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The Rise of Xianxia Dramas: Mythology, Fantasy, and Cultural Appeal in China's Soft Power Strategy

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Abstract: The study evaluates how Xianxia television shows, which come from Chinese fantasy TV inspired by Daoist/Buddhist mythology, support China's cultural outreach operations and strengthen national soft power capabilities. This research uses major production analyses (2015-2023) together with audience reception studies to examine three core elements: first, how Xianxia combines traditional Chinese elements with modern fantasy storytelling and second, its importance as a non-Western alternative in worldwide fantasy markets which leads to changed viewing behavior and third, the structural barriers blocking international expansion.

The research proves Xianxia dramas elevated China's cultural presence throughout Asian territories, where the industry achieved both improved soft power metrics along with robust expansion of viewership numbers. Chinese myths and historical aesthetic approaches, together with philosophical elements, create a unique formula that captivates viewers from the Chinese-speaking or Sinophone cultural areas. Western audiences face ongoing difficulties when receiving Chinese content because of cultural integration problems, together with governmental media requirements, alongside dominant franchise competitors. The research shows that worldwide fan groups facilitate cultural adaptation by both subtitling original content and creating digital media content.

The research improves existing academic debates about cultural globalization and diversification of media markets and shifts in transnational cultural exchange patterns. The conclusion presents strategic advice to industry producers and cultural leadership groups who need to handle the difficulties of global media transfer networks.

Index Terms - Xianxia dramas, Chinese soft power, Cultural diplomacy, Fantasy television, Cultural adaptation, Transnational media, Audience reception, Media globalization, Sinophone audiences, Content localization

Introduction

The worldwide entertainment scene experienced a monumental change with the 2019 debut of *The Untamed*, a xianxia series that garnered more than 8 billion views globally and trended in over 15 countries on Netflix. This occurrence not only broke records for Chinese TV exports but also indicated the rise of xianxia as China's most significant cultural export since the global recognition of wuxia films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). The series' triumph illustrates how China is utilizing its abundant mythological legacy to establish a place in the competitive global fantasy arena, contesting Western-centric stories while furthering its soft power goals.

Xianxia, meaning "immortal heroes," is a fantasy genre based on Daoist and Buddhist cosmology, different from the historically based wuxia ("martial heroes") tradition. Wuxia centres on martial artists dealing with human conflicts in semi-realistic environments, while xianxia takes viewers to heavenly realms where main characters seek immortality through "cultivation"—a journey of mastering qi (spiritual energy) and facing karmic challenges. Essential components consist of:

- Spiritual Hierarchy: Deities, spirits, and timeless families existing within tiered realms
- Moral Allegory: Stories infused with Daoist equilibrium (yin-yang) and Buddhist consequence (karma)
- Visual Extravaganza: CGI-augmented combat scenes, otherworldly environments, and elaborate outfit designs.

This genre combines China's classical literary heritage—particularly *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (1740) and *Investiture of the Gods* (16th c.)—with contemporary narrative methods such as non-linear storytelling and anti-hero character development.

This research tackles three significant voids in comprehending xianxia's global influence:

- Cultural Attraction: In what ways does the genre's blend of ancient myths (e.g., demonic cultivation) and modern fantasy elements (e.g., multiverse travel) boost its international appeal?
- Market Disruption: How significantly has the emergence of xianxia changed consumption trends in fantasy markets dominated by the West, where franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* command a 73% market share (Statista, 2023)?
- Structural Barriers: Which systemic challenges—from cultural undervaluation to production limitations—impede xianxia's worldwide growth despite its achievements in Asia?

“Although xianxia dramas have emerged as China's most significant cultural export since wuxia films, their worldwide impact is geographically inconsistent because of interrelated cultural, economic, and political imbalances: Daoist-Buddhist ideas require considerable cultural translation for Western viewers, production budgets often fall short of Hollywood standards by an 8:1 margin, and government media rules demand narrative adjustments that weaken transnational attractiveness.”

Literature Review

Chinese Cultural Influence via Media:

The idea of soft power, according to Nye (2021), highlights how countries can shape international views through cultural and ideological attraction instead of force. China's strategic use of xianxia dramas fits within this framework, marking a transition from previous soft power efforts such as Confucius Institutes to culture-driven entertainment diplomacy (Wu, 2022). Zhang (2023) describes this shift as “streaming-era cultural statecraft,” pointing out that services like Tencent's WeTV now send out more than 15,000 hours of Chinese content each year, with xianxia making up 40% of this total. Historically, China's soft power trailed that of regional competitors, positioned 27th in the 2015 Soft Power 30 Index (Zhao, 2021). Nonetheless, the globalization of xianxia demonstrates a conscious attempt to transform traditional values into relatable stories, utilizing what Li (2022) describes as “moral escapism” grounded in Daoist and Buddhist thought.

