

# PERSPECTIVE

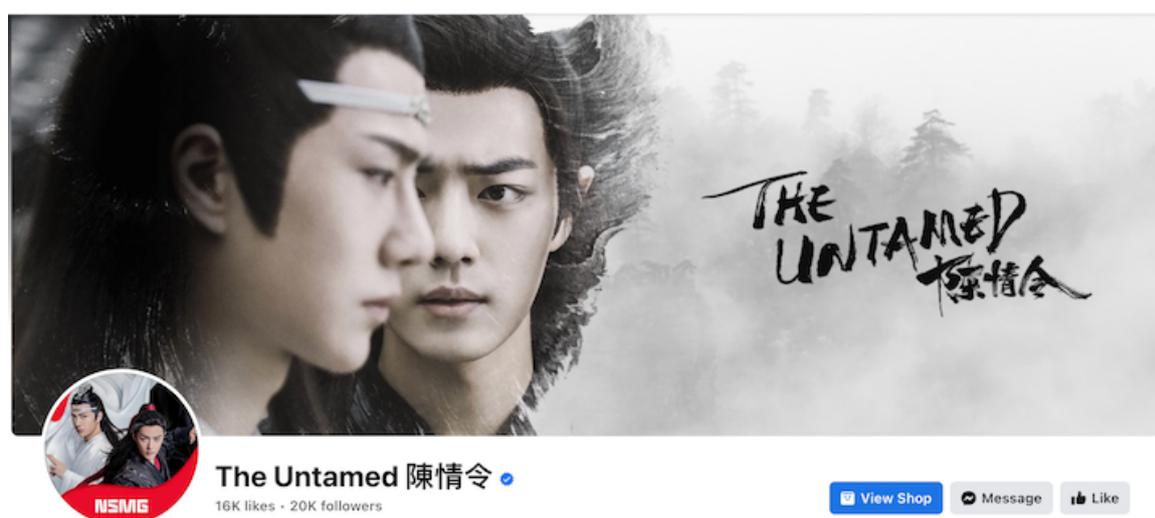
RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 29 May 2023

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## The Power of Fantasy: Southeast Asians Develop an Obsession with Chinese *Xianxia* Dramas

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The popular xianxia drama, *The Untamed* (<https://www.facebook.com/TheUntamedNET>), featured on Facebook. Accessed 25 May 2023.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the past five years, a new genre of Chinese drama, *xianxia* (仙侠), has been rising in popularity in Southeast Asia. This genre combines Chinese mythology and culture with fantasy and action and has been very well-received by Southeast Asian audiences.
- While *xianxia* finds its roots in *wuxia* (武侠), the distinctive differences between the two require that *xianxia* be regarded as a genre of its own. However, the interchangeable use of the two terms on drama ranking sites has led to criticisms that *xianxia* is unable to live up to *wuxia*'s legacy. Nonetheless, the phenomenal popularity of *xianxia* should not be underestimated.
- Two reasons for its popularity in Southeast Asia are *xianxia*'s status as a hybrid cultural product constructed to appeal to regional audiences, and the recent foray of Chinese streaming services into Southeast Asia.
- However, the popularity of *xianxia* is threatened by domestic restrictions in China, such as crackdowns on online literature websites – from where many *xianxias* were adapted – and tighter regulations in 2021 on how men should be portrayed on-screen.
- Nonetheless, the continued popularity of *xianxia* in Southeast Asia has led to further China-Southeast Asian collaborations in entertainment and in other East-Asian countries picking up on the trend. Thus, it appears that China's foray into regional popular entertainment will only continue to grow.

## INTRODUCTION

On 21 September 2019, a 9,000-strong crowd eagerly watched the stage of IMPACT Arena, Bangkok, Thailand.<sup>1</sup> They were not there for K-pop stars or for Japanese celebrities. Instead, they were awaiting the leading cast of *The Untamed* (陈情令), a Chinese *xianxia* (仙侠) drama. Earlier in 2019, this 50-episode Chinese *xianxia* was released on Chinese online streaming site, Tencent Video. It swept domestic and regional markets, ranking first in popularity among 631 web dramas from 2019 to 2020 at the 8<sup>th</sup> China Internet Audio and Video Convention.<sup>2</sup> The wildfire of *The Untamed* did not leave Southeast Asia unscathed, having garnered 106 million views in the region.<sup>3</sup> Due to its popularity in Southeast Asia, a world tour for the cast of *The Untamed* was announced, with Bangkok being the first stop, followed by Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia. Unfortunately, this was derailed due to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

