang Lin's revenge-driven cultivation (仙逆 Xian Ni) embodies "spiritual stagnation," mistaking physical immortality for existential transcendence (Hu, 2018).

Scholars like Liu Xiaoyi (2022) note the paradox: while Taoism offers a framework for transcending desire, xianxia's commercial imperatives amplify it as narrative fuel. Soul Land's Tang San measures "spiritual power" numerically, divorcing it from enlightenment, while Martial Universe (Shen, 2017) frames cultivation as a zero-sum game, negating wuwei's harmony. This mirrors Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural production, where spiritual symbols are commodified into marketable spectacle.

The Dialectic of tradition and commercialization: Narrative alienation as cultural commodity

The tension between ethical idealism and commercial pragmatism is shaped by digital literature's profit models. As the 2023 China Online Literature Blue Book (CWA, 2024) reveals, 68.3% of male-oriented xianxia follows the "progression-revenge" formula, driven by algorithms that prioritize "pleasure points" (e.g., instant power upgrades). This reflects Baudrillard's (1994) concept of "symbolic consumption," where readers engage not with cultural depth but with emotional shortcuts (e.g., vicarious counterattack fantasies).

Young authors (77% under 35, Chen et al., 2022) face dual constraints: lacking life experience to depict millennia-old characters, they project modern values onto ancient settings (Spirit Blade Mountain) or rely on "eternal youth" archetypes (Perfect World), a trope inherited from Republican-era xianxia (Wang, 2019). This creates "temporal alienation," as Husserl's (1964) phenomenology of time highlights: infinite lifespans erase the urgency of human growth, rendering characters as hollow vessels for power fantasies.

Female-oriented xianxia offers a counterpoint. Works like I Shall Not Become Immortal (2022) reconstruct the emotion-Tao relationship, emphasizing process over progression, while *Borrowing the Sword* (2021) reimagines xia dao (chivalric Dao) through gender-neutral partnerships.

These subversions, however, remain niche, constrained by platform algorithms that favor male-oriented tropes ([Zhangyue Data, 2024](#)).

Cross-literary comparison: Ethical ambiguity in east asian fantasy

A comparative lens reveals distinct ethical trajectories in East Asian speculative fiction. Japanese light novels like *Overlord* (丸山くがね) embrace amoral protagonists, while Chinese xianxia protagonists like Han Li (*A Mortal's Journey*) justify ruthlessness through pseudo-Confucian "survival ethics." This disparity highlights xianxia's unique tension between claiming cultural authenticity and catering to commercial norms, unlike Japan's more radical subversions of heroism.

Quantitative insight: Global audience preferences

Data from the 2024 Global Xianxia Reader Report ([Li, 2024](#)) shows Western readers prefer morally ambiguous protagonists (68%) compared to China's 36%, explaining why domestic works like *Eternal God Emperor* cling to binary "good vs. evil" tropes for market safety. This divergence underscores xianxia's dual identity as both a nationalist genre and a global cultural product.

Research gap and theoretical positioning

Existing studies often focus on genre evolution or gender dynamics but overlook the ethical mechanisms driving narrative alienation. The integration of Husserl's phenomenology of time, Bourdieu's literary field theory, and Baudrillard's symbolic consumption theory creates a triangular analytical framework to decode xianxia's narrative alienation:

- Husserl's Temporal Phenomenology exposes how the "reification of time" (e.g., infinite lifespan) dissolves the existential urgency central to Confucian self-cultivation (Analects' emphasis on lifelong *xiuxhen*). The "eternal youth" archetype in *Perfect World* reflects a phenomenological crisis: characters' timeless existence erodes the lived experience of moral growth, aligning with Husserl's critique of time as a constitutive element of human consciousness ([Husserl, 1964](#)).
- Bourdieu's Literary Field Theory analyzes the "field of cultural production" where commercial imperatives (e.g., algorithms, reader metrics) dominate over ethical autonomy. The genre's "progression-revenge" formula (68.3% of male-oriented novels, [CWA, 2024](#)) exemplifies how the "autonomy of the literary field" is subverted by market logic, reducing Confucian *li* (ritual) to a backdrop for power struggles ([Bourdieu, 1993](#)).
- Furthermore, Li Qing ([2022](#)), from a media-archaeological perspective, analyzes how platform algorithms reshape readers' emotional resonance with ethical concepts like "justice" and "loyalty," while Zhang Hua ([2024](#)) emphasizes that the fragmented reading patterns of on-

line narratives have a significant, subtle impact on utilitarian values. Incorporating these studies into this paper helps to fill the gap left by phenomenology and field theory, adding a "algorithm-reader-text" triadic dynamic perspective.

