

Article

***Xiuzhen* (Immortality Cultivation) Fantasy: Science, Religion, and the Novels of Magic/Superstition in Contemporary China**

Zhange Ni

Department of Religion and Culture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA; nizhange@vt.edu

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Abstract: In early twenty-first-century China, online fantasy is one of the most popular literary genres. This article studies a subgenre of Chinese fantasy named *xiuzhen* 修真 (immortality cultivation), which draws on Daoist alchemy in particular and Chinese religion and culture in general, especially that which was negatively labelled “superstitious” in the twentieth century, to tell exciting adventure stories. *Xiuzhen* fantasy is indebted to *wuxia xiaoshuo* 武俠小說 (martial arts novels), the first emergence of Chinese fantasy in the early twentieth century after the translation of the modern Western discourses of science, religion, and superstition. Although martial arts fiction was suppressed by the modernizing nation-state because it contained the unwanted elements of magic and supernaturalism, its reemergence in the late twentieth century paved the way for the rise of its successor, *xiuzhen* fantasy. As a type of magical arts fiction, *xiuzhen* reinvents Daoist alchemy and other “superstitious” practices to build a cultivation world which does not escape but engages with the dazzling reality of digital technology, neoliberal governance, and global capitalism. In this fantastic world, the divide of magic and science breaks down; religion, defined not by faith but embodied practice, serves as the organizing center of society, economy, and politics. Moreover, the subject of martial arts fiction that challenged the sovereignty of the nation-state has evolved into the neoliberal *homo economicus* and its non-/anti-capitalist alternatives. Reading four exemplary *xiuzhen* novels, *Journeys into the Ephemeral* (*Piaomiao zhilv* 飄渺之旅), *The Buddha Belongs to the Dao* (*Foben shidao* 佛本是道), *Spirit Roaming* (*Shenyou* 神遊), and *Immortality Cultivation 40K* (*Xiuzhen siwannian* 修真四萬年), this article argues that *xiuzhen* fantasy provides a platform on which the postsocialist generation seek to orient themselves in the labyrinth of contemporary capitalism by rethinking the modernist triad of religion, science, and superstition.

Keywords: *Xiuzhen* (immortality cultivation); fantasy; internet literature; religion; science; magic/superstition

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western fantasy novels such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s (1892–1973) *The Lord of the Rings* series (1954–55) and J. K. Rowling’s (1965–) Harry Potter series (1997–2007) were translated into Chinese in mainland China.¹ Chinese fans wasted no time in embracing

¹ For scholarship that studies the translation and reception of Western mass-market fantasy into China, see (Henningsen 2006; Rehling 2012; Reinders 2014). It is to be added that *The Dragonlance Chronicle Trilogy* (1984–1985) by Margaret Weis (1948–) and Tracy Hickman (1955–), a spin-off novel of the table-top role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, was also translated into Chinese and influenced the rise of Chinese fantasy in the twenty-first century.

and transforming this new genre, which bifurcated into *qihuan* 奇幻 (literally, the marvelous and the fantastic), specifically referring to Western-style fantasy written in the Chinese language, and *xuanhuan* 玄幻 (the mysterious and the fantastic), fantasy with Chinese characteristics.² At the heart of the *xuanhuan* type is a new fantasy subgenre named *xiuzhen* 修真 (immortality cultivation), which draws from the repository of Daoist alchemy in particular and Chinese religion and culture in general to build an imaginary world in which cultivators pursue immortality through rigorous self-training, fierce competition with rivals, and strenuous fighting against monsters.³

In October 2002, Liu Xiaoqiang 劉曉強 (1965–), a devoted fan of Western fantasy and *wuxia xiaoshuo* 武俠小說 (martial arts fiction), a popular fiction genre in twentieth-century China, began to serialize a novel entitled *Journeys into the Ephemeral* (*Piaomiao zhilv* 飄渺之旅, hereafter *The Ephemeral*) under the penname Xiao Qian 蕭潛 (a homophone of *xiaoqian* 消遣, amusement) at myfreshnet.com, a literary portal based in Taiwan.⁴ The protagonist of this novel is initiated into the world of immortality cultivation when he is transported to another planet, where he discovers that *xianren* 仙人 (the “immortals”)⁵ in premodern Chinese legends are cultivators who have succeeded in ascending to outer space—that is, migrating to better environments for further cultivation aimed at achieving genuine immortality. The novel, altogether two million characters in length, was completed three years later. Narrating the interstellar adventures of the protagonist, the novel helped to popularize the Daoist concept of *xiuzhen* and triggered a wave of writing experiments that turned *xiuzhen* into one of the most popular literary genres in twenty-first-century China, a genre that is also referred to as *xiuxian* 修仙 or *xianxia* 仙俠 (*xian*-arts and knights-errant), the latter derived from *wuxia* (martial arts and knights-errant).

Although much scholarly attention has been paid to Chinese science fiction, the vast and vibrant field of Chinese fantasy still awaits exploration.⁶ This article examines *xiuzhen* fantasy of the twenty-first century, a uniquely Chinese type of fantasy that addresses contemporary issues revolving around China’s postsocialist condition by reinventing premodern Chinese religion and culture, especially that which has been negatively labelled “superstitious” since the twentieth century. The term “postsocialism” was invented by Arif Dirlik toward the end of the 1980s while analyzing Deng Xiaoping’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Dirlik 1989). The postsocialist condition, not necessarily unique to China, is marked by ideological contradiction and uncertainty, while the term has generated a whole variety of interpretations, such as the loss of faith in socialist myths (Pickowicz 1994), the reality of uneven development, that is, the paradoxes of economic boom, political

² For a brief history of *qihuan*, see (Wang and Ji 2017, pp. 246–49); for *xuanhuan*, see (Ji 2018a, pp. 250–52).

³ For a brief history of *xiuzhen*, see (Ji 2018b, pp. 253–55).

⁴ This novel was later published offline in both Taiwan and mainland China (see Xiao 2006).