By 2021, two years after its initial release, *The Untamed* had acquired 9.8 billion views on Tencent Video.<sup>5</sup> The success of *The Untamed* heralded a new wave of Chinese *xianxia* dramas, with the genre producing 13 new dramas in the second half of 2022, and 16 drama releases projected for release in 2023.<sup>6</sup> These new dramas have been made available on regional streaming sites such as Netflix, Disney+, WeTV and iQiYi, to feed the demand.<sup>7</sup> Like the Korean wave of the 2000s that has now translated into a tool of soft power for the Korean government<sup>8</sup>, this surge in *xianxia*'s popularity represents a potential source of soft power for China. Specifically, *xianxia* dramas were born out of China's push to globalise its entertainment industry, following in the footsteps of Korea's success<sup>9</sup>. However, with the Chinese state moving to regulate *xianxia*'s production domestically, complications regarding the spread of Chinese soft power arose.

*Xianxia*'s popularity in Southeast Asia raises two important questions: First, how and why did *xianxia* reach this level of popularity in Southeast Asia? Second, what does this sudden popularity bode for China's regional soft power?

## WHAT EXACTLY IS XIANXIA?

*Xianxia* derives its name from two words, *shenxian* (神仙) and *xia* (侠). *Shenxian* broadly refers to gods, demons and immortals in the Chinese mythological realm, while *xia* refers tales of *wuxia* (武侠), the hero-warrior figure. *Xianxia* merges the characteristics of the two terms in its literature, broadly positioning the immortal as the hero-warrior who overcomes difficulties to save the world. However, it is not necessary for the titular character of *xianxia*

to be a god or an immortal. Many *xianxias* feature humans who go on to attain god-like spiritual powers – and even immortality – through ‘cultivation’ (修炼 *xiulian*).

Sharing the root concept of a hero-warrior triumphing over evil, *xianxia* and *wuxia* are often conflated on drama ranking pages, making it difficult to distinguish between them.<sup>10</sup> However, *xianxias* carry distinctive differences from *wuxias* and should be viewed as a separate phenomenon of its own (see Table 1). Indeed, its predecessor, *wuxia*, has been highly popular in Southeast Asian markets since the 1930s, carrying a long and rich tradition that cannot be easily subsumed under the more recent phenomenon of *xianxia*.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 1: Differences between *Xianxia* and *Wuxia***<sup>12</sup>

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Wuxia</b>	<b>Xianxia</b>
<b>Focus</b>	Physical action	Magic and fantasy action
<b>Characters</b>	Working-class descent	Noble/deity descent
<b>Dramatisation</b>	Historical realism	Historical aestheticism
<b>Thematic Concerns</b>	Violence/loyalty/brotherhood	Romance/beauty/loyalty
<b>Authors</b>	Dominated by men	Dominated by women

From the table above, one could say that *xianxia* is an extension from, not a continuation of *wuxia*. Despite the differences in content, the interchangeable labelling of the two genres has led to criticism that *xianxia* is unable to live up to the legacy of *wuxia*. Critics declare the *jianghu* (江湖) – the alternate realm that *wuxia* novels are set in – dead,<sup>13</sup> regarding *xianxias* to not be worthy enough to continue the complex world-building that the *wuxia* classics embarked so elegantly upon. Others bemoan the superficiality of *xianxia*, either in its overly romantic storytelling or its hyper-focus on good-looking actors.<sup>14</sup> Despite these criticisms, the explosive popularity of *xianxia* reflects an appeal that cannot be taken lightly. The next section will look at the possible reasons for the regional attractiveness of *xianxia*.

## **THE RISE OF *XIANXIA* IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

The popularity of *xianxia* in Southeast Asia can be attributed to two factors. First of all, *xianxia* is a hybrid cultural product that appeals to regional audiences. Secondly, the recent foray of Chinese streaming services into Southeast Asia coincided with the heightened attention paid to the *xianxia* phenomenon.