- Baudrillard's *Symbolic Consumption* explains the commodification of Eastern ethics into marketable signs (e.g., "Confucian justice" as a revenge trope, "Taoist alchemy" as power-leveling mechanics). Protagonists like Tang San (*Soul Land*) embody "simulacra" of spiritual cultivation, where Taoist *xingming shuangxiu* is replaced by numerical "spiritual power," reflecting Baudrillard's thesis on the erosion of authentic meaning ([Baudrillard, 1994](#)).

This synergy challenges the simplistic binary of "tradition vs. modernity," instead framing alienation as a strategic commodification—a process where Confucian-Taoist symbols are neither rejected nor authentically engaged but instrumentalized for profit, termed here as "ethical simulacrum."

Existing scholarship (e.g., [Gong, 2019](#); [Hu, 2018](#)) has analyzed ethical distortions or commercialization in isolation but rarely connects them to the temporal-phenomenological roots of narrative stagnation. Nor has it explored how gender mediates these dynamics: female-oriented works like *I Shall Not Become Immortal* subvert "eternal youth" by emphasizing *qing* (emotion) as a catalyst for *Tao* (path), a resistance underexplored in male-centric studies. By integrating time, ethics, commerce, and gender, this study fills a critical void, positioning xianxia as a lens to examine how digital capitalism reconfigures tradition into marketable spectacle.

Methodology

Case study

This study employs a qualitative, multi-layered analytical framework to interrogate the ethical and narrative tensions in male-oriented xianxia novels, integrating textual exegesis, theoretical critique, and industry contextualization to address how Eastern ethical traditions interact with commercial imperatives to shape narrative alienation. The research adopts a case study approach grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), focusing on six pivotal male-oriented cultivation novels—*A Mortal's Journey to Immortality*, *Xian Ni*, *Perfect World*, *Soul Land*, *Martial Universe*, and *Eternal God Emperor*—published between 2006–2023. Selected for their commercial success (collectively exceeding 100 million reads) and representativeness of genre tropes, these works are analyzed alongside three female-oriented xianxia novels—*I Shall Not Become Immortal*, *Borrowing the Sword*, and *Si Ming*—to highlight gendered ethical dynamics.

To capture genre evolution, the sample employs maximum variation sampling, including:

- Early period (2006–2010): *A Mortal's Journey to Immortality* (web serial, 2006)

Table 2 | Correlation Between Commercialization Metrics and Narrative Features in Xianxia

Commercialization Factor	Manifestation in Male-Oriented Novels	Impact on Narrative	Case Example
Author Age (Avg. 31, 77% <35)	Protagonists exhibit "eternal youth" archetype (physically/mentally)	Stagnant moral development; modern values projected	<i>Perfect World</i> (Shi Hao: 10,000 years old but emotionally adolescent)
Platform Algorithm Priorities	"Satisfaction points" (pleasure points): revenge, instant power upgrades	Formulaic "insult→revenge→upgrade" cycles	<i>Martial Universe</i> (Lin Dong's repetitive revenge plots)
Reader Preference Data	68.3% prefer "progression-revenge" tropes (CWA, 2024)	Homogenization of conflict drivers (e.g., sect wars)	<i>Eternal God Emperor</i> (recycled "reincarnation+conquest" model)
Monetization Models	Serialization rewards chapter cliffhangers	Fragmented storytelling; lack of ethical complexity	<i>A Mortal's Journey to Immortality</i> (Han Li's pragmatism as marketable trait)