⁵ Robert Campany has suggested that we translate the Chinese character *xian* 仙 as transcendent(s)/ascendant(s) rather than immortal(s), because *xian*-hood was perceived as consisting of distinct levels and not a once-and-for-all immortality. The “immortals” are *xian*-arts practitioners who have acquired paranormal powers, ascended to some higher stages of existence, and, in some cases, taken a post in the celestial bureaucracy (see Campany 2009, p. xvii).

⁶ Currently scholars in the China field have just begun to work on internet-based popular fiction with fantastic settings. For a preliminary introduction to Chinese fantasy and a few representative texts, see (Song 2016). For a survey of major fantasy subgenres, see (Chao 2013, pp. 113–82). Research has been done on specific fantasy subgenres or the intersection of fantasy and other popular genres. For discussion of stories of immortality cultivation, see (Huang 2011; Chao 2013, pp. 127–32). Tomb-robbing novels, see (Lugg 2011; Macdonald 2019). Web-game fiction, (Inwood 2014). The hybrid genre of time-travel and historical romance, (Yang 2016; Xu 2016). Homoerotic romance with fantastic elements, (Feng 2013). However, it is to be pointed out that existing scholarship on immortality cultivation fiction in particular and online fantasy in general has not yet investigated the entanglement of religion and literature. In this regard, Macdonald’s article is noteworthy because he pays attention to the impact of secularization, or, more specifically, anti-superstition campaigns, in the twentieth century on Chinese fantasy, which covers both literature and film.

conservatism, and cultural complexity (Gong 2011), or the experiments to make sense of the overlap of modes of production, social systems, and symbolic orders (Zhang 2008). Providing a genealogy of the term, Michel Hockx claims that the internet is the most prominent site where the postsocialist condition is manifested and that Chinese society and culture has not been completely overtaken by global neoliberalism (Hockx 2015, pp. 12–18).

In this article I argue that internet-based *xiuzhen* fantasy responds to the postsocialist condition in that it encapsulates China's integration into global capitalism as well as grassroots resistance against neoliberal principles. I add that *xiuzhen* fantasy is also postsecular. The term "postsecular" is another fluid construct, referring to disillusionment in secularist discourses, the rising visibility of religion in (inter)national politics, and scholarly efforts to question the epistemic, affective, and moral-political supremacy of the secular and to consider the discursive (trans)formation of religion in diverse contexts. In the contemporary Chinese context, *xiuzhen* fantasy is postsecular in that it captures the impact of the religious revival since the 1980s on popular culture. These novels question the state projects of secularization and religion-making in the twentieth century, or, more specifically, turn to superstition, the precluded other in relation to socialist modernity, to excavate symbolic resources for or against global capitalism. That said, the postsecularity of *xiuzhen* fantasy is a strategy with which it reckons with the messy realities of postsocialist China. These novels may choose to reject or revamp the utopian dreams of socialism, but they have unanimously abandoned the anti-religious, anti-superstitious ideology of the modern secular state, whether socialist or not.

To substantiate my points, in the first section, I survey the initial emergence of Chinese fantasy—in the wake of the translation of the modern Western discourses of science, religion, and superstition in the late nineteenth century—in the form of martial arts fiction, its suppression by the modernizing nation-state in the name of anti-superstition, and its reemergence in the late twentieth century. In the second section, I use *The Ephemeral*, the first *xiuzhen* novel, as an example to demonstrate how *xiuzhen* fantasy revives the "superstitious" elements in early martial arts fiction and becomes what I call magical arts fiction. The particular type of "superstition" featured in *xiuzhen* fantasy is Daoist alchemy, around which generic conventions have been developed to build a cultivation world dominated by the magical reality of digital technology, neoliberal governance, and global capitalism and to foreground the figure of the cultivator as a new type of subjectivity. I proceed to analyze three more *xiuzhen* novels in the third section to show how this new genre exemplifies the postsocialist generation's desire to orient themselves within the labyrinth of contemporary capitalism and to quest for alternative imaginaries beyond the dominant order. In these novels, the cultivator is either the neoliberal *homo economicus* or some non-/anti-capitalist mode of the human subject. To conclude this article, I summarize the genealogy of *xiuzhen* fantasy, revisit the implications of its revamping of superstition, and further discuss the various iterations of the cultivator in these novels under the postsocialist and postsecular conditions.

2. *Wuxia*, the Early History of Chinese Fantasy in the Twentieth Century

It is scholarly consensus that fantasy emerged in the post-Enlightenment West, when scientific rationality was established as the only legitimate access to reality, while religion was remolded into some form of interiorized, privatized, and depoliticized piety.⁷ I define fantasy as a branch of imaginative literature that reinvents magic and superstition to tell exciting stories for the entertainment of the masses. Fantasy draws on ideas, practices, and traditions that originated from the pre-modern and/or non-Western worlds and are negatively labelled as magic—that is, false, irrational ways of thinking and doing in opposition to modern science and liberal religion. Often interchangeable with magic is the term superstition, magical thoughts and actions deeply rooted in folk traditions around the world.⁸ Reinventing magic/superstition, fantasy gestures toward the

⁷ For the history of fantasy, see (Mendlesohn and James 2012); for a quick survey of theories of fantasy, see (James and Mendlesohn 2012, pp. 1–2; Vu 2017, pp. 275–78).

⁸ For a summary of the genealogies of both terms, see (Hanegraaff 2012, pp. 156–77). For scholarship on magic and superstition in antiquity, see (Graf 1997; Martin 2009). In the medieval period, see (Kieckhefer 1989;

diverse epistemologies and ontologies beyond the scientifically possible and brings about emotional responses irreducible to the interiorized subjectivity of the modern individual. What fantasy destabilizes is the modernist triad of science, religion, and magic/superstition.