As mentioned, *xianxia* is a product of “cultural mixing”, and this cements its appeal to Southeast Asian audiences. “Cultural mixing” is a term used to denote how different cultures

merge through the processes of production and adaptation to generate new products that transcend national borders.<sup>15</sup> In *xianxia*'s case, it originated through a blend of Japanese and Chinese cultural influences to be later translated on-screen through Korean-influenced production processes.

In the previous section, it was mentioned that *xianxia* originated from web novels. These web novels are published on online literature websites such as *Jinjiang* (now partially owned by Tencent) and JJWXC. These websites often featured fan fiction written in the *danmei* (耽美) style that originated in Japan as *yaoi* (Boys' Love). Featuring homoerotic relationships between men, the genre spilled over into China from Japan as early as the 2000s.<sup>16</sup> *Danmei*, meaning "indulgence in beauty", features the leads as aesthetically beautiful and desirable,<sup>17</sup> and displaying traits contrary to traditional expectations of gender. The web novels reinterpreted Chinese classics and *wuxias* into *danmei* novels for a dominantly female readership. Over time, it was this combination of influences that gave birth to the aesthetic-focused hybrid, *xianxia*.

*Xianxia* combines the elements of aesthetic beauty sought by *danmei* writers and the tales about loyalty, the triumph of good over evil, and justice as modelled by *wuxia*. In fact, *The Untamed* is one such homoerotic *xianxia* adapted from the online web novel, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (魔道祖师). In contrast to its origins, however, *xianxia* is not exclusively confined to homosexual relationships, and often features heterosexual couples in storytelling. TV adaptations of *xianxias* featuring heterosexual couples include *Love Between Fairy and Devil* (苍兰诀) and *Eternal Love* (三生三世十里桃花). Both have garnered high viewership domestically and regionally.

If the *xianxia* web novel is a mixing of Chinese *wuxia* and Japanese *danmei*, then the drama adaptation is a product formed through the addition of Korean production aesthetics. Following the success of the Korean drama *My Love from the Stars* (2013) in China, the Chinese media industry sent delegates to Korea to learn from the "'success story' of the Korean Wave", sparking a tide of collaboration between Korea and China on production know-how.<sup>18</sup> This led to the globalisation of drama production in China, aimed at attracting external audiences and bolstering Chinese soft power. Through these collaborations, many Chinese studios began not only to adapt dramas from Korea for their local audiences but to produce original stories for global consumption. The *xianxias* is a result of this.

Indeed, the ability of *xianxia* to introduce traditional Chinese culture and mythology to a global audience aligns with the ambition of the state to increase the reach of its soft power.<sup>19</sup> *Love Between Fairy and Devil*, a *xianxia* that garnered 1<sup>st</sup> place in global popularity rankings four hours after its release,<sup>20</sup> had 32 intangible cultural heritage traditional crafts presented, and 27 intangible cultural heritage craftsmen working on the show.<sup>21</sup> Thus, through cultural mixing,

*xianxia* not only makes itself palatable to Southeast Asian audiences but provides enough uniqueness to set it apart from dramas produced by Japan and Korea.

Secondly, the accessibility and affordability of Chinese streaming services in the region contribute to the popularity of *xianxia*. From 2019 to 2020, Tencent – one of China’s biggest tech companies – rolled out WeTV in Southeast Asia. WeTV is the international streaming arm of Tencent Video, the service responsible for releasing *The Untamed* to critical success. It is unsurprising therefore that *The Untamed* saw a surge in popularity in Southeast Asia in the same duration, reportedly achieving 250% growth for Tencent after the drama was made accessible through WeTV.<sup>22</sup>

During its initial entry into the Thai market, WeTV only offered original Chinese content with Thai dubbing.<sup>23</sup> After acquiring iFlix, the second biggest regional streaming service next to Netflix,<sup>24</sup> Tencent expanded to include Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian subtitles to cater to regional audiences.<sup>25</sup> This expansion indicates that the reach of the Chinese streaming market has gone beyond that of the ethnic Chinese community to non-Chinese audiences in Southeast Asia.

To date, WeTV is one of the Top 3 OTT service providers in Southeast Asia,<sup>26</sup> taking up 10% of viewership regionally and coming in third to competitors Disney+ and Netflix.<sup>27</sup> On regional streaming services, 13% of content across all platforms are Chinese. It is worth noting, however, that Netflix – the largest viewing site regionally – also contracted popular Chinese *xianxias* for viewing, hence reducing the incentive for audiences to cross streaming platforms to view Chinese dramas.

