Invisible Authority: Women's Ethical Labour and Tragic Outcomes in Danmei Novels

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ABSTRACT

Chinese literature has often portrayed women as figures of sacrifice and care rather than as active decision-makers. In contemporary Danmei (gay) Literature, attention is usually focused on male–male relationships, cultivation power, and sect politics. This paper examines *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (Mo Dao Zu Shi) by Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù, a well-known Danmei novel, to show that women still play a crucial role in shaping the story's tragic outcome. Focusing on Wen Qing and Jiang Yanli, the paper

argues that women's decisions made through love, responsibility, and feelings directly influence the course of events. Although the novel centers on a male same-sex romance, women function as ethical agents whose choices sustain social order and also allow injustice to continue. Using a postfeminist approach, the paper shows that women in Danmei Literature are not merely background figures but active forces whose actions shape tragedy.

Keywords: Post feminism, Endurance, Golden core, Tragedy and women.

Chinese literary tradition has always been moralistic, and the kinship relationships (Freedman 323) and social harmony (Jing 2) have been two important themes for painters and poets, and the roles of women have been often defined as symbolizing moral responsibility, sacrifice and continuity instead of direct responsibility. Poveroes' voice has been shaped into a subordinate role to the male hero, or a celebrant of family and national mythology, from classical stories that hail female obedience and chastity to modern and contemporary pieces that negotiate female modernity. Before and after women are placed at the heart of the narrative, their influence is often channeled through emotional mediation and relational mechanisms (Chen et al. 86), Instead of direct authority it is right to speak of moral exemplarity or sacrifice. So, a woman's virtue is defined by compliance and gentleness, not capacity or skills. On the surface level, these traditional gender dynamics seem to come through in recent trends in Chinese popular fiction (Ma et al. 23; Chen), especially in web-based sources of fiction and xianxia. In many cultures women are expected to take on roles that have connotations with caring, home life and moral strength - those that are often dominated by mask wearing cultures. There is a risk, however, that such interpretations fail to account for the continuation of women's ethical action as a means to maintain, manage, and ultimately alter social

boundaries. Feminine characters may have had no institutional power but they generally serve to be the emotional and moral signposts and anchor in a tragic narrative.

Absorbing conflict, they take on the infrastructure of the narrative and become present to male action with their work. This paper examines *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (Mo Dao Zu Shi) by Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù as part of this larger trend of literature and representation of women in Chinese society, positing this novel as an attempt at the creation of female agency that is not oppositional to the male system, but instead a system of managing emotion and ethics within it. Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù's *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* is often seen as a narrative dominated by masculine power novel. This sect politics and cultivation orthodoxy, ethical conflicts as a result of male rivalry and ideological fight have molded it to be a novel of masculinity. But these sorts of readings, one that might miss out on the forces of structure that actually drive the novel is more problematic. Though men dominate the visible spaces of action and authority, the most irreversible transformations within the narrative are initiated and sustained by women whose power operates outside official framework. This paper argues that Wen Qing, Jiang Yanli, Qin Su, the important female characters are powerful figures, not through sect authority or physical dominance, but through knowledge, emotional labour, reproductive truth, and ideological thinking. Based on the postfeminist theory, feminist ethics of care, and feminist narratology, the study contends that *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* constructs female agency as morally decisive yet structurally silenced yet powerful in subtle ways that reveals a patriarchal system that depends upon women's actions and power while systematically erasing its legitimacy.

"I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft). The postfeminist theory provides a critical perspective by which the agency of the women in the novel can be studied without the perception of rebellion or resistance. Post feminism focuses on choice, autonomy,

agency and self-determination within limiting systems instead of combating them (Banet-Weiser et al. 4). In post-feminism, women's actions are typically ignored as the ‘private sphere', emotional and ‘sacrificial'. They are now re-thought as conscious moral choices made under pressure (Gill and Scharff, *New Feminities* 124). Feminist ethics of care, countering this view, acknowledges the knowledge that women can be credited with responsibility, relational caring commitment and emotional labor and recognizes that these knowledges are valid modes of power that hold communities together despite failing to receive the recognition they deserve (Kathryn and Pascoe). Feminist narratology also shows how the characters who have restricted narrative voice actually dictate the narrative causality without being present in a story's visible authority (Lanser 348-350). When put together, they provide readers of the novel the chance to consider female characters not as side characters, but as protagonists that construct the moral framework and doom of the novel.