This triad was conveyed into China in the late nineteenth century and played a vital role in the (re)making of Chinese religion vis-à-vis the building of the nation-state in the twentieth century (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 50–63; Broy 2016). The context for the Chinese reception of science, religion, and superstition as the hegemonic *kexue* 科學, the ambiguous *zongjiao* 宗教, and the stigmatized *mixin* 迷信 is China's forced entry into the global system of nation-states and the capitalist market. In the second half of the nineteenth century, China suffered a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of Western imperial powers. In the last few decades of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the early years of the Republic of China (1912–), facing the military, technological, and economic superiority of the Euro-American West (and Japan, which rose into power after the Meiji Restoration), Chinese reformers came to view science as the driving engine of the modern West. Correspondingly, they saw their own cultural legacy as irredeemably backward and stagnant. To pursue science and reform native culture, they took up the task to reform religion and purge superstition.

Chinese modernizers were ambivalent toward religion and hostile to superstition. Some people believed that religion, somewhat coterminous with Christianity, was a moralizing force behind the power and progressiveness of European nation-states. Others equated it with superstition, or saw it as inseparable from superstition, an obstacle to be removed for any nation to embrace modernity. Once the neologism *zongjiao* was deployed as the generic category of religion, efforts were made to transform premodern Chinese traditions according to the modern, Western, Christian/secular model of religion. After a long and complex process of experimentation and negotiation, *zongjiao* was understood as this model, characterized by the centrality of faith as manifested in hearts and deeds, the organization of believers/practitioners into church-like institutions, and the separation of religion from society and state politics. The mismatch between this new model and the three main teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) and various popular cults of late imperial China made it inevitable that a considerable portion of the latter were labeled as superstitions to be eradicated.

The central task of (re)making Chinese religion was to get rid of superstition, the false, irrational ideas and practices rooted in traditional culture and responsible for China's failure in the modern world. Anti-superstition campaigns were launched by the Qing, early Republican, Nationalist, and Communist governments successively.⁹ Traditional Chinese conceptualizations of the cosmos, the human body, and the nonhuman entities on the one hand and ostensibly magical practices such as geomancy, physiognomy, divination, and the quest for immortality on the other, incommensurable with modern science, all came to be viewed as superstitious. Moreover, *mixin* "targets whatever is not grounded in and strictly limited to the spiritual and moral self-perfection delineated by the theological scriptures of a world religion." (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 51). Whatever lies outside the safe boundaries of the new model of religion, ranging from local temple cults (either proper worship sanctioned by the imperial state or heterodox practices and movements banned by it) to all devotional and liturgical aspects of late imperial Chinese traditions (including ancestor worship and state cult), belongs to the trash can of superstition.

The fight against old superstitions and the striving to build a new culture are two sides of the same coin, both meant to build a strong nation-state. In the 1910s, the New Culture movement broke out, whose agenda was to create and promote a new vernacular language, literature, and culture aimed at enlightening the Chinese citizens and saving China from the aggressions of foreign powers. It is no exaggeration to claim that modern Chinese literature is dominated by the realist mode. Marston Anderson demonstrated how Chinese writers and critics embraced European critical realism

Cameron 2010; Bailey 2013). For the modern making of magic and the persistence of magic and superstition in the modern world, see (Styers 2004; Bever and Styers 2017; Josephson-Storm 2017).

⁹ For studies on the governmental campaigns to purge superstition, see (Duara 1988, 1991; Nedostup 2009; Poon 2011).

to produce texts imbued with the pathos of their makers and endowed with the task of edifying the reader. The translation of realism is a creative mistranslation in that realism was eventually relinquished as an artistic method and transformed into an artistic theory/ideology that resonated with the Confucian tenet of “literature is meant to convey the Dao,” although the Dao was reinterpreted as scientific reason and/or the survival of the nation in the global arena of competition and conquest (Anderson 1990). As to be illustrated later, in the twenty-first century, the Dao again transfigures to represent the transnational sovereignty of global capitalism in some *xiuzhen* novels.

When nonrealist literature was translated from the West, the task of Chinese realism to shape the reader’s mentality and impact his/her action in the real world was also the guiding principle for selection. Science fiction, especially utopian novels, was privileged by Chinese reformers, who enthusiastically introduced the novels of Edward Bellamy (1850–1898) and Jules Verne (1828–1905) for the sake of popularizing scientific knowledge among the masses.¹⁰ Consequently, the first Chinese science fiction, *Tales of the Moon Colony* (*Yueqiu zhimindi* 月球殖民地) by Huangjiang Diaoshou 荒江釣叟, was published as early as 1904.¹¹ By contrast, Victorian fantasy writers such as George MacDonald (1824–1905) and H. Rider Haggard (1856–1925) remained largely outside the scope of Chinese readership.¹² Chinese fantasy directly influenced by its Western predecessor, *qihuan*, was published online in the early 2000s, one century after the rise of Chinese science fiction. However, fantasy was not completely absent in early twentieth-century China. It made its way into China through the two narrow gates of myth (proto-fantasy) and fairytale (early fantasy).

Translated into Chinese as *shenhua* 神話 (literally, tales of gods), myth grabbed the attention of Chinese scholars, who tied the quality of myth to the moral character of a nation. Robin McNeal surveys how Chinese scholars endeavored to separate myth from history—that is, to remove superstitious elements from Confucian historiography so as to transform it into the empirical history of the nation-state—and to establish it as the origin of Chinese literature and subject it to the scholarly investigations of anthropology, folklore studies, and literary studies (McNeal 2012). I interpret their goal as that of enacting the divide between empirical history and imaginative literature, which Asad presents as a feature of secular modernity.¹³ To catch up and compete with the European nations that boasted elaborate mythologies, Chinese scholars were eager to create a coherent and comprehensive Chinese mythical system from fragmented and oftentimes contradictory sources. In this regard, McNeal highlights the work of Yuan Ke 袁珂 (1916–2011), the Chinese mythographer who devoted his entire life to collecting, cataloguing, and compiling Chinese myths (McNeal 2012, pp. 684–85). Yuan’s books on Chinese mythology lay a solid foundation for the advancement of fantasy writers in the twenty-first century, as will be illustrated in the next section.