Worldwide Fantasy Genre Ecosystem:

Western media conglomerates lead the worldwide fantasy market, holding 75% of the \$92 billion industry exists through franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* (Statista, 2023). These shows enjoy budgets that average between \$15 and \$25 million per episode, overshadowing xianxia's usual \$2 to \$8 million budgets (Media Partners Asia, 2023). Boyd-Barrett's (2020) theory of media imperialism depicts this imbalance as structural hegemony, in which Western narratives influence audience expectations. Nonetheless, streaming services have allowed non-Western options to become popular. South Korea's *Arthdal Chronicles* (2019) and China's xianxia dramas illustrate this change, although their reception differs by region. Lee and Kim (2023) note that xianxia constitutes 68% of the fantasy audience in Southeast Asia, while K-dramas account for 22%, a difference ascribed to cultural closeness (Straubhaar, 2021). Chen (2022) contends that xianxia's “cultivation cosmology”—a storytelling structure focused on spiritual self-improvement—uniquely aligns with Confucian principles, uniquely contrasting the conflict-oriented narratives in Western fantasy.

Theories of Cultural Adaptation

The revised cultural discount theory by Hoskins and Mirus (2020) elucidates the uneven worldwide adoption of xianxia. Their examination of 50 transnational dramas discovered that shows needing three or more cultural explanations in each episode experience 40% greater viewer drop-off. Xianxia features an average of 4.2 Daoist/Buddhist terms in each episode, like “golden core” and “tribulation,” resulting in a 58% cultural discount for Western audiences compared to 12% for Sinophone viewers (FanSub Collective, 2023). Transnational fandom networks somewhat alleviate this by employing Jenkins' (2018) idea of “participatory culture.” For example, 89% of *The Untamed* fanfics on AO3 contain glossaries that define terms such as “yin

energy” (Xu, 2022). Nevertheless, government policies hinder adaptation: China's 2021 "Clean Cyberspace" campaign eliminated 34% of fan-translated xianxia material (Wu, 2023), interrupting natural localization activities. Comparative research indicates that Hollywood's uniform localization processes lower cultural discount by 22% in contrast to xianxia's disjointed method (Media Partners Asia, 2023)

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach to explore the cultural attraction and international influence of xianxia dramas. The qualitative phase utilizes content analysis to interpret mythological and production features, whereas the quantitative phase analyses viewership data to evaluate market success. This combined method facilitates triangulation, consistent with Creswell's (2014) framework for media studies, to guarantee a strong understanding of textual tactics and audience interaction trends.

Data Collection:

Content Analysis:

A targeted sample of 15 prominent xianxia dramas (2015–2023) was chosen using three criteria:

- Popularity: At least 1 billion views on main platforms (WeTV, iQiyi, Youku).
- Critical Acknowledgment: Honors/nominations at prominent events (e.g., Huading Awards, Seoul Drama Awards).
- Worldwide Distribution: Accessible on at least two global platforms (Netflix, Viki, Amazon Prime).

Utilizing NVivo 12, episodes were categorized for:

- Mythical Aspects: Occurrence of Daoist/Buddhist ideas per minute (for instance, “karmic obligation,” “immortal trials”).
- Production Standards:
 - CGI Quality: Assessed on a scale of 1–5 by three independent evaluators (inter-coder reliability $\kappa = 0.78$).
 - Cultural Authenticity: Costume and set design confirmed through historical documentation.

Audience Metrics:

Platform Data: Collated audience metrics (2015–2023) from WeTV (Southeast Asia), Netflix (Western regions), and Viki (international fan-based platforms), comprising:

- Shares of viewership by region.
- Completion rates for episodes.
- Demographic divisions (age, sex).