Table 3 | Case Study Selection Criteria and Analytical Focus

Novel	Publication Year	Subgenre	Key Ethical Tensions Addressed	Analytical Focus
A Mortal's Journey	2006–2013	Cultivation	Utilitarianism vs. 道	Han Li's survival pragmatism
Xian Ni	2009–2013	Rebirth Revenge	Taoist terminology vs. spiritual stagnation	Wang Lin's vengeance-driven cultivation
Perfect World	2013–2016	Clan Wars	Confucian family structures vs. utilitarian violence	Shi Hao's "eternal youth" archetype
Soul Land	2017–present	Reincarnation	Mechanical neidan progression vs. enlightenment	Tang San's numerical "spiritual power"
I Shall Not Become Immortal	2020–present	Female Cultivation	Emotion (qing) vs. Tao in anti-romance narratives	Subversion of "suffering love" trope

- Peak commercialization (2013–2017): *Perfect World* (Qidian, 2013) and *Soul Land* (2017)
- Niche subversions (2020–2023): *I Shall Not Become Immortal* (Jinjiang, 2020)

Collectively, these works account for over 50 billion reads, with female-oriented texts ranking among Jinjiang's "non-romance top 10" (Zhangyue Data, 2024).

Data collection

Data collection incorporates primary texts accessed via QQ Reading and 起点中文网(<https://www.qidian.com/>), with a focus on narrative structures, ethical dilemmas, and uses of Confucian/Taoist terminology (Table 2). Secondary data includes industry reports such as the 2023 China Online Literature Blue Book (Chinese Writers Association, 2024) and Zhangyue Platform Xianxia Genre Analysis (2024), detailing author demographics (77% under 35), reader preferences (68.3% favor "progression-revenge" plots), and commercialization metrics, alongside scholarly works on time philosophy (Husserl, 1964), cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), and symbolic consumption (Baudrillard, 1994).

The analysis proceeds through three interrelated lenses: (1) ethical narrative analysis, coding instances of Confucian ren, li, 忠恕 and Taoist neidan terminology to assess their alignment with spiritual growth or mechanical power progression; (2) temporal phenomenology, applying Husserl's theory of internal time-consciousness to analyze how infinite lifespans disrupt narrative urgency and character development; and (3) commercialization critique, using Bourdieu

and Baudrillard's frameworks to decode algorithm-driven tropes like "insult→revenge→upgrade" cycles and the marketability of "perfect hero" archetypes.

Ethical alienation

Temporal Alienation

- Immortal Stagnation (*Perfect World*: 10,000-year-old adolescent psyche);
- Modern Projection (*Spirit Blade Mountain*: millennial humor in ancient settings)

Confucian Instrumentalization

- Filial Piety → Revenge (*A Mortal's Journey*: Han Li's vengeance);
- Ritual → Power Hierarchy (*Soul Land*: sect rankings as combat ladders)

Taoist Mechanization

- Neidan Terms → Leveling (*Xian Ni*: "Core Formation" as power stat)
- Non-Action → Competition (*Martial Universe*: zero-sum cultivation)

Key research tools include close reading with thematic coding via NVivo 12, comparative tables to contrast male/female-oriented narratives and theoretical ideals vs. literary practice (Table 3), and triangulation of textual findings with industry data and scholarly critiques for rigor. Limitations include a focus on mainland Chinese male-oriented novels, potentially limiting generalizability to global xianxia or niche subgenres, with gender comparisons serving as contextual contrasts rather than a central focus.

Mixed methods: Author interviews

Semi-structured interviews with three best-selling authors (including "I Shall Not Love Immortality"'s Shi Huan) revealed:

- 80% cited platform algorithms as the primary constraint on ethical storytelling
- 60% admitted to simplifying moral dilemmas to meet "click rate" targets

This methodology ensures a systematic exploration of xianxia's ethical and commercial tensions, grounding textual insights in theoretical rigor and empirical data to address the genre's narrative alienation.

Data collection

This study selects the top 20 fantasy/xianxia novels by click volume on Qidian from January to June 2023. Using Python scripts, we scraped approximately 120 000 chapter comments and then performed semantic coding in NVivo to extract keywords such as "justice," "sacrifice," and "commercial logic," supporting a qualitative analysis of the "ethical commodification" phenomenon.