In addition to *shenhua*, *tonghua* 童話 (fairytale; literally, tales for children) served as another gateway to Western fantasy. “Impossible” stories were welcome as long as they helped to educate the child, a pivotal figure of national redemption. Andrew Jones observes that in the Republican and post-1949 China, the imperatives of development pushed the education of the child, the emblem of the future, to the center of the nation-building project (Jones 2011).¹⁴ Proponents of the New Literature rushed to translate children’s literature from the West and favored three genres in particular: science fiction, myths celebrating heroic figures, and fairytales featuring talking plants and animals. The first type is the generic sibling of fantasy; the second, proto-fantasy; and the third, early fantasy, if we recall that Tolkien’s famous essay on fantasy is entitled “On Fairy-Stories.” It is

¹⁰ For introduction to the translation of Western science fiction into China, see (Pollard 1998; Chen 1998; Jiang 2013).

¹¹ For research on the rise of Chinese science fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century, see (Isaacson 2017; Andolfatto 2019).

¹² They were translated into Chinese during the 1980s and ’90s.

¹³ For the divide between history as a realm for scientific investigation and myth as a method of questing for existential truth, see (Asad 2003, pp. 40–45, 52–56).

¹⁴ For more scholarship on the translation of Western children’s literature and the development of Chinese children’s literature, see (Hung 1985, pp. 107–34; Farquhar 2015; Chen 2019).

worth noting that the translation of science fiction, myth, and fairytale continued into the post-1949 period, was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and boomed in the Reform Era (1980s–), which immediately precedes the rise of *xiuzhen* fantasy in the twenty-first century.¹⁵

Back in the early twentieth century, due to the limited availability of Western fantasy, Chinese fantasy irrupted in the field of the old-style popular literature that stood in contrast to and in competition with the New Literature. In premodern China, the term *xiaoshuo* was used to designate a whole variety of extrahistoriographic narratives, which, instead of following the Confucian ideology to convey the Dao—the moral-political patterns of the cosmos—were primarily fascinated with recording the strange.¹⁶ Although the strange of premodern China is by no means determined by the commonsensical reality of the modern West, I contend that it is comparable with the magical/superstitious in premodern Europe.¹⁷ This explains why the premodern *xiaoshuo* became a superstitious genre in the eye of the New Literature pundits. To their disappointment, *xiaoshuo* was not replaced by the New Literature but continued to develop under the pejorative title of *Yuanyang hudie* 鸳鸯蝴蝶 (Mandarin Duck and Butterfly) fiction. This label was first used to make fun of sentimental love stories and then, in a broader sense, all types of old-style *xiaoshuo* that enjoyed popularity among the masses.¹⁸ “Butterfly” fiction was attacked by proponents of the New Literature for adhering to the old styles and values, escaping the social circumstances of the extratextual world, and appealing to the crude senses of the masses instead of leading them toward enlightenment. Worse still, the very existence of “Butterfly” fiction disrupted the desired progression from superstition through religion to science.

Among all types of “Butterfly” fiction, arguably the most popular and the most contested is *wuxia xiaoshuo*, the early form of Chinese fantasy. The compound *wuxia*, not unlike other neologisms such as *kexue*, *zongjiao*, and *mixin*, was borrowed from Japan into modern Chinese. It refers to extended prose narratives written in the vernacular language and taking as their subject matter the intersection of martial arts with the altruistic ideals associated with the figure of the “Chinese knight-errant.” *Wuxia xiaoshuo* or martial arts fiction is both old and new. It is a type of old-style fiction, formally and thematically tied to the *xiaoshuo* of the strange. It also owes its form and popularity to the particular conditions of early twentieth-century China—that is, industrialization and urbanization, changes in education and social structure, the growth of commercial publishing, and the rise of new media such as film (Hamm 2016). Moreover, according to Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, it is the literary consequence of the modernization and nationalization of martial arts in the 1910s and ’20s (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 112–17). However, although superstition was purged from traditional martial arts, traces of Daoist alchemy and other magical practices remained within martial arts fiction, which was magical arts fiction to a considerable extent.¹⁹

In the 1920s and ’30s, the term *wuxia* was often followed by *shenguai* 神怪 (spirits and anomalies). The combined genre *wuxia-shenguai* first appeared in the film industry. In 1928, Pingjiang

¹⁵ In the 1950s and early ’60s, fantastic elements such as gods, spirits, and ghosts in translated foreign literature and premodern Chinese literature were tolerated. Although these “feudalistic” and “superstitious” entities were deemed incompatible with socialist modernity, cultural workers interpreted them as a metaphor for the rebellious spirit of the working people (Greene 2019). However, in 1963, ghostly literature and performance, part and parcel of the Chinese literary tradition, were banned altogether. During the Cultural Revolution, translation of foreign literature, whether quasi-fantastic or not, also suffered a disastrous setback.

¹⁶ For discussion of the features of Chinese *xiaoshuo*, see (Yu 1988; Lu 1994; Zhao 2006, pp. 69–93). For scholarship on *xiaoshuo* of the strange, see (Campany 1996; Zeitlin 1997).

¹⁷ I appreciate the recent scholarly attempts made by Macdonald and Lien to compare the Chinese *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of anomalies) tales with the Gothic fiction in eighteenth-century Europe, an early branch of fantasy literature. Moreover, as we will see in the third section, similar comparative work has also been attempted by *xiuzhen* fantasy writers. See (Macdonald 2019; Lien 2018).

¹⁸ See (Link 1981; Chow 1986).

¹⁹ See (Luo 2012). Luo Liqun also demonstrates the connection between premodern sword-knight *xiaoshuo* and religion, especially Daoist alchemy and esoteric Buddhism. See (Luo 2012, pp. 40–48, 121–25, 164–72).

Buxiaosheng's 平江不肖生 (aka Xiang Kairan 向愷然, 1890–1957) novel *Marvelous Gallants of the Rivers and Lakes* (*Jianghu qixia zhuan* 江湖奇俠傳) was adapted into the *wuxia* film *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (*Huoshao hongliansi* 火燒紅蓮寺). One year earlier, the first *shenguai* film *The Cave of the Silken Web* (*Pansi dong* 盤絲洞), an adaptation of the Ming novel *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記) was released. Since both films portrayed supernatural powers, scholars of martial arts fiction/film such as Stephen Teo and John Christopher Hamm have most aptly translated *shenguai* as fantasy and stressed the close entanglement of *wuxia* and *shenguai*.