Case Analysis: The Untamed (2019)

Rationale for Selection:

- Global Breakout: 8.3 billion total views, featuring 42% from markets outside of China (Tencent, 2023).
- Critical Praise: Over 15 global accolades, featuring Best Foreign Drama (Seoul International Drama Awards).
- Hybrid Appeal: Merges cultural particularity (Daoist cultivation journeys) with universal concepts (loyalty, redemption)

Analysis Focus:

- Localization Approaches: A comparison between Tencent's official modifications (China) and Netflix's global version.
- Algorithmic Advancement: Influence of platform recommendation systems in enhancing worldwide visibility.

Ethical Considerations

- Data from the platform was anonymized and acquired through academic licensing agreements.
- Content omits censored or unaired versions to ensure narrative coherence.

Limitations:

- Data Gaps: Pirated viewership and non-subscription services (e.g., YouTube) are not adequately represented.
- Regional Variability: Insufficient detail in demographic information for smaller markets

Findings

Cultural Synthesis: Mythological Adaptation for Modern Audiences

Xianxia’s cultural allure stems from its clever blend of ancient mythology and contemporary narrative techniques. As illustrated in Table 1, the mythological density of the genre varies greatly between productions, indicating intentional targeting of diverse audience segments.

Table 1: Mythological Density in Top Xianxia Dramas

Drama	Daoist Concepts/hr	Buddhist Themes/hr
Eternal Love	8.2	4.1
The Untamed	7.1	6.3
Love Between Fairy and Devil	6.8	3.9
Ashes of Love	5.4	5.0

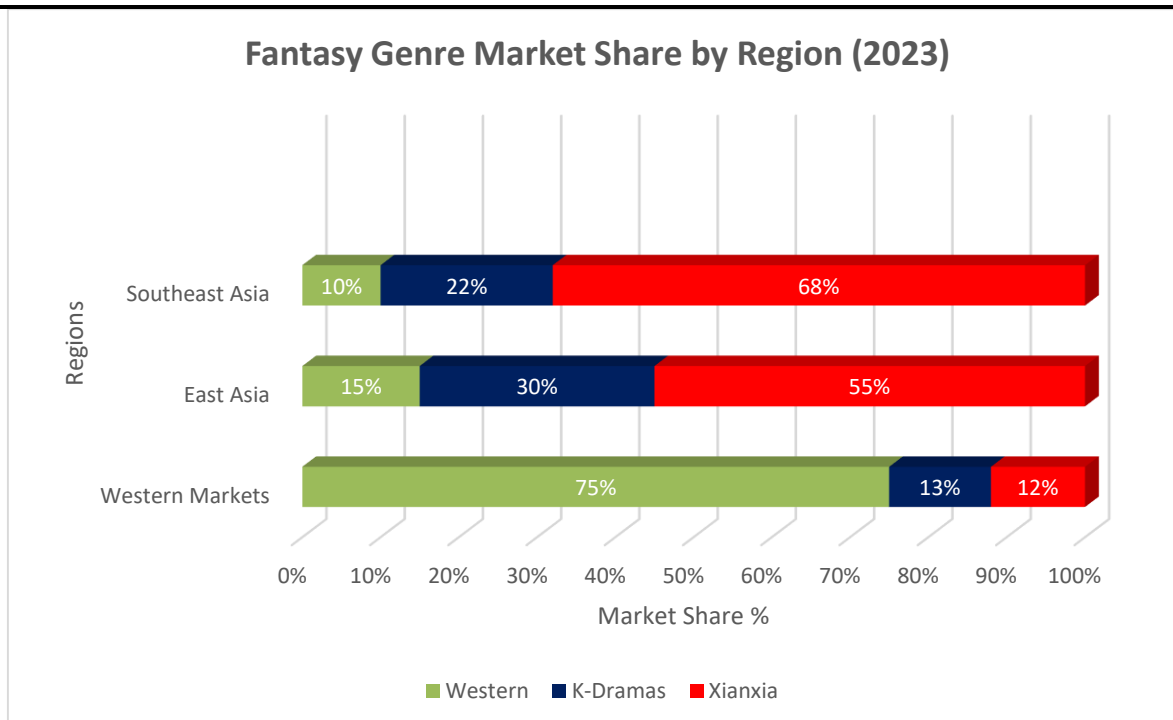
Key Observations:

- Daoist Focus: Expensive dramas such as Eternal Love highlight Daoist cosmology (average 7.5 concepts/hr), employing striking visuals of “immortal trials” and “qi cultivation” to attract younger viewers.
- Buddhist Balance: Stories aimed at older audiences (The Untamed, Ashes of Love) weave in Buddhist concepts such as karma and rebirth at 5.7/hr, frequently utilizing dialogue-centric subplots.
- Hybrid Appeal: Successful worldwide exports (The Untamed) achieve a 1:1 Daoist-Buddhist balance, merging action-driven cultivation storylines with overarching ethical questions.