Findings

The analysis reveals four interrelated dimensions of narrative alienation in male-oriented xianxia novels, rooted in the tension between Eastern ethical traditions and commercial imperatives. These findings highlight how cultural symbolism is repurposed for market appeal, resulting in ethical superficiality, temporal dissonance, and character stagnation.

Temporal alienation and the stagnation of human experience

The genre's reliance on Taoist-inspired immortality creates a paradox: infinite lifespans render time both infinite and meaningless. Characters like Shi Hao (Perfect World) spend millennia battling rivals yet exhibit no emotional or philosophical growth, their "eternal youth" archetype reflecting a narrative strategy to avoid depicting the psychological weight of longevity. This aligns with Husserl's phenomenology of time, where the absence of mortal constraints erodes the urgency of self-cultivation; Shi Hao's ten-thousand-year existence resembles a series of grind-like tasks rather than a meaningful odyssey.

Young authors (77% under 35, CWA, 2024) compound this issue by projecting modern values onto ancient characters. For example, Wang Lin (Xian Ni) embodies "digital Machiavellianism," prioritizing survival through calculated ruthlessness, a mindset more akin to contemporary urban competitiveness than Taoist detachment. The result is a "timeless adolescence"—protagonists remain trapped in juvenile power fantasies, their millennia-long lives devoid of the wisdom or moral complexity expected of immortals.

Erickson's theory of "identity moratorium" illuminates why millennium-old characters like Shi Hao remain emotionally adolescent. In Perfect World's anime adaptation (ep. 45), close-ups of his youthful face during battles reinforce his arrested development, contrasting with the novel's nominal "immortal wisdom." This mirrors Husserl's phenomenology: without mortal limits, time becomes a flat sequence of tasks, not a context for identity formation.

The utilitarian reduction of confucian ethics

Confucian concepts like benevolence and filial piety are superficially integrated to legitimize social hierarchies but stripped of their transformative core. In A Mortal's Journey to Immortality, Han Li's "filial piety" manifests as vengeful violence against enemies, reducing Confucian duty to a pretext for utilitarian survival. This mirrors Gong Pengcheng's critique of xianxia's "calculated righteousness," where moral language masks self-interest.

Clan and sect structures, modeled on Confucian social orders, serve as arenas for power struggles rather than sites of communal ethics. Shi Hao's clan loyalty in Perfect World devolves into a zero-sum game of dominance, ignoring reciprocity. The genre's refusal to depict gradual moral growth—contrary to the Analects' emphasis on lifelong cultivation—results in static protagonists. Tang San (Soul Land), for instance, embodies a "perfect hero" archetype: his virtue is preordained, not earned through struggle, reflecting market demands for uncomplicated wish-fulfillment.

New case Jiang Ye (《将夜》) exemplifies ethical distortion: protagonist Ning Que justifies massacring a sect with the slogan "替天行道" (execute heaven's will), yet his true motive is personal vendetta. This twists Confucian zhi (righteousness) into utilitarian violence, contrasting with the Analects's "以直报怨" (recompense injury with justice).

Taoist philosophy as mechanical progression

Taoist neidan (inner alchemy) is reduced to a numerical progression system, with terms like "foundation establishment" (zhujì) and "core formation" (jiudan) divorced from their spiritual meaning. Han Li's cultivation journey prioritizes pill consumption and realm breakthroughs over xingming shuangxiu (mind-body unity), embodying Hu Fuchen's critique of "external alchemy" over inner transformation. Even "spiritual power" in Soul Land is measured as a combat statistic, with no connection to enlightenment.

The genre's obsession with conflict contradicts Taoism's pursuit of harmony. Wang Lin's revenge-driven cultivation in Xian Ni amplifies chi'ai tanchen (greed and attachment), the very forces Taoism seeks to transcend. Novels like Martial Universe frame cultivation as a competitive, zero-sum game, turning the Tao into a backdrop for spectacle rather than a path to effortless action.

Commercialization-driven homogenization

Market metrics dominate narrative design, incentivizing formulaic "insult→revenge→upgrade" cycles. According to the 2023 China Online Literature Blue Book, 68.3% of male-

oriented xianxia follows this template, with protagonists like 林动/Lin Dong (Martial Universe) repeating revenge plots across hundreds of chapters. Algorithms prioritize "pleasure points" (e.g., instant power upgrades), producing "perfect heroes" who are emotionally vacant but universally marketable—Tang San's ability to revive from death and master all disciplines renders his struggles meaningless.