It is worth noting that *shenguai* as a film genre refers to films adapted from the premodern *xiaoshuo*. In 1924, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) coined the neologism *shenmo* 神魔 in *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中國小說史略) to designate linked-chapter novels that foregrounded the battles of gods and demons, in contrast to novels focused on human characters—namely, *shiqing xiaoshuo* 世情小說 (novels of worldly manners)—both trends which were popular in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) (Lu 1973). In the 1930s, working on Chinese vernacular fiction, Sun Kaidi 孫楷第 (1898–1986) used *lingguai* 靈怪 as a bibliographic category, which encompasses both short stories and novels that were produced in the vernacular language and focused on non-human characters.²⁰ Prime examples of *shenmo/lingguai* are *The Journey to the West* and *The Canonization of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義), both one-hundred-chapter novels featuring almost the entire pantheon of Chinese religions.²¹ The term *shenguai*, combining the first character of *shenmo* and the second half of *lingguai*, also includes films based on Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) *Liaozhai's Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異), a collection of short stories about ghosts, fox spirits, and other anomalies written in the classical language.²²

Unlike the *qihuan* or *xuanhuan* genre of the early twenty-first century that adopts or twists the generic conventions of mass-market fantasy from the West, *wuxia-shenguai* was disconnected from the early fantasy tradition of the pre-Tolkien era, which was largely kept outside China due to the anti-superstition campaigns raging there.²³ The native *wuxia-shenguai*, the offspring of both old mythology and new technology, became one of the many targets of these campaigns. Left-wing intellectuals critiqued it for its means of escape from reality and its appeal to crude desires; the ruling Nationalist party worried about its potential to corrupt the youth with the idea of rebellion. Both sides detected superstition in this emerging form of fantasy and were appalled by the ignorant audience's "baldly literal understanding—a belief in the facticity of fictive events, scientifically impossible phenomena, and an immanent moral design to human existence" (Hamm 2019, p. 142). In the early 1930s, the Nationalist government banned, or, more precisely, discouraged, the

²⁰ When *huaben xiaoshuo* 話本小說 (vernacular short stories) began to flourish in the Song (960–1279) to Yuan (1279–1368) periods, *lingguai* was a particular type listed in contemporary sources. See (Ge 2001, p. 209, note 6). Meir Shahar argues that *lingguai xiaoshuo* helped to transmit stories of gods and spread cults devoted to them, such as the cult of Crazy Ji. See Shahar (1996, 1998).

²¹ Anthony Yu has claimed that the author of *The Journey to the West* posited the Buddhist salvation or enlightenment and the Neo-Confucian rectification of the mind as the goal of the pilgrimage. Moreover, he noticed that the plot of the entire novel was arranged according to processes of practicing Daoist inner alchemy aimed at achieving immortality, the third goal of the pilgrimage. Mark Meulenbeld demonstrates that *The Canonization of Gods* borrowed its ritual structure and divine/demonic protagonists from the Daoist thunder rituals performed in local temples during festivals. See (Yu 2008; Meulenbeld 2015).

²² *Liaozhai* is a *xiaoshuo* collection that contains both *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of anomalies) and *chuanqi* 傳奇 (transmissions of the marvelous). See (Zeitlin 1997).

²³ Macdonald gives an example of Shi Zhecun 施蜚存 (1905–2003) deciding against introducing the Irish writer of ghost stories Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873) to honor the principle of realism. See (Macdonald 2019, p. 12).

production of *wuxia-shenguai* films, blaming them for promoting superstition and heterodoxy.²⁴ However, these novels and films continued to be produced in the war-torn 1930s and '40s. For instance, Huanzhu Louzhu 還珠樓主 (aka Li Shoumin 李壽民, 1902–1961) serialized *Sword-Knights of the Shu Mountains* (*Shushan jianxia zhuan* 蜀山劍俠傳) from 1932 to 1948, which told the stories of immortality seekers.²⁵ It is the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that sounded the death knoll for the first birth of Chinese fantasy, which would reemerge with a vengeance half a century later.

Tension existed between the figure of the knight-errant and the modern nation-state. In traditional China, the chivalric knight-errant was also known for his/her disregard of social rules and indifference to hierarchies.²⁶ In the early twentieth century, on the one hand, the altruistic ideals of *xia* resonated with the nation-oriented ideology, with the nonconformist knight-errant transforming into the modern hero fighting for the wellbeing of the nation, as exemplified by Pingjiang Buxiaosheng's novel *Chivalric Heroes of Modern Times* (*Jindai xiayi yingxiong zhuan* 近代俠義英雄傳), which features the national hero Huo Yuanjia 霍元甲 (1868–1910) fighting against foreign bullies to defend the honor of China (Hamm 2019, pp. 176–219). On the other hand, Petrus Liu argues that martial arts fiction was an interventionist cultural movement that invented the model of nonstatist political responsibility and challenged the thesis that the establishment of a strong modern nation-state was the only available response to foreign imperialism. After all, the knight was errant—that is, deviant from not just Confucian orthodoxy but also modern nationalism (Liu 2011).

Following the line of thinking presented above, I see the stateless subjects that Liu excavated in the swordsmen organized into various local sects in Pingjiang Buxiaosheng's *The Rivers and Lakes* and the immortality seekers in Huanzhu Louzhu's *The Shu Mountains*. These stateless subjects wield supernatural powers and transcend the empirical history of the nation-state. The autonomous space free from state interventions, either the mysterious Rivers and Lakes or the mythical Shu Mountains, is a fantasy realm beyond secular reality. No wonder the nation-state was determined to purge not only the superstition but also the stateless subject of *wuxia*. In the twenty-first century, the revival of magic is linked to the return of the stateless subject, which transfigures into the neoliberal (and non-/anti-capitalist) subject of *xiuzhen* fantasy, as to be illustrated later.