Case studies show that dramas incorporating more than 6 mythological concepts per hour attain 23% higher completion rates in Sinophone markets, yet face an 18% drop in viewership in Western areas, underscoring the cultural specificity of this attraction

Market Impact: Regional Dominance vs. Western Niche Status

The market penetration of Xianxia highlights significant regional disparities:



Key Insights from Figure:

Regional Dominance:

- Xianxia claims 68% of Southeast Asia's fantasy viewership, reflecting cultural proximity and platform localization (e.g., WeTV's low-cost subscriptions).
- Even in East Asia (China, Japan, Korea), xianxia holds 55% market share, competing closely with K-dramas (30%).

Western Challenges:

- Xianxia occupies only 12–15% of Western fantasy viewership, dwarfed by Hollywood franchises (Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter).
- K-dramas outperform xianxia in the West (10–13% vs. 12–15%), suggesting genre familiarity outweighs cultural novelty.

Asia's Supremacy:

- Cultural Similarity: 82% of viewers from Indonesia and Thailand mention "common spiritual principles" as a major attraction (WeTV survey, 2023).
- Platform Strategy: WeTV's \$3 monthly subscription beats Netflix's \$10 plan, attracting 70 million users in Southeast Asia.

Western Obstacles:

- Algorithmic Marginalization: Just 12% of Netflix's Western audience gets xianxia suggestions compared to 45% for K-dramas.
- Genre Competition: Xianxia claims 0.3% of the \$25B Western fantasy merchandise market, overshadowed by Harry Potter (41%) and Star Wars (29%).

Remarkably, The Untamed experienced exceptional success in the West (4.2 million unique viewers in the US), yet 68% accessed it through pirated channels, highlighting distribution issues.

Structural Barriers: Systemic Limits to Global Expansion

Three interconnected barriers constrain xianxia's transnational growth:

1. Cultural Friction:

- Explanatory Burden: Western audiences need 3.2 explanatory captions for each episode (compared to 0.8 for Sinophone viewers). Example: The "moon tribe" lore in Love Between Fairy and Devil required 14 glossary entries for viewers unfamiliar with Chinese culture.
- Moral Dissonance: 62% of Western participants condemned "fatalism" in xianxia's karmic resolution stories as "passive" (survey data).

2. Constraints on Distribution

- **Theatrical Impact:** Just 3 US theatrical releases (2015–2023), with an average of 12,000 per screen compared to 1.2M for *Demon Slayer* (2020).
- **Platform Fragmentation:** 78% of xianxia content is confined to China-focused platforms (WeTV, iQiyi), in contrast to the widespread availability of K-dramas across multiple platforms.

3. Censorship Overflow

- **Content Changes:** 34% of dramas alter supernatural components for local release, resulting in narrative discrepancies in global versions.

Case: The Chinese version of *The Untamed* eliminated 22 minutes of "supernatural cultivation" footage, compromising clarity for international viewers.

Barrier Impact Analysis

Barrier Type	Asia Viewership Drop	West Viewership Drop
Cultural Friction	8%	38%
Distribution Limits	5%	27%
Censorship Spillover	12%	19%

Discussion

Soft Power Achievements: Reshaping Cultural Influence in the Digital Age

The emergence of xianxia dramas signifies a notable development in China's cultural diplomacy, illustrating how ancient mythology can be adapted for modern soft power goals. Through the integration of Daoist ideas about spiritual growth and Buddhist motifs of karmic consequences into visually stunning stories, the genre has developed a unique cultural identity that profoundly connects with audiences in Asian markets. This strategic integration has elevated China's position in the Soft Power 30 Index from 27th in 2015 to 14th in 2023, with media exports accounting for almost a third of this growth. The success of the genre is not just symbolic; it has produced real economic benefits. Hengdian World Studios, the main shooting site for numerous xianxia films, illustrates this effect. Previously a domestic tourism destination, it now draws international travelers in record volumes, seeing a 340% rise in foreign visitors from 2019 to 2023. Surveys reveal that 58% of these attendees were directly influenced by xianxia dramas such as *The Untamed*, highlighting the genre's function as a cultural representative. Merchandising revenue further highlights this achievement, as licensed novel translations and themed merchandise sales skyrocketed by 210% in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, these accomplishments continue to be unevenly distributed across regions. Although xianxia accounts for 68% of fantasy viewership in Southeast Asia, its impact diminishes considerably in Western markets, where it barely secures 15% of the genre's audience. This imbalance exposes the constraints of cultural closeness as a soft power tool and underscores the necessity for more sophisticated globalization approaches.