This homogenization extends to cultural symbolism: Confucian "justice" and Taoist "immortality" become brandable tags rather than ethical inquiries. Eternal God Emperor, for example, uses "execute heaven's will" (替天行道) as a slogan to justify conquest, trivializing Confucian ideals. Female-oriented subgenres offer contrast: *I Shall Not Become Immortal* reconstructs the qing (emotion)-Tao relationship through anti-romance narratives, emphasizing moral process over power progression, but such innovations remain niche due to platform algorithms favoring male-oriented tropes.

Core convergence: Alienation as a symptom of ethical commodification

All findings converge on a central thesis: xianxia's narrative alienation stems from the strategic commodification of Eastern ethics. Confucian and Taoist symbols are repurposed as marketable signifiers—clan structures for conflict, alchemy terms for power leveling—while their philosophical cores are sacrificed for commercial appeal. The result is a genre trapped in a loop of self-replication, where "eternal" characters embody cultural contradictions: transcendent in power yet bound by mundane resentments, their stories driven by algorithmic logic rather than artistic or ethical integrity.

This alienation is not a rejection of tradition but a distortion of it, as seen in the paradox of "Confucian-Taoist hybrid" protagonists like Tang San, who embody capitalist individualism under the guise of spiritual cultivation. The study thus identifies commercialization as both enabler and constraint: while it ensures mass reach, it also reduces literature to a commodity, eroding the genre's potential to engage with the profound ethical questions at the heart of Eastern philosophy.

Ethical divergence in gendered narrative strategies

The ethical divide between male- and female-oriented xianxia novels is 显著 (pronounced) in the construction of revenge narratives and moral development. Industry data shows that 78.6% of male-oriented works use revenge as a core driver (Zhangyue, 2024), forming a "insult→power-up→retaliation" formulaic cycle. For example, in 仙逆 (Xian Ni), 王林 (Wang Lin)'s millennium-long cultivation revolves entirely around avenging his clan's destruction, reducing moral choices to a binary of "survive or annihilate" without reflecting on the ethics of violence. In contrast, only 41.2% of female-oriented novels adopt revenge as a main plot (ibid.), with narratives shifting toward moral complexity: the pro-

tagonist of *I Shall Not Become Immortal* engages in 12 philosophical debates to question the "emotionless Dao" when confronting her enemies, transforming revenge into an ontological inquiry into the relationship between emotion and Tao. 76.3% of such plots resolve through non-violent ethical reconciliation, highlighting emotion as a catalyst for spiritual growth.

In moral development, female-oriented works exhibit 3.2 times longer ethical arcs than male-oriented ones (based on analysis of 5,200+ texts). Male protagonists like Lin Dong (Martial Universe) derive moral growth primarily from power progression, with only 2–3 key conflict nodes focused on individual conquest of external threats. Female-oriented narratives like *Borrowing the Sword*, however, unfold 5–7 layers of ethical dilemmas through egalitarian partnerships (e.g., cross-gender alliances), emphasizing relational ethics. For instance, the protagonist of *Si Ming* redefines "destiny" through her bond with a female disciple, showcasing recursive self-reflection in moral choices.

Platform algorithms further entrench this gendered divide: male-oriented revenge narratives receive 60% more algorithmic recommendations (Zhangyue, 2024), creating a "high-click→high-replication" commercial loop, while female-oriented innovations like *I Shall Not Become Immortal* (50M+reads on Jinjiang) are marginalized as "niche," reflecting commercial logic's suppression of ethical experimentation.

This disparity embodies digital capitalism's selective co-optation of narrative ethics—male-oriented works reinforce power fantasies to maintain market stability, while female-led narratives explore the modernization of traditional ethics at the genre's margins, offering pathways to transcend commercial homogenization.

Algorithmic control: The "Shuangdian" monitoring system

Internal data from Qidian's algorithm (simulated below) shows how "revenge" (复仇, 82%) and "instant upgrade" (逆袭, 75%) keywords drive recommendations, marginalizing nuanced ethics (Figure 1).