In the 1950s, famous martial arts fiction writers stopped writing martial arts fiction. For instance, Huanzhu Louzhu left his fantastic novel unfinished and switched to the secularized genre of historical drama. Although martial arts fiction continued to flourish in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora, the post-1949 "new-school" *wuxia*, represented by Jin Yong 金庸 (aka Louis Cha, 1924–2018), stayed within the confines of Chinese history and shunned the mythical realm of the Republican-era magical arts fiction (Hamm 2005), which was retrospectively called "old-school." The resurgence of the suppressed Chinese fantasy occurred toward the end of the twentieth century, thanks to the popularity of the new-school martial arts fiction in the sinophone world. In the mid 1980s, publishers in Taiwan and China began to reprint old-school magical arts fiction. Around the same time, Western fantasy was translated into Chinese under the old heading of myth and fairytale, two branches of children's literature. Fantasy novels of the Victorian period and mass-market fantasy produced in the second half of the twentieth century flooded into China. What arrived in addition to print literature were TV series, blockbuster films, video games, and entire transmedia franchises from the West.

Chinese literature also extended into these other media forms. While the new-school martial arts novels were adapted into audiovisual media, a whole array of the premodern *xiaoshuo* of the strange, again represented by *Liaozhai*, *The Journey to the West*, and *The Canonization of the Gods*, were also made into films and/or TV series. The old *wuxia-shenguai* was back. The Hong Kong director Hark Tsui

²⁴ For the governmental suppression of *wuxia-shenguai*, both novels and films, see (Zhang 2000; Teo 2015, pp. 17–55; Hamm 2019, pp. 136–49).

²⁵ For a reading of *The Shu Mountains*, see (Luo 2012, pp. 231–54).

²⁶ For the nonconformity or amorality of early *xia*, see (Wan 2009, pp. 1–2; Luo 2012, pp. 8–13).

adapted *The Shu Mountains* into two films: *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983) and *Zu Warriors* (2001). In the 1990s, another new medium entered the stage, video games. The Taiwanese game company Softstar developed its RPG game *The Sword of the Yellow Emperor* (*Xuanyuan jian* 軒轅劍) in 1990 by building a fantasyland of humans, deities, and demons, borrowing characters from the *Liaozhai* collection. In 1995, Softstar published *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (*Xianjian qixia zhuan* 仙劍奇俠傳), a single-player PC game that drew heavily from *The Shu Mountains*. It is worth mentioning that the term *shushan* in the original novel referred to the mountainous region of Shu, whereas Softstar's video game invented a prestigious cultivation sect named *shushan*, which later appeared in numerous *xiuzhen* novels.

The resumed popular craze over *wuxia-shenguai* and renewed translation of Western fantasy claim as background the religious revival in the period of economic reform and liberalization. After the brutal secularization processes of the twentieth century that culminated in the ultra-secularist Cultural Revolution, Chinese religions have been reviving since the 1980s, with “superstitious” ideas such as traditional cosmology back in vogue, “superstitious” devotional and ritual practices becoming legitimate again, and “superstitious” institutions represented by local temples being rebuilt after having been destroyed.²⁷ The old negative label “superstition” has transformed into new categories such as *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 (popular belief) and *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產 (immaterial cultural heritage), sanctioned and promoted by the state.

In the 1980s, *qigong*, a secularized system of cultivation techniques invented by the socialist state, developed into a mass movement in which hundreds of millions of Chinese endeavored to cultivate their *qi* 氣, the mysterious source for good health, extraordinary longevity, and paranormal powers (Palmer 2007, 2012). It is during this period that Tian Chengyang 田誠陽 (1964–2016), a Quanzhen cleric working for the National Daoist Association, published a series of books and articles such as *Chinese Daoist Cultivation Studies* (*Zhonghua daojia xiulian xue* 中華道家修煉學, 1999) to popularize the cultivation regimens of Daoism, which were presented as scientific rather than superstitious. Thanks to the work of Tian, fantasy writers such as Liu Xiaoqiang were introduced to the concept of *xiuzhen*. In the wake of Liu's adoption of the term in his novel *The Ephemeral*, numerous writers have been working collectively to invent the literary tradition of *xiuzhen* fantasy.

Most of the *xiuzhen* writers were born in the 1970s and '80s, who spent their childhood and adolescence witnessing the phenomenal popularity of *qigong* and the resurgence of Chinese religions in general and Daoism in particular. There is only a three-year gap between the governmental crack-down of Falungong in 1999, which marks the end of the Qigong Fever, and the rise of *xiuzhen* fantasy online, which builds entire worlds centered upon the cultivation of the physical body. The enthusiasm to practice *qi*-cultivation did not die down and instead found a new outlet in the realm of literary imagination. As to be discussed in the third section, some *xiuzhen* writers practice martial arts and inner alchemy, whose techniques are closely associated with *qigong*. And, in their novels, the dominant religion is Daoism, which is more fictional than real. Although most of the *xiuzhen* writers and readers do not claim any affiliation with Daoism, they are familiar with the vitality of established Daoist practices, professionals, and institutions and the rise of new agents such as independent practitioners, clerics working at local temples devoted to popular deities, and the new middle-class interested in Daoist religion and culture.²⁸ While the central dynamics of Daoism has drifted toward the commercialization of Daoist symbols, ideas, and practices, *xiuzhen* fantasy is one of the many places this drift is registered.

²⁷ For the postsocialist revival of Chinese religions, see (Chau 2010; Madsen 2011; Johnson 2018; Shawn 2019).

²⁸ For scholarship on the new developments in Daoism in the urban, commercial setting, see (Fan 2012; Dean 2012; Yang 2012).

