

From Cosmic Fluidity to Rebellious Intimacy: The Evolution of Queer Fantasy from the Mahabharata to Mo Dao Zu Shi

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Abstract

This research paper traces the evolution of queer representation in fantasy literature through a comparative analysis of the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata between c. 400 BCE–400 CE and the contemporary Chinese danmei novel Mo Dao Zu Shi, which is also known as Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, 2015–2016 by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. Despite separation by over two millennia and distinct cultural contexts, both works deploy fantasy frameworks. One concentrates on the divine transformation while the other deals with spiritual cultivation, but both engage in the identities and relationships that challenge heteronormative structures. This paper argues that the Mahabharata establishes a paradigm of queerness as cosmic instrumentality, wherein gender fluidity serves karmic or dharmic purposes, while MDZS represents a shift toward queerness as rebellious intimacy, wherein queer bonds become the emotional and moral center that exposes systemic hypocrisy.

Keywords: *Queer fantasy, Mahabharata, Mo Dao Zu Shi, danmei, gender fluidity, comparative literature, Chinese censorship, South Asian mythology*

1. Introduction

The task of tracing queer lineages in fantasy literature requires methodological care. Too often, contemporary readings project modern identity categories onto pre-modern texts, or conversely, dismiss ancient representations of gender fluidity as merely symbolic and thus unrelated to lived queer experience. This paper adopts a different approach like treating both the Mahabharata and Mo Dao Zu Shi (MDZS) as serious imaginative engagements with the question of how fantasy worlds can accommodate bodies, desires, and bonds that exceed normative prescription.

The Mahabharata, attributed to the sage Vyasa, is among the longest epic poems in human history, comprising over 100,000 couplets. Its narrative of dynastic struggle, philosophical discourse, and divine intervention has served as a foundational text for South Asian cultural self-understanding for over two millennia. Mo Dao Zu Shi, a Chinese webnovel published serially between 2015 and 2016 on the platform JJWXC, belongs to the danmei where it deals with male-male romance narratives that have become a significant site of queer cultural production in contemporary China despite state censorship

At first glance, these works share little. Yet both use fantasy elements and has divine boons, reincarnation, supernatural cultivation, magical warfare which explores what it means to exist outside social orthodoxy. Both feature protagonists whose gendered or sexual non-conformity is inseparable from their heroic or antiheroic journeys. And both have generated rich traditions of interpretation that read their queer potentials against the grain of dominant, often heteronormative, reception histories.

The central argument of this paper is threefold.

First, the Mahabharata establishes a paradigm of queerness as cosmic instrumentality, wherein gender fluidity serves divine or karmic purposes but rarely becomes the basis for sustained intimate rebellion.

Second, MDZS inherits and transforms this paradigm, shifting queerness from the margins of cosmic order to the center of emotional and moral life, and here what the researcher finds is that queer id used as rebellious intimacy.

Third, this evolution of the novel where from sacrifice to survival, from duty to choice, here represents not a rupture but a reorientation. contemporary queer fantasy finds in ancient epic not a template but a precedent, permission to imagine that those who exist outside normativity have always been here, even if their stories are told differently now.

2. Theoretical Framework: Reading Queerly Before Queer Identification

To read the Mahabharata queerly is not to claim that the epic contains gay characters or any LGBTQ theme in any modern sense. Rather, as Sitaram Gangode and Manohar Dugaje argue, the epic provides a fertile ground for investigating how gender non-conformity and non-traditional sexualities are portrayed within spiritual, social, and cultural frameworks which ritualized and normalized queerness

This paper draws on postcolonial queer theory, which argue against the claim "that genderfluidity is a modern and Western trend. By reading the Mahabharata and MDZS together, this paper contributes to a growing body of comparative work that resists Eurocentric frameworks for queerness while also acknowledging the specific constraints like including state censorship in contemporary China which is said to be the famous global space that shape queer cultural production.