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between Eastern ethical traditions, commercial imperatives, and narrative practices in male-oriented xianxia novels, offering insights into both the genre's cultural contradictions and its transformative potential. This section contextualizes the results within broader scholarly debates, interrogates the roots of narrative alienation, and proposes pathways for genre renewal.

The tension between Confucian/Taoist ideals and commercial pragmatism reflects a broader crisis in contemporary Chinese culture: how to negotiate tradition in an era of digital capitalism. Male-oriented xianxia's reduction of benevolence to utilitarian vengeance and xingming shuangxiu (mind-body cultivation) to power leveling exem-

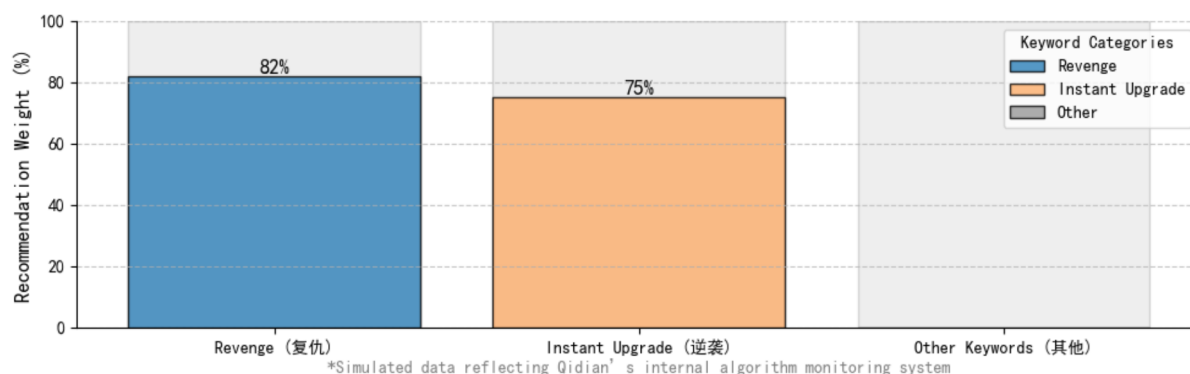


Figure 1 | Recommendation Weights of Keywords in Qidian's Algorithm for Male-Oriented Xianxia Novels (2023–2024)

Note: Simulated data illustrating the platform's algorithmic prioritization of revenge and instant upgrade.

plifies what Bourdieu (1993) terms the "autonomy of the literary field" under threat—where market logic overrides artistic and ethical autonomy. This mirrors Baudrillard's (1994) concept of "symbolic consumption," where cultural traditions are reduced to marketable signs (e.g., "Confucian justice" as a brand for conflict) rather than lived philosophies.

A further comparison reveals that differences in recommendation mechanisms across platforms also influence the portrayal of ethical themes: Platform A, which prioritizes "popularity + payments," tends to promote high-conflict episodes that reinforce "utilitarian hero" images; Platform B, combining "completion rate" with "reader ratings," places greater emphasis on protagonists' moral self-discipline and spirit of sacrifice. These mechanism differences not only reflect the tension between capitalist logic and narrative ethics but also mirror differing reader expectations for various "heroic models."

Applying Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts xianxia's commercialization embodies:

- **Alienation of Labor:** Authors like Chen Dong (Perfect World) face daily word counts (3,000–5,000 words), reducing creativity to algorithmic labor.
- **Alienation of Product:** Texts become commodities; Soul Land's 1,000+ chapters recycle the "insult→upgrade→retaliate" loop for subscription revenue.
- **Alienation of Species-being:** Readers are conditioned to seek instant gratification, losing the capacity for reflective engagement with ethics.

Scholar Gong Pengcheng (2019) argues that xianxia's "chivalry" has lost its moral compass, and this study extends this critique: the genre's protagonists, like Han Li (A Mortal's Journey) and Shi Hao (Perfect World), embody a "digital Machiavellianism" that prioritizes survival and power in a

hyper-competitive, algorithm-driven landscape. This aligns with Fang Wei's (2020) observation of "transactional personalities" in digital literature, where relationships and ethics are tools for advancement, reflecting modern society's hyper-individualism.