## **OBSTACLES TO THE POPULARITY OF *XIANXIA***

While the Chinese state has largely encouraged the export of Chinese dramas to Southeast Asia, the *xianxia* genre has suffered domestic restrictions that threaten its status as a viable cultural product in Southeast Asia. The sanctions slapped against it include crackdowns on online literature websites – from which many *xianxias* were adapted – and tighter regulations in 2021 on how men should be portrayed on-screen.

The online literature websites from which *xianxia* dramas are drawn are highly popular in China, and in 2020 registered altogether over 460 million readers.<sup>28</sup> In 2019, tightening online regulation by the Chinese government called for these websites to remove obscene literature from their platforms. Obscene literature refers to materials with sexual or LGBTQ content.<sup>29</sup> This meant that many *xianxia* stories built around homoerotic relationships are now inaccessible through these websites. While it can be argued that many *xianxia* novels remain

permissible due to the fact that what they depict are heterosexual relationships, the ban effectively limits the pool of inspiration that *xianxia* dramas are adapted from. The irony is not lost on commentators who have observed that queer content are proven successful money-makers for streaming giants. However, its heavy reliance on the capital provided through adaptation means that these contents are now often swept under the rug as state regulations kick in.<sup>30</sup>

The second obstacle to *xianxia*'s popularity is the portrayal of men on-screen. In 2021, China's National Radio and TV Administration released a series of guidelines targeted the entertainment industry. The third clause states that artists are not allowed to be 'sissy' (娘炮), and have to adhere to a 'proper beauty standard' (正确审美导向).<sup>31</sup> While the terms remain vague, the statement suggests that effeminate portrayals of men are discouraged. These include having men having delicate or graceful mannerisms or acting in any manner not regarded as stereotypically masculine.<sup>32</sup> This further limits the production ability of *xianxia* dramas, which now have to factor in the effeminateness of their costumes, actors and mannerisms. This poses a problem as *xianxia*'s main draw are good-looking, delicate-featured actors preferred by the dominantly female audience. Directors of *xianxia* dramas even acknowledge that good looks are of priority over the skillset of the actors when it comes to casting.<sup>33</sup>

However, the extent of these restrictions on *xianxia* production for a global audience remains uncertain. As streaming companies host differing applications for their domestic and international audience – for instance, Tencent Video caters to Chinese audiences while WeTV is internationally directed – what may impact the domestic market may not affect the international market. Nonetheless, as China's cultural image heavily relies on its portrayal through international channels, this image cannot stray too far from what is presented domestically, making the future of *xianxias* uncertain.

## THE SHOW GOES ON

While domestic restrictions remain a central concern for *xianxia* adaptations, exported *xianxia* dramas have recorded a spike in production in the past and upcoming years. This indicates that the continued demand for *xianxia* outweighs the problems brought on by domestic censorship, reinforcing the notion that soft power is often societally driven and not state-motivated. Indeed, *xianxia* dramas have opened doors for China-Southeast Asia collaboration in entertainment. After WeTV's success in establishing itself in the region using *xianxia*, it has moved to draft partnerships with production companies in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines to produce local content under WeTV Originals. It has also begun to open doors for regional advertisers on their streaming app.<sup>34</sup>

iQiyi, a rival Chinese streaming service, inked a collaboration with Singaporean company G.H.Y Culture to produce short drama series for Singaporean viewers<sup>35</sup> and has signed with Astro Malaysia to stream Chinese dramas for Malaysian viewers. These collaborations might allow production companies to sidestep Chinese restrictions and offer certain content – such as those relating to LGBTQ+ and other sensitive issues – for a global audience. With the increasing number of collaborations between regional production companies and their Chinese counterparts, it will not be surprising if examples of Southeast Asian *xianxia* appear in the near future.

The genre's popularity is also not lost on other East Asian countries, and Korea has released its own *xianxia*-esque drama on Netflix, titled *Alchemy of Souls*.<sup>36</sup> Though it represents a relatively new genre for Korea, it has been very well-received by Korean and Southeast Asian audiences, ranking Top 10 on Netflix for an average of 25 consecutive weeks across Southeast Asian countries.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that Chinese production companies face competition from their better-established East Asian counterparts, and should not take their recent popularity for granted.