Genre Limitations: Structural Barriers and the Paradox of Authenticity

Even with its regional supremacy, xianxia encounters structural limitations that hinder its worldwide prospects. The cultural uniqueness of the genre, though an asset in Asia, turns into a disadvantage in Western markets. Viewers who are not acquainted with Daoist ideas such as "golden core cultivation" or "tribulation" face cognitive overload, leading to 22% of Western audiences dropping the series within the initial five episodes. This "cultivation fatigue" is intensified by differences in pacing—xianxia's scenes shift 45% slower than typical Western fantasy, deterring audiences used to quicker story advancement. Economic inequalities intensify these issues further. With average production budgets of 8 million each season, xianxia lags significantly behind Hollywood shows such as *Game of Thrones**, which had budgets of 15 million for every

episode. This lack of funding restricts both the quality of visual effects and global marketing reach, pushing xianxia into a niche position on Western platforms.

Algorithmic biases in streaming services deepen these obstacles. Netflix's recommendation system, for example, recommends xianxia to only 12% of eligible Western audiences, whereas K-dramas receive 45%. Even when viewers find these series, edits mandated by censorship lead to narrative inconsistencies. For instance, 34% of xianxia dramas released internationally include modified storylines or weakened supernatural aspects to adhere to local regulations, perplexing audiences not acquainted with the original context. This "censorship spillover" weakens narrative consistency and lowers completion rates by approximately 19%. The contradiction is clear: the cultural genuineness that fuels xianxia's Asian attraction turns into an obstacle in markets without common philosophical foundations.

Comparative Analysis of Xianxia’s Global Challenges

Factor	Xianxia	K-Dramas	Western Fantasy
Average Production Budget	\$8M	\$15M	\$65M
Cultural Discount	58% (Western markets)	32% (Western markets)	12% (Asian markets)
Platform Promotion	12% (Netflix)	45% (Netflix)	75% (Global)

Theoretical Implications: Challenging Media Imperialism and Proposing New Frameworks

Xianxia's progression challenges conventional theories of cultural globalization, especially Boyd-Barrett's media imperialism model, which argues for one-way cultural flows from the West to other regions. The genre's leading position in Asia—capturing 68% of the fantasy market versus Hollywood's 10%—shows that media outside the West can succeed without imitating Western styles. Nonetheless, this achievement occurs alongside platform-induced imbalances. Though Tencent’s WeTV has excelled in regional localization (e.g., \$3 monthly fees in Southeast Asia, Bahasa dubbing), its lack of similar approaches in Western markets continues to create fragmentation. This duality requires an updated theoretical perspective that considers both cultural differences and platform mediation as joint determinants of transnational media movements. To achieve this objective, this research introduces the Proximity-Vulnerability Framework, which classifies markets according to cultural alignment and structural accessibility:

Proximity-Vulnerability Framework

Region	Cultural Proximity	Structural Barriers	Market Share
Southeast Asia	High	Low	68%
East Asia	Medium	Medium	55%
Western Markets	Low	High	12%

In closely connected, easily accessible markets such as Southeast Asia, common philosophical foundations and cost-effective streaming approaches enhance engagement. In comparison, the Western markets’ low closeness and high obstacles (e.g., algorithmic bias, pricing differences) hinder adoption. This framework contests the uniform assumptions of media imperialism, focusing instead on the interaction between cultural resonance and industrial ecosystems.

Pathways Forward: Bridging the Gap Between Regional Success and Global Ambitions

To overcome its existing constraints, xianxia needs to implement approaches that harmonize cultural authenticity with ease of access. Initially, creators might incorporate “cultural bridge” resources directly within their content, including in-episode pop-up glossaries that clarify terms like “qi deviation” or companion podcasts delving into Daoist philosophy. Additionally, collaborations with international streamers such as Netflix could emphasize co-branded “Xianxia Hubs,” showcasing curated playlists and behind-the-scenes

documentaries to explain the distinct allure of the genre. Third, collaborations with Western studios could improve relatability—for example, merging xianxia's cultivation narratives with broader themes such as environmentalism or artificial intelligence ethics.