3. The Mahabharata: Queerness as Cosmic Instrumentality

3.1 Shikhandi: Transition as Weapon and Destiny

The most prominent queer figure in the Mahabharata is Shikhandi. Born as Shikhandini, daughter of King Drupada, this character is central to the epic's climax: Bhishma, the grandsire of the Kuru dynasty, has been granted the boon of choosing the time of his own death and cannot be killed by any man. Shikhandi, who was once a woman, stands before Bhishma in the great battle, and Bhishma who is granted various divine powers, recognizes the presence of a female essence lays down his weapons. Shikhandi's arrows, with Arjuna's help, are shot to bring down the invincible warrior.

The narrative of Shikhandi's gender transition varies across retellings, but several elements remain consistent. A yaksha, also known as a nature spirit, exchanges Shikhandini's female form for a male one, though the yaksha stipulates that the change is temporary or conditional. In some versions, Shikhandi retains memories of female embodiment; in others, the transition is complete. What matters for queer reading is the function of this transition within the epic's economy: Shikhandi's gender fluidity is not incidental but instrumental. It is precisely the trace of femaleness, though in a past life made the fact that Shikhandi was once a woman, and raising a weapon against females is wrong, and that fact makes Bhishma vulnerable.

Contemporary scholarship has reclaimed Shikhandi as a trans figure. Shikhandi, one of the most essential transgender characters of the Mahabharata, has been used as a medium to symbolise modern-day prejudice, acceptance, and its impacts, and that his narrative shows the pre-colonial celebration of gender fluidity. For queer readers today, this character has gained significant popularity amongst queer youth as the metaphors in his story resonate with the struggles of said youth

Shikhandi's transition is not an expression of autonomous identity but a divine intervention serving karmic necessity. His queerness is for something like the end of Bhishma, the resolution of dynastic destiny rather than something that exists for its own sake. Shikhandi is one of several "liminal figures... uniquely placed in conversation involving queer space, marginalization, and resistance" (p. 45). But resistance here is not personal or romantic; it is strategic and epic.

3.2 Arjuna as Brihannala: Gender Performativity in Exile

The second major locus of gender fluidity in the Mahabharata is the story of Arjuna and the transformation he has undergone during the hiding year in exile. After losing a game of dice, the Pandava brothers are exiled for thirteen years, the final year to be spent in disguise. Arjuna, the greatest warrior of his age, chooses to live as Brihannala, a eunuch and dance teacher in the court of King Virata.

This transformation is, like Shikhandi's, divinely sanctioned. The god Indra, Arjuna's father, provides the magical necklace that enables the disguise. But the narrative's texture is more complex than mere instrumentalism. As Brihannala, Arjuna teaches dance and music to the princess Uttara, a form of art traditionally associated with the hijra community, a third-gender group recognized in South Asian social history.

Critics say that Arjuna's embodiment as Brihannala, along with other figures like "Shikhandi's gender transition... and Ardhanarishvara's synthesis of feminine and masculine traits... show how spiritual, social, and cultural frameworks ritualized and normalized queerness while also highlighting the acceptance of multiple identities" (p. 87).

Importantly, Arjuna emerges from this year transformed but not traumatized. The narrative does not frame Brihannala as humiliation or punishment. Instead, Arjuna's skills as Brihannala is known for his dancing, his musicality, his care for the princess which are presented as genuine accomplishments to the role and character he expressed. The epic allows Arjuna to inhabit femininity without mockery. This is not, to be sure, a representation of trans identity in the

contemporary sense. But it is a representation of gender as performative in a pre-modern context, a recognition that the same body can manifest different gendered presentations without losing its essential heroism.

3.3 The Mohini-Aravan Tradition: Divine Queerness

A third strand of queer reading concerns the god Vishnu in his female form, Mohini. In several Puranic retellings and regional performance traditions of the Mahabharata and it's also most famously the vili tradition of Tamil Nadu. The Mohini appears in the narrative of Aravan also known as Iravan, the son of Arjuna and the Naga princess Ulupi.