While *xianxias* gain more attention in the region, how it will benefit China and Chinese policymakers remains unclear. However, from the continued growth of Chinese TV shows in the region and the increased demand for new *xianxias*, it appears that China's rise in popular entertainment in the region will only continue.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Naewna.com. 2019. “8นักแสดง‘ปรมาจารย์ลัทธิมาร’บุกไทย เสรีพิศความฟิน”. 31 October 2019. <<https://www.naewna.com/entertain/450790>> (accessed 13 April 2023).

<sup>2</sup> 微博电视剧. (@微博电视剧). #陈情令网络剧热度第一##第八届网络视听大会# 【18个月上线631部网剧《陈情令》成“剧王”】据《中国网络视听发展研究报告》显示，从2019年-2020年上半年上线的631部网络剧的热度指数排行来看，仙侠剧《陈情令》排在首位，刑侦剧《破冰行动》、校园青春偶像剧《全职高手》以及《庆余年》《长安十二时辰》紧随其后. 14 October 2020. <<https://m.weibo.cn/status/4559979988390428>> (accessed 13 April 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Li, Cheng Cheng. 2019. “Tencent Report Reviews the Online Video Trends of 2019” *TMTPost*, December 2019 <<https://medium.com/@TMTPOST/tencent-report-reviews-the-online-video-trends-of-2019-17957f5889a5>> (accessed 13 April 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Hudson, Nikki. 2020. “‘The Untamed’: Everything We Know About the 2020 World Tour”. *Filmdaily*, 27 January 2020 <<https://filmdaily.co/news/the-untamed-2020-world-tour/>> (accessed 13 April 2023).

<sup>5</sup> The show is also available on streaming platforms such as Netflix, Viki and Amazon Prime, with none of the views counted into this number. See: 陈熙涵, 2021. “时隔两年，《陈情令》热度不减，播放量破95亿”. 文汇, 24 June 2021 <<https://wenhui.whb.cn/third/jinri/202106/24/411014.html>> (accessed 13 April 2023).

- <sup>6</sup> 搜狐. 2022. “2023 仙侠剧 16 部推荐片单！罗云熙&白鹿《长月烬明》、肖战《玉骨遥》必看”. 21 December 2022 <[https://www.sohu.com/a/619601860\\_99913067](https://www.sohu.com/a/619601860_99913067)> (accessed 13 April 2023).
- <sup>7</sup> Personal observation of streaming websites and their respective landing pages.
- <sup>8</sup> Shim, Doobo. “Hybridity, Korean Wave, and Asian Media.” *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, edited by Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai and Chris Berry, 34 – 44. NY: Routledge, 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Shim, Doobo. “Hybridity, Korean Wave, and Asian Media.” *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, edited by Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai and Chris Berry, 34 – 44. NY: Routledge, 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> According to fan blogs, *wuxia* and *xianxias* are usually grouped together. See: <https://www.newhanfu.com/23661.html> and <https://sarankita.com/blog/2872/best-wuxia-series-xianxia-chinese-dramas/>
- <sup>11</sup> Teo, Stephen. *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- <sup>12</sup> Characteristics of *wuxia* were gleaned from Teo’s exposition on the *wuxia* genre in his book *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (2009). The comparisons to *xianxia* were derived from personal observations of popular *xianxia* dramas. See: Teo, Stephen. *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*, 1 – 15. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
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- <sup>15</sup> Koichi, Iwabuchi. “East Asian Popular Culture and Inter-Asian Referencing.” *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, edited by Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai and Chris Berry, 24 – 33. NY: Routledge, 2017.
- <sup>16</sup> Jin Feng. “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, No. 2 (Fall, 2009): 1 -41. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41491008>.
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- <sup>22</sup> *Blognone*. 2019. “Tencent เผย "ปรมาจารย์ลัทธิมาร" ดัน WeTV โต 250%, ยอดดาวน์โหลดเฉลี่ยเดือนละล้าน” 17 October 2019 <<https://www.blognone.com/node/112591>> (accessed 14 April 2023).
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- <sup>36</sup> Similar to Chinese *xianxias*, this is a fantasy drama that features humans who go through 'cultivation' to achieve immortality. It also features Korean traditional culture and mythology heavily.
- <sup>37</sup> The Southeast Asian countries include Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. See: <https://top10.netflix.com/united-states/tv>

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