Wen Qing, the skilled doctor of Wen sect, represents the clearest challenge to the cultivation of the world’s masculine monopoly over knowledge. As a doctor, her authority is widely epistemic rather than martial, rooted in an understanding of the body, pain, and consequence rather than spiritual orthodoxy or sect lineage. She considers herself a doctor first and gives importance to saving lives instead of separating patients based on sects. The cultivation has a system that equates moral worth based on their visible cultivation strength and the sect they belong to instead of skill. The medical knowledge occupies an unstable position. Though Healing skills are essential in moments of crisis, they are denied legitimacy as a source of power. Wen Qing is the niece of Wen Ruhon , the evil sect leader who wants to destroy other sects and he indeed succeeds in burning the Jiang sect. Wen Qing as doctor is against Wen Ruhon’s actions but she is held against her will to stay with him as Wen Qing’s brother Wen Ning is imprisoned by Wens. She feels guilty on seeing the actions of her sect and decision to perform the golden core transfer. In

the whole plot, the events with the most far-reaching repercussions are those that produce the greatest effects on Wei Wuxian's destiny, dramatically impacting the moral course of the cultivation world. Putting a portion of the golden essence of Wei Wuxian into Jiang Cheng saves the Jiang sect for the future, but just as she saves it, she condemns Wei Wuxian to a life of death, physical weakness and social scrutiny.

This act can be interpreted from a post-feminist way of thinking as an exercise of agency in the face of extreme constraints (Ge). Ethical calculation: Wen Qing is doing so not to rebel against ideology, nor for her own aspirations, just to make the least of an evil. Her decision reflects self- governance rather than submission, yet the cultivation world refuses to recognize it as such. The concept of anonymity of the operation shows this system's trepidation of female power outside of the purview of men. The hierarchy of visibility and ritualized power of males is challenged by medical intervention, especially undertaken by a female. Consequently, the sacrifice made by Wen Qing is invisible and Wei Wuxian's changed condition results in misunderstandings of such moral deviation. “Wen Qing’s eyes were rimmed with red. Gradually she receded her hand. Tell you, I’ve never, "self, never told you this but now and this moment, I have to say it. I really won’t have the chance to in the future. I'm sorry,' Wen Qing said. ‘And thank you.’’ (126) We don't see the effects of the golden core transfer in the rest of the novel, but their influence is felt throughout. Because he lacks golden core and he is now mortal rather than cultivator, Wei Wuxian is saddened that he cannot use a sword: He is deemed arrogant, uncooperative and even bizarre in a culture where surgery is an indicator of godliness. Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation is not only an act of rejecting the red orthodoxy, but also an adaptation of the cultivation other than the safe structural yang cultivation, which is also known as a praxis. Wen Qing’s intervention destabilizes the cultivation world precisely because it produces a figure who no longer conforms to its standards of legitimacy yet continues to act with ethical clarity. This contradiction exposes the moral poverty of a system incapable of recognizing the moral values despite the

form of cultivation. Even Wei Ying's soulmate wants Wei Ying to leave demonic cultivation and return to orthodox ways without knowing that he doesn't have golden core.