Before the great battle, Aravan agrees to be sacrificed to ensure Pandava victory, but his final wish is to marry before dying. No woman will wed a man destined for death. Krishna transforms into Mohini, marries Aravan, and then mourns him as a widow. In the Koovagam festival, this narrative is ritually reenacted by trans women and hijras, who marry the deity as Aravan and then undergo widowhood and annual ritual that provides a sacred space for non-heteronormative connection, grounding queerness as the divine form.

Here, the queer reading moves from textual to performative. The Mahabharata itself may only hint at this story, but living traditions have seized upon it, making it a site of transaffirming ritual. This matters because it demonstrates that queerness in the epic tradition is not merely a scholarly imposition but a reading that communities have enacted, embodied, and celebrated.

3.4 The Limits of Cosmic Fluidity

For all its radical potential, the Mahabharata's queerness remains bounded. Shikhandi attains male embodiment but is not permitted romantic fulfillment. Arjuna returns to masculinity without apparent longing for what he left behind. Mohini is a divine disguise, not an identity. And crucially, none of these figures articulate desire for same-sex partnership. The epic's queer imaginary is one of transformation, not intimacy; of duty, not pleasure; of cosmic function, not personal rebellion.

The Mahabharata operates within a different philosophical framework, one centered on dharma like right action, cosmic duty rather than individual flourishing. Within that framework, gender fluidity is possible, even celebrated but it's also always in service to something beyond the self.

4. Mo Dao Zu Shi: Queerness as Rebellious Intimacy

4.1 The Danmei Context: Writing Queer Under Censorship

Mo Dao Zu Shi emerges from a specific and precarious context: contemporary Chinese danmei literature. The genre originated in the 1990s, influenced by Japanese yaoi, but has since developed its own tropes and aesthetics. The censorship environment shapes MDZS in material ways. The original webnovel includes explicit romantic and sexual content between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. However, various adaptations including the donghua (animated series) and the live-action drama *The Untamed* are under censorship and they must navigate Chinese regulations that forbid visually depict[ing] two men engaging in romantic relationships. Various fans express their frustration on this as it is impossible for that level of relationship to

be shown in any television adaptations due to Chinese censorship laws and thus spoiling the plot of the original version of the novel.

This constraint has produced creative strategies of indirection. The donghua conveys intimacy through metaphor, verbal interactions, and carefully placed non-sensual touching like using the lan clan ribbon to showcase the relationship between Lan Zhan and Wei Ying as the ribbon can only be touched by family and spouse but Lan Zhan allowed wei Ying to touch it and even tied wei Ying hands with it. Another crucial sequence are their outfits are dyed a deep red after they reunited again and in Chinese culture, red is used in marriage clothes. This moment symbolizes their combined choice to become cultivation partners. Similarly, the live-action drama replaces overt romance with transcultural adaptations and fan art where the show's excision prompts a fan's desire to reinsert the scene.

4.2 Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji: Chosen Bonds Beyond Orthodoxy

The central relationship of MDZS is between Wei Wuxian, the brilliant but reckless founder of demonic cultivation, and Lan Wangji, the upright and restrained second master of the Gusu Lan sect.

Their romance unfolds across two timelines: the past during their youth, Wei Wuxian's rise and fall, his death and the present where wei ying resurrection thirteen years later, the investigation into the past's hidden truths, and their eventual union.

At the level of plot, their relationship is a classic trope of enemies-to-lovers arc. At the level of queer reading, it is a sustained meditation on what it means to choose a bond that offers neither social safety nor institutional sanction. Wei Wuxian is reviled by the cultivation world for his heterodox methods; Lan Wangji is revered but constrained by his sect's 3,000 rules. They come together not despite but through their marginal positions Wei as the outcast and Lan as the dissident within the establishment.