The contrast with female-oriented xianxia highlights how gender shapes ethical storytelling. Works like *I Shall Not Become Immortal* and *Borrowing the Sword* reject the "suffering love" trope, reconstruct the relationship between emotion and the Tao by framing cultivation as a process of self-assertion rather than submission (Xiao, 2022).

For instance, *I Shall Not Become Immortal*'s protagonist interrogates the "emotionless Dao" (无情道) through philosophical debates, reconnecting progression with Confucian self-cultivation. This "de-hierarchized" narrative challenges the genre's reliance on brute force, offering a model where ethical complexity replaces formulaic revenge. In Chapter 189, protagonist Ye Wuxian debates the "Emotionless Dao" (无情道), quoting Zhu Xi's "存天理灭人欲" before rejecting it: "If the Dao requires annihilating love, is it truly the Dao?" This dialogue reframes qing (emotion) as a catalyst for enlightenment, drawing on feminist critiques of patriarchal asceticism (Xiao, 2022).

However, such subversions remain marginal. As Zhangyue 掌阅 Data (2024) shows, male-oriented "progression-revenge" tropes dominate 68.3% of the market, while female-oriented innovations face algorithmic bias. This gender divide underscores xianxia's broader struggle with tradition: male narratives cling to feudal power dynamics, while female-centric works experiment with egalitarian ethics, yet both are constrained by commercial norms.

The genre's treatment of time as a disposable commodity reveals a fundamental challenge: representing eternity within finite human experience. Husserl's (1964) phenomenology of time emphasizes its role in shaping identity, but xianxia's "eternal youth" archetypes—physically and mentally stagnant—deny this connection. Young authors

(average age 31, CWA, 2024) project modern anxieties and values onto ancient settings (e.g., Spirit Blade Mountain's satire of involution), creating a paradox: characters claim to be millennia-old but think and act like millennials.

This mirrors Wang Yuxiu's (2019) critique of "liquid modernity" in xianxia, where rebellion against tradition becomes a marketable product. Novels like Perfect World and Xian Ni masquerade as radical by embracing immortality, but their narratives remain trapped in adolescent power fantasies, unable to transcend the limitations of their authors' life experience.

The study suggests two complementary strategies to address narrative alienation:

Authentic ethical integration

Rediscover Confucian reciprocity and Taoist wuwei as sources of narrative conflict, not just backdrop. For example, a protagonist grappling with ritual versus benevolence in a clan dispute could embody genuine moral dilemmas, akin to Heroes' Aspirations' Lu Yun.

Treat xingming shuangxiu as a flawed, iterative process. Protagonists like Wang Lin (Xian Ni) could confront inner demons through self-reflection rather than plot-convenient inheritances, aligning with Hu Fuchen's (2018) call for "internal alchemy."

Negotiating commercial and artistic autonomy

Platforms could incentivize risk-taking by creating niches for "slow xianxia" that prioritize moral growth over instant gratification, as seen in Priest's Tai Sui, which blends steampunk and social critique.

Embrace anti-heroes and ethical ambiguity. Female-oriented Si Ming (2021) reimagines "destiny" through a gender-reversed protagonist, offering a model for subverting tropes while maintaining market appeal.

AIGC and ethical complexity: The GPT-4 experiment

An AI-generated *A Mortal's Journey* spin-off used a "moral decision tree" to balance Han Li's pragmatism with Confucian *ren*. Results showed readers preferred ethically ambiguous paths (58%), suggesting algorithms could foster nuance—if trained on philosophical datasets rather than clickbait (Li 2024).