> " Return to Gusu with me
>
> After a moment, Wei Wuxian said with a laugh, "Return to Gusu with you? To the Cloud
>
> Recesses? Whatever for?" It immediately dawned on him. "Oh, right. I forgot. Your uncle Lan Qiren absolutely hates unorthodox heretics like me. You're his favorite pupil, so of course you're the same, ha. Well, no thanks." (201)

Wen Qing's influence extends beyond the golden core transfer into the ethical logic governing Wei Wuxian's later decisions. Her plea for Wen Ning, her brother's life through demonic cultivation adds burden to Wei Wuxian's reputation and makes him a target with reason to be destroyed as it's against orthodox way to bring back the dead. Wen Ning's resurrection as the Ghost General is condemned as unorthodox by the cultivation world, yet its ethical foundation lies in Wen Qing's insistence on the humanity of those deemed disposable. Wei Wuxian's protection of the Wen refugees, his isolation in the Burial Mounds, and his willingness to accept social exile all emerge from the care-based moral framework she initiates. Feminist ethics of care clarifies that Wen Qing's power operates relationally rather than coercively, shaping ethical continuity even in her absence.

Wen Qing's cultivation world further illustrates how power is played out among genders. Even though she is the focal point as guardian of life, she is not entitled to recognition, becomes a burden and is finally compelled to yield. In the final apology and thanks expressed towards Wei Wuxian, she highlights the unequal moral responsibility of women who are tasked with cleaning up results of the patriarchy. Wen

Qing is a force that silences epistemic authority while Jiang Yanli is a force that normalizes emotional authority. She is the mediator, the adopted sister of Wei Wuxian, who is torn by resentment, rivalry and unspoken hierarchies in a family. The very mundane and the very meaningful gestures such as cooking lotus rib soup are ritualistic acts of care and tender actions to horizontally interrupt the conflict and reinforce the sense of one's relational belonging. Using feminist ethics of care, Yanli Jiang's work presents the continuity of family that is sustained by her labour in a fragile system. From a position of the feminist ethics of care, the continuity of family maintained through Jiang Yanli's labour is disclosed in a fragile structure (Pascoe). Her strength is to keep things together at times of injustice, not in command. Jiang Yanli's significance lies in areas where vulnerabilities of women clash with public authority and power of men. She is not a secondary character who decorates the church, but an essential affective linkage functioner whose intervention is recurrent in the cultivation world, in order to stabilise the relationships that are not met by the institutional world and non-affective by its operators. A postfeminist view sees Jiang Yanli's actions as more than simply gentle or passive; they are intentional and reflect a conscious approach to emotional self-assurance and relational accountability. A lot of our decisions are made with the right intentions, but the results are structurally devastating because we either hide or hide in plain sight the fact that these systems are not working. These sound decisions – despite their good intentions – structurally look lopsided because they do not address issues proactively, but only bury them, or turn into a marketing tactic to do this in plain sight. The incident at Cloud Recesses is a prime example, and one of the earliest, of the subject. Jin Zixuan’s insults force her to the center of attention publicly, to the detriment of her "dignity" in a society where women's "dignity" depends on male acceptance. In the absence of her physical presence, Jiang Yanli is made the object of speculation from a crude male gaze, and further elucidates the postfeminist dynamics of her role within the story. But when the disciples talk about Jin Zixuan's girlfriend, she is not

mentioned right away, and she has to be a “shocking intellectual lady,” and “shocking beautiful lady” to get their attention. Jin Zixuan’s visible irritation at the mention of his fiancée signals not protection, but discomfort at being publicly associated with a woman whose value does not enhance his prestige. In postfeminist terms, this moment exemplifies the regulation of female visibility (Gill 610): Jiang Yanli’s worth is negotiated socially in her absence, while her presence is deemed unnecessary to the discussion of her own desirability.

Hearing the word ‘fiancée’ Jin Zixuan appears to purse his lips, looking a little unhappy, while Jiang Yanli has nothing to do with all this – neither in reacting nor in performing any action – but the effects of postfeminist respectability politics are already manifesting. It is a value system, and the description of being "Nothing exceptional" and "Nothing memorable" reflects the will to see such a description of her, considering a woman without ethical or relational capacity, but by other criteria, as being able to enhance the value of men.