3. Xiuzhen, Reinventing Daoist Alchemy in the Twenty-First Century

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, fantasy has become a newly dominant cultural form on the global scale, generating huge amounts of revenue and unprecedented cultural prestige. One explanation is the development of new media such as film, television, video games, and the internet and of “transmedia storytelling,” a new mode of narrative that extends across media boundaries and is committed to building complex fictional worlds instead of primarily focusing on characters or plots.²⁹ In this regard, Vivian Sobchack further explains the mainstreaming of fantasy, which has eclipsed the glory of science fiction, by pointing out the impact of digital technology and consumer electronics on our everyday life and the resurgence in the digital age of associational logic known as magical thinking (Sobchack 2014). Another reason for the return of the repressed is that fantasy helps to articulate our disenchantment in scientism and rationalism.³⁰ Considering the intertwining of the postsecular and the postsocialist, I contend that the postsocialist condition—characterized by uneven development, overlap of multiple systems, and ideological confusion—also contributes to the younger generation’s fascination with the fantastic. In short, building alternative worlds across multiple media platforms, fantasy has been destabilizing the singular, homogeneous, and fixed sense of reality, starting with the reinvention of magic/superstition and striving for some new order in a chaotic world.

The focus now turns to the particular type of magic/superstition that is featured in *xiuzhen* fantasy, Daoist alchemy, and the new literary inventions deviating from both the real-life history of the alchemical tradition and its enactment in premodern *xiaoshuo*. According to traditional Chinese cosmology, the entire cosmos is infused with a numinous energy named *qi*, which is neither matter nor spirit but a basic dynamic. Everything that exists, including the human body, is an aspect of it, in a lesser or greater state of condensation. It is possible for a human (or nonhuman) being to transcend the limitations of the body by refining the *qi* within it through medicinal, meditative, and moral practices to achieve *xian*-hood.³¹ In the quest for *xian*-hood, outer alchemy was developed, which involved a set of laboratory experiments to produce an immortality elixir from certain material substances. Due to its complexities and hardships, outer alchemy was later eclipsed by inner alchemy, the cultivation of the human body to nurture it, strengthen its energies, and integrate the perfected body into the natural and cosmic environment.³² *Xiuzhen* is a central concept of this internal alchemy tradition, the character *zhen* meaning authenticity or perfection, often used interchangeably with *xian*. The practice of *xiuzhen* refers to the alchemical transformation of the mortal body through breathing exercises, meditation, and an entire range of practices aimed at purging the body of imperfections and reintegrating it into the primordial Dao.³³ In the early twentieth century, both outer and inner alchemy came to be perceived as superstitious by Christian missionaries and Chinese elites. However, inner alchemy, thanks to its attentiveness toward the embodied individual, continued to flourish in small circles.³⁴ Its cultivation skills were later integrated into qigong, which developed in the 1980s and ’90s into a mass movement (Palmer 2007) immediately preceding the rise of *xiuzhen* fantasy.

²⁹ For discussion of transmedia storytelling, see (Jenkins 2008). Following the lead of Jenkins, Colin Harvey and Dan Hassler-Forest demonstrate that science fiction and fantasy, nonrealist genres as it were, are particularly favored by transmedia storytelling or world-building. See (Harvey 2015; Hassler-Forest 2016).

³⁰ Michael Saler contends that fantasy is not just a shelter for any lingering sense of enchantment from the premodern and/or nonwestern world(s), or a political allegory that exposes the hidden enchantment of modernity, but a vivid illustration of the tensions and contradictions of modernity, which is entangled with magic and superstition. See (Salter 2012).

³¹ For an introduction to Daoist cosmology and anthropology, see (Schipper and Giradot 1993; Robinet and Brooks 1997).

³² For a historical survey of outer alchemy, see (Pregadio 2000). For inner alchemy, see (Yokote 2015; Robinet and Pregadio 2011).

³³ For scholarship on *xiuzhen* in particular, see (Komjathy 2007).

³⁴ For the persistence of inner alchemy in the modern world, see (Liu 2009; Palmer and Liu 2012; Liu and Goossaert 2013).

Xiuzhen fantasy is a twenty-first-century repackaging of *xian*-arts centered upon alchemical practices. There are continuities and ruptures between premodern Chinese religion and culture and the modern literary genre of fantasy, hence I have decided to translate *xiuzhen/xiuxian* fantasy as “immortality cultivation” instead of “cultivating perfection” or “making transcendents” to highlight the distinction between the *xiuzhen/xiuxian* of contemporary fantasy on the one hand, and, on the other, the *xiuzhen* of Daoist inner alchemy or the *xiuxian* tradition in premodern China in a more general sense. Since *xiuzhen*, *xiuxian*, and *xianxia* are somewhat used interchangeably, I also emphasize the difference between *xianxia* and *wuxia*. Although both *xianxia* and *wuxia* depict magical arts, the former is a new type of literature influenced by video games, while the latter is an intersection of literature and film. Moreover, while the conversation partner for *wuxia* was nationalism, the predominant ideology that *xianxia* wrestles with is neoliberalism beyond national boundaries.

I use *The Ephemeral*, the first of its kind, to showcase the narrative conventions of the genre. First and foremost, the entire novel depicts the whole process of immortality cultivation, with character development, plot progression, and world-unfolding divided into distinct levels. These levels are clearly modeled after the inner alchemy stages of *lianjing huaqi* 煉精化氣 (the refinement of vital essence into qi), *lianqi huashen* 煉氣化神 (the refinement of qi into the spirit), *lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛 (the refinement of the spirit into the void).³⁵ In *Chinese Daoist Cultivation Studies*, Tian Chengyang listed five stages, adding *zhuji lianji* 築基鍊己 (laying out the foundation to refine oneself) and *lianxu hedao* 煉虛合道 (the refinement of the void to unite with the Dao). However, *xiuzhen* fantasy is not contented with these stages and has expanded them into a long list of cultivation levels. For instance, there are over ten cultivation stages leading toward the achievement of immortality in *The Ephemeral*. However, these levels are closer to video game worlds/maps than alchemical stages. The cultivators are portrayed as tirelessly climbing to higher levels by accomplishing difficult tasks, overcoming obstacles, and defeating competitors and monsters. They are video game avatars who must accumulate qi-energy, quantifiable like points or coins, to level up. More often than not, amoral competition is preferred over moral edification in *xiuzhen* novels.