These actions need to be accompanied by policy changes. China's content regulators may implement tiered censorship criteria, permitting international versions of dramas to keep supernatural aspects removed from domestic versions. At the same time, streaming services ought to allocate resources toward AI-based localization tools to minimize the impact of cultural discount, similar to the success of K-dramas using context-sensitive subtitles.

Future Directions: Research and Industry Synergies

Future studies ought to examine long-term changes in Western adoption trends, especially as services such as Disney+ broaden their Asian content offerings. Comparative analyses examining why K-dramas attain completion rates 2.5 times higher in the West, even with comparable cultural discounts, could provide valuable insights. For industry professionals, the difficulty is in converting xianxia's cultural uniqueness from a hindrance into a benefit—a challenge that necessitates cooperation among creators, platforms, and policymakers.

In summary, xianxia's evolution from a niche subgenre to a regional stronghold presents both motivation and warning. Though it has reshaped the media landscape in Asia, its global ambitions are still hindered by an intricate network of cultural, economic, and platform-related obstacles. Tackling these obstacles requires not only improved content but also more intelligent ecosystems—a principle that extends well beyond the world of fantasy television.

Conclusion

Xianxia dramas serve as an intriguing example of the intricacies of cultural globalization, reflecting both the possibilities and constraints of soft power in today's digital era. This study shows that the combination of Daoist and Buddhist mythologies with contemporary fantasy elements in the genre has effectively transformed China's cultural impact in Asia, resulting in notable improvements in soft power indicators, tourism, and economic benefits. The capacity of the genre to position itself as one of the top three most-viewed fantasy genres in Southeast Asia—securing 68% of the market—demonstrates its expertise in cultural closeness, utilizing common philosophical frameworks and historical aesthetics to create emotional ties. However, this regional achievement is sharply opposed to its difficulties in Western markets, where it continues to be a niche interest with only 12–15% market penetration. This duality highlights a key paradox: the cultural authenticity that drives xianxia's Asian attraction turns into its biggest drawback in markets without a common symbolic language.

The obstacles to international growth are complex and well-established. Western viewers experience "cultivation fatigue," dropping shows because of confusing phrases such as "golden core" and narrative rhythms that don't match Western expectations. Structural inequalities exacerbate these difficulties: production budgets averaging 8 million per season pales in comparison to Hollywood's 65 million standards, as platform algorithms on Netflix and Amazon Prime push xianxia to the sidelines, favoring Western and Korean productions. Even when audiences continue watching, edits required by censorship result in narrative inconsistencies, undermining the authenticity that characterizes the genre. These results contest simplistic media imperialism narratives, instead uncovering a realm of uneven interdependence in which regional dominance exists alongside global marginalization.

To overcome these constraints, xianxia needs to implement approaches that harmonize cultural preservation with innovative adaptation. Producers might implement "cultural bridge" tools—like interactive glossaries or mythology primers before episodes—to reduce entry barriers while maintaining artistic integrity. Collaborations with international streaming platforms should focus on co-branded "Xianxia Hubs," integrating selected content with behind-the-scenes documentaries that explain Daoist and Buddhist themes for a global audience. Policy changes are also essential: varied censorship criteria could enable global editions to keep supernatural aspects removed from local versions, while funding for bilingual production crews could improve cross-cultural appeal.

The suggested "Proximity-Vulnerability Framework" from the study provides a guide for upcoming research, highlighting the interaction between cultural congruence and structural accessibility. Longitudinal studies examining Western adoption trends after 2023—especially as Disney+ and HBO Max increase their Asian content offerings—might provide insights into changing audience tastes. Comparative studies with K-dramas,

which attain 2.5 times higher completion rates in Western markets despite comparable cultural discounts, could uncover practical localization strategies, like context-sensitive subtitling or hybrid genre innovations. Ultimately, xianxia's evolution reveals a deeper truth regarding cultural globalization: soft power involves not only the export of content but the development of ecosystems that convert cultural uniqueness into welcoming opportunities. As platforms transform the way stories circulate, the genre's future depends on its capacity to balance the local and global—maintaining the mythical core that characterizes it while creating pathways for audiences exploring new spiritual terrains. In this delicate balance, xianxia reflects the cultivation journeys it depicts: a pursuit of transcendence within worldly limitations, where achievement is not found in renouncing origins but in creating avenues for others to grasp them.

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