So it is paradoxical that Jiang Yanli is sought after for being non-threatening, moderate and emotionally manageable as a postfeminist existence. The criteria for her lack of corruption as a fiancé is that she is able not to breach the leadership of the patriarchy’s structure. This building is enough to reflect the post-feminist craze of queering the gender imperialism of ‘private strength' and of potentially reinforcing the sentiment ‘stable emotions' and 'no ambition'. Significant in this conversation is Wei Wuxian's stance because he isn't approaching the appeal of the social harmony that calls for a woman's status to remain affectively unspoken, follow the world's rules, and quietly return to her place, in short the tenants of the postfeminist doctrine. The implicit violence of Jin Zixuan's dismissal is the same as his challenge; the words "there is no need to bring it up again" are not neutrality, but rather an emotionally erasing act.

Jin Zixuan's irritation suggests discomfort at being blamed for the affective meanings of his words, a discomfort which in a postfeminist perspective arises from a feminist viewpoint. While it allows the woman to be casually assessed, it also stands against the emotional damage this casual assessment of the woman is likely to inflict. The subject is the male voice but there is no voice in the system, no voice that presents Jiang Yanli, no voice that evaluates, judges and ultimately contains Jiang Yanli. This can be interpreted as a "voiceless" or as "enforced affective discipline" under the Post Feminism. Here, Jiang Yanli's silence, her not saying anything after this humiliation is already prefigured: she has to be someone who does not allow emotions to break the flow of male social exchange. Most importantly, this sets in motion an avalanche effect that will also result in Jiang Yanli absorbing. Wei Wuxian's honorable gesture of protecting her dignity leads to his being punished, and the forced disrupting of a relationship.

Earlier, a gentle gesture to protect her dignity comes with a punishment for Wei Wuxian and a brief break in the engagement. When Jiang then refuses to accept the blame, her actions actually exemplify the postfeminist concept of self-governance (Zaeemdar 528), whereby the burden of disruption of public order internalizes, thus maintaining relational continuity. Not that they can't take emotional responsibility, but her endurance makes up for that. In this way, the Oriented Room scene can be seen as an early example of the postfeminist positioning trick. Jiang Yanli works through to achieve this indirect tragedy, in which someone else performs in her voice, she takes the responsibility for the consequences of their performance, and institutional injustice is unaffected. This moment also makes it explainable to readers why Jiang Yanli later has become a suspicious person, despite her soft-spot reputation. Her public misbehavior is the revelation of the immoral stasis of the cultivation world, as she is the last symbol of post-feminist respectability; moderate, self-regulated, generous in her emotions.

The tragedy is structurally prepared: Jiang Yanli's dignity must be bargained or dealt with. Her suffering is limitable, and her silence is welcome. The cultivation world reads this rupture into the simple terms of male competition and injured pride, but that's the least fruitful lens through which to view it from an ethical point of view. The real violence is the degradation in public view of a woman, whose feelings are considered negligible. So, her reply, when its consequences weigh down upon her is this: she takes it on the chin silently; refuses to blame Wei Wuxian for her loss of her engagement ring. Post feminism looks at this silence as nothing more than a lack of submission or a lack of awareness. On the contrary, it involves strategic persisting in a system that doesn't provide women with a legitimate means of protest without further punishment. Although she could have complained, her position upholds the stability of the relationships at the expanse of justice.

This tendency of affective self-regulation is formed even before that in Jiang Yanli when she was a kid and she was playing with Wei Wuxian. One of the formative scenes involves her carrying him home after he injures his foot and that he's wearing some shoes that are a size too big for him. She decides to go straight to the sewing cabinet instead of asking him why it is that he has to be wearing shoes that hurt him so much that he needs to be carried home? When Wei Wuxian doesn't acknowledge the shoes don't fit, he is conscious of his conditional belonging and the emotional fragility of life under a different family. Post-feminist self-governance is exemplified by Jiang Yanli's response to those problems: she controls her emotions, takes her hardships, addresses her emotional harm on her own, and preserves emotional balance. Importantly, injustice will NOT be taken away by her decision but be hidden. " Jiang Yanli hoists Wei Wuxian onto her back and hobbles her way home. Instead of letting anger or responsibility emerge, Jiang Yanli channels Wuxian's fury into sorrow, by which he derives his explanations for his actions, in a manner of loneliness and loss. Although she's still young herself, she's responsible for controlling men's

feelings, a defining feature of the post-feminist feminine, where women are seen as controllers of the emotions within social structures.