The novel makes their equality explicit. Serina Chan notes that MDZS clearly establishes Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji as equals, even though they are not of equal political standing, they are of equal strength as that is they first meet each other, by duelling on the rooftop when wei Ying first arrived at Gusu. This equality extends to emotional and intimate initiative. While danmei tropes often assign a "gong" and "shou" dynamic, MDZS deliberately try to subvert this. There are "multiple moments that Wei Wuxian, going beyond just teasing Lan Wangji, initiates kissing or other kinds of intimacy" Crucially, Wei Wuxian undermines the concept of the gong as the one always in control, as the only instigator of intimacy but despite being the chaotic nature of relationship, Wei Ying also plays the role of Shou.

4.3 Queering the Gentleman-Scholar

One of the most politically significant dimensions of MDZS is its queering of traditional Chinese masculinity. Lan Wangji is repeatedly described as a junzi person who is the Confucian ideal of the gentleman scholar, characterized by moral rectitude, learning, and self-cultivation. In the novel's own words "By all appearances, Lan Wangji was a well-bred and refined young master. Although he was slender, his strength was not to be underestimated"(67)

This characterization matters because it challenges contemporary anxieties about effeminate masculinity in China. As Geng Song has documented, there is cultural, social and political backlash against effeminate male actors in contemporary China. Yet MDZS presents an hero who is simultaneously a warrior, a cultural ideal, and a devoted romantic partner. " Thus, MDZS offers possibilities for reconciling cultural identity and queer identity

4.4 The Everyday as Radical Endpoint

Unlike the tragic or sacrificial endings that characterize many queer narratives even including the queer figures of the Mahabharata, MDZS concludes with domesticity. After the mysteries are solved and the villains defeated, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji return to the Cloud Recesses, home of Lan Zhan. They raise their son Lan Sizhui, the child Wei Wuxian saved and Lan Wangji adopted and accompanies the juniors in night hunting the job of cultivators. They play music together, bicker over chores, and live and cultivate immortality.

The narrative's investment in their everyday existence is explicit: the extras show them shopping, cooking, celebrating festivals. This is what one might call the "hard-won 'everyday life'"and mdzs didn't give them the tragic queer endings.

This shift is not merely aesthetic but political. For centuries, queer narratives have ended in death, separation, or assimilation. MDZS refuses each. It insists that the reward for queer struggle is not a glorious sacrifice but survival and that this survival is glorious.

5. Comparative Analysis: Two Paradigms of Queer Fantasy

The core difference between the Mahabharata's queer figures and MDZS's central relationship can be stated simply. Shikhandi transforms for the war; Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji choose each other against the cultivation world. One serves destiny; the other defies orthodoxy. One is instrumental to cosmic order; the other is an end in itself.

This difference is not merely tonal but structural. In the Mahabharata, queerness is incorporated into the epic's machinery. Shikhandi's transition enables Bhishma's death, which enables the Pandavas' victory, which restores dharma. The epic cannot do without Shikhandi's queerness; it is crucial to the plot. But it is crucial precisely as a function, not as a personhood.

In MDZS, by contrast, the queer bond is what the narrative protects against the cultivation world's hypocrisy. The second siege of the Burial Mounds, the confrontations with Jin Guangyao, the revelation of past betrayals all of these plot elements serve ultimately to clear the space for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji to live together.

6. Conclusion: Evolution as Reorientation

This paper has argued that the evolution from the Mahabharata to Mo Dao Zu Shi is not a rupture but a reorientation. From queerness as cosmic instrumentality to queerness as rebellious intimacy, from sacrifice to survival, from duty to choice. Both works deploy the affordances of fantasy and the changes it brings in transformation, reincarnation, supernatural bonds. It also gives a message that to imagine lives that exceed normative prescription. But they do so in different registers, shaped by different philosophical frameworks and different political

constraints. The Mahabharata shows us that queerness has always been thinkable within fantasy literature. It provides archetypes, precedents and permission. The MDZS shows us that queerness can also be livable not only just as a plot device and a divine disguise, but also the quiet center of a life worth living.

This comparative analysis offers a dual inheritance. From the epic, one inherits the knowledge that queerness is not alien to tradition. From the modern novel, we inherit the insistence that queerness is not reducible to tragedy. Both are true. Both are necessary. And in the space between them, queer fantasy continues to grow.

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