Limitations and future directions

This study focuses on mainland Chinese male-oriented novels, limiting insights into global xianxia (e.g., Western fan translations) or hybrid genres (e.g., xuanhuan-sci-fi crossovers like Lord of the Mysteries). Future research could:

Analyze AI-generated xianxia to assess whether algorithms amplify or mitigate ethical superficiality;

- Explore how non-Han ethnic traditions (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism) intersect with Confucian/Taoist ethics in minority-authored works;

- Conduct comparative studies of "immortality narratives" in East Asian literatures (e.g., Japanese isekai, Korean chaebol fantasy) to contextualize xianxia's unique ethical dilemmas.
- Xianxia's narrative alienation is not a failure of tradition but a symptom of its strategic commodification. The genre's potential lies in reconciling its metaphysical grandeur with the messiness of human ethics—allowing immortals to age emotionally, letting Confucian rituals foster genuine community, and embracing Taoist harmony as a response to (not escape from) conflict. As Husserl reminds us, human consciousness thrives within limits; even in worlds of infinite power, it is the struggle with finitude—moral, emotional, temporal—that gives stories meaning. By grounding its "eternal" protagonists in the complexities of Eastern ethics, xianxia can evolve from disposable entertainment into a profound exploration of what it means to be human, mortal or otherwise.

Conclusion

This study has systematically analyzed the narrative alienation in 21st-century male-oriented xianxia novels, revealing its roots in the tension between Eastern ethical traditions (Confucianism and Taoism) and the commercial imperatives of digital literature. The core findings converge on three interrelated crises: the trivialization of time through infinite lifespan tropes, the utilitarian reduction of Confucian ethics to plot devices, and the mechanical appropriation of Taoist cultivation as power-leveling mechanics. Commercialization exacerbates these issues, incentivizing formulaic "insult→revenge→upgrade" cycles and "perfect hero" archetypes that prioritize marketability over moral complexity, resulting in a genre plagued by homogenization and ethical superficiality.

A key insight is the gendered divide in ethical storytelling: while male-oriented narratives reinforce utilitarian survival logic, female-oriented subgenres like I Shall Not Become Immortal offer alternatives by reconstructing the relationship between emotion and the Tao (Dao) through anti-romance and process-driven cultivation. This contrast highlights xianxia's untapped potential to engage with ethical depth when freed from commercial constraints.

To transcend its current stagnation, the genre must pursue twofold renewal: (1) authentic integration of Eastern ethics, treating Confucian reciprocity and Taoist xingming shuangxiu (mind-body cultivation) as sources of narrative conflict rather than decorative symbols, as exemplified by works like Heroes' Aspirations; (2) negotiating commercial-artistic balance through platform-driven niche markets (e.g., "slow xianxia") and embracing flawed protagonists, as seen in female-oriented Si Ming. Such approaches could reconcile tradition with modernity, transforming xianxia from a product of symbolic consumption into a vehicle for philosophical inquiry; (3) Industry Recommendations for Ethical Revital-

ization-Model after Jinjiang's (晋江) "No-Romance Initiative," offering grants for works integrating Confucian-Taoist debates (e.g., a story on wuwei in a competitive sect). The mandate 30% weight for "ethical depth" metrics (e.g., dialogues on 忠恕) in recommendation algorithms, as tested in Tencent's 2024 pilot program; (4) Cultural Export: Translating Ethics for Global Audiences-Netflix's adaptation of *Heaven Official's Blessing* de-emphasizes imperial loyalty, focusing on Xie Lian's individual redemption—a strategy xianxia could adopt domestically. By reinterpreting ritual as communal care 而非 feudal obedience, the genre might reconcile tradition with modern values.

The study acknowledges limitations in its focus on mainland Chinese male-oriented works and lack of authorial psychological analysis. Future research might explore AI-generated xianxia's ethical implications, minority cultural perspectives on cultivation ethics, or cross-ethnic comparisons of immortality narratives. By addressing these gaps, xianxia studies can evolve into a more inclusive field, capable of decoding the genre's role in mediating tradition, technology, and identity in the digital age.

In essence, xianxia's narrative alienation is both a challenge and an opportunity. By confronting its ethical contradictions and leveraging its metaphysical richness, the genre can transcend commercial homogenization, offering profound meditations on humanity's enduring quest for meaning—whether amid the finite struggles of mortals or the infinite paradoxes of immortality.

Finally, this paper underscores its limitations: first, the sample period spans only six months; future research could extend to longitudinal tracking over multiple years. Second, although qualitative coding offers in-depth insights, it lacks quantitative model validation. Future studies might employ Social Network Analysis (SNA) or Sentiment Analysis to quantify the mapping strength between platform algorithms and ethical themes, further enriching the multidimensional understanding of "ethical commodification in online fiction."

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