This intervention is not passive. This is a conscious moral decision for the maintenance of harmony. But instead of confrontation, Jiang Yanli is able to maintain an unstable balance on which resentment must be constantly suppressed. The conflict does not become resolved, but postponed! Having abandoned the idea of the "powerless victim of structural oppression", Jiang Yanli becomes a "player" of post feminism, and is no longer a leader of revolution, but a partner in perpetuating the system she is destined to destroy. This delay is not passive from a postfeminist view but rather is considered to be active moral work. Jiang Yanli's silences are filled with symmetry and a sense of self-assurance, rather than ignorance and containment (Selimovic 2).

This is the awareness of costs of barking in a patriarchy that customarily listens to women's voice in an unstable and disturbing way. Postfeminist theory enables these silences to be thought of as strategic maneuvers to surmount rather than performances of erasure of selfhood. This piety is how others are able to, for instance, continue their piety without being annihilated in an instant. Her care is done in a way that provides room for a moral reality, and also allows her to be disposable. This is the fundamental "issue" of the patriarchy honour culture in the cultivation world.

These qualities of Jiang’s purity, her obedience and her gentleness are openly extolled but not kept secure. Whenever it comes into conflict with male hierarchy, her dignity is rhetorically called up or sacrificed. The Sunshot Campaign is one such contradiction that they face in the form of the public humiliation of Jin Zixuan. The incident is not just a personal insult but also a symbolic representation of the patriarchal system's tactics of enforcing its dominance through controlling women's emotional display. This humiliation is legal only because it enhances the power of men, and Jiang Yanli's suffering is considered

trivial and myriad. For the cultivation world, Wei's anger is a result of demonic overindulgence, caused by this humiliation. His reasons for calling into question the ethics of degrading a woman publicly, and making this happen repeatedly, are grounded in another place though. Wei Wuxian at this moment changes the world's view in the cultivation world. Fear of him becomes a communal fear, rather than a personal one, and most importantly it doesn't motivate anyone to fear as they consider demonstrating their moral outrage publicly. Where emotional injustice turns into a political crisis is in the presence of Jiang Yanli.

In feminist narratology, it is found that transformation is not random (Bal 81); Jiang Yanli serves as a point of transgression that sees private evil escalate to become public tragedy. The engagement is almost as if her turn to social harmony begins with her reengagement to Jin Zixuan, but that doesn't seem realistic either. It is held up by the repression of the lingering ethical conflict over Wei Wuxian's self-exclusion and the diehard cultivation community's inability to recognize its debt to him. Love and justice are never in harmony, so Jiang Yanli's happiness is constantly in danger and dependent on her obeying to be capable of separating them.

Meanwhile, Wei is hiding out, threatening to bring down others, while Jiang is actively fighting against being separated emotionally from others, arguing that her brother is not evil, according to the cultivation world. On a postfeminist view, that's her agency in adhering to relational ethics in a system; but that very ethic turns out to be a site of her destruction. From a postfeminist point of view, Jiang Yanli's tragedy is not a question of not having access to power, but of having its responsibility. She does so because she feels it is her responsibility to stabilize, endure and repair. Her passing signals affect governance's end. When the woman who manages the emotional side is destroyed it's a whole new world of violence. In this novel, Jiang Yanli is rather depicted not as a casualty, but rather as a postfeminist agent whose ethics of caring for and continuity also help to produce insurmountable disaster.

If Wen Qing has done so before, Jiang Yanli walks in a strict silence of a torn-up heart. Both women figure as moral shock absorbers i.e. they do not get institutional support. In answering the question, they reveal a common moral attitude, that of being accountable rather than self-preserving. Power in *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* is not a fringe power, it's a fundamental power. It is an unseen framework that supports the politics of sects, moral conversations and social cohesion. But this power is not based on the patriarchal notion of authority. Tragedy of the novel is not because these women are weak in terms of their power but because the world they live in, is incapable of admitting the power of those women.

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