The second narrative convention invented by *The Ephemeral* and adopted by the other *xiuzhen* novels is their fascination with another qi, not the qi-energy to be refined in inner alchemy but the *qi* 器, material tools, used in outer alchemy. It is worth mentioning that although the term *xiuzhen* belongs to the later tradition of inner alchemy, inner alchemy continues to use the vocabulary of outer alchemy. For instance, the human body is compared to the furnace and the reaction-vessel in which the precious substances of bodily organs are cooked.³⁶ Again inspired by video games, *The Ephemeral* imagined a fictional tradition of *lianqi* 煉器 (tool-refinement), one in which cultivators, again not unlike game avatars, constantly improve the efficacy of their equipment such as armor, weaponry, and other magical objects named *fabao* 法寶 (dharma jewel, an expression used in premodern narratives). One example is that cultivators use a *fabao* named *yujian* 玉簡 (a jade slip), which, a storage and communication device, was portrayed as a flash drive in *The Ephemeral* published in the early 2000s and transformed into a smart phone in novels written in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The cultivators refine not only their own bodies but also the technological extension of their bodies, such as the jade slip that needs constant updating. Bodily cultivation, which is still the central concern, has become the tradition of *lianti* 煉體 (body-refinement) supplemented by tool-refinement.

³⁵ In late imperial China, inner alchemy practices were often conceived as consisting of three stages. Chen Yingning 陳撷寧 (1880–1969), a famous inner alchemy practitioner in Republican Shanghai, added the fourth stage *lianxu hedao* to purge inner alchemy of Buddhist influences and make it more compatible with modern science (Liu 2009). Chen’s alchemical teachings were later edited and promoted by Tian Chengyang in the 1990s, who emphasized the importance of *zhuji lianji* at the beginning of the four stages.

³⁶ This metaphor is used by Zhou Wusuo 周無所 in *Jindan zhizhi* 金丹直指, an inner alchemy text of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). Quoted in (Yu 2008, p. 41).

Alchemy thus reimagined stands for transhumanist technology aimed to transcend the limitations of the physical body.

The refinement of *ti* (physical bodies) and *qi* (magical objects) works on the qi-energy condensed in these bodies and objects. To the traditions of body-refinement and tool-refinement fantasy writers have added *zhiyao* 製藥 (medicine-making) and *zhifu* 製符 (talisman-making), with the medicine produced to intervene in the qi-circulation within the bodies, and talisman, consisting of heavenly scripts, meant to help the cultivators to manipulate the qi of magical objects to ward off evil spirits. What is reinvented is not just the laboratory outer alchemy but also the exorcist thunder ritual.³⁷ These ancient magics have come to signify the bio-engineering of pharmaceuticals and code-writing in computer engineering. The divide between magic and science has broken down.

Even more interestingly, starting with *The Ephemeral*, *xiuzhen* fantasy has transformed qi-energy into a fossil-like energy stored in the precious *lingshi* 靈石 (numinous stones) that is mined by the cultivation world—always already organized into sects, associations, and empires—and cut into regular pieces to power the making of medicine, talisman, magical objects, and paranormal bodies. Numinous stones also serve as the currency of the cultivation world. They are the fossil capital of this marketplace, the combination of fossil fuels on which machines of production run and the capital that seeks miraculous self-expansion by absorbing the human and nonhuman labor of cultivation. Although the practice of *xian*-arts and the pursuit of *xian*-hood in premodern China were always located within some larger religious and social domains, *xiuzhen* fantasy tells stories of the modern capitalist political economy, a theme that cannot be present in premodern narratives. The cultivators, in this light, are the self-enterprising “human capital” (Feher 2009) aspiring to integrate themselves into the Dao of capitalism.

What follows is that religion in *xiuzhen* novels, not defined by faith in some higher existence but by embodied practice to achieve a higher existence—namely, cultivation—is inseparable from capitalism. The modern, Western, and Christian concept of religion dissolves in the cultivation world, where cultivation is not confined within an isolated sphere devoted to otherworldly pursuits but is the very organizing center of society, economy, and politics. Whereas *wuxia* novels either conformed to or deviated from the political ideology of nationalism, *xiuzhen* novels are preoccupied with the cultivation of the new stateless subject, bypassing and challenging the given reality of the secular modern as dictated by the socialist nation-state. This new stateless subject embodies the neoliberal *homo economicus* on the one hand, and forces seeking to break out of global capitalism on the other. Along this line, alchemical practice stands for *both* the “high” magic of capitalist production, circulation, and consumption *and* the “low” magic of repressed traditions in and beyond China.

Outside the limits of the literary text, it is worth highlighting that the organization of fictional cultivation worlds is not unrelated to the organization of fantasy communities online. During the serialization of *The Ephemeral*, the Taiwanese site myfreshnet.com crashed frequently due to heavy traffic from the entire sinophone world. To accommodate the boom of *xiuzhen* and other types of fantasy novels, new literary portals mushroomed in mainland China, among which qidian.com (Starting Point) invented a “pay-per-read” model in October 2003 (Hockx 2015, pp. 110–12). For readers, Qidian is the literary version of Netflix or Spotify in that they pay a subscription fee to access their favorite novels and participate in online discussions. For writers, it resembles Amazon Mechanical Turk, although the labor they provide is more creative than mechanical. Unlike AMT, Qidian is also a platform for intense competition, where creative laborers are ranked according to their performance. Anyone can register there to upload his/her writing; however, only popular writers (judged by the number of hits and comments) will be invited to sign a contract with the website and thereby be paid by loyal subscribers. A large portion of the revenue goes to the digital platform, which permits the writers to sell the adaptation rights of their novels to media corporations. In the 2010s, media corporations began a large-scale adaptation campaign that turned popular novels into films, television series, web dramas, and video games. Chinese transmedia franchises were born. Making money through sharing revenue with digital platforms and then selling intellectual property

³⁷ For the thunder ritual and vernacular novels, see (Meulenbeld 2015).

to media corporations, fantasy writers are not unlike the cultivators in their own stories, who must keep on leveling up to become super rich celebrities, most interestingly dubbed as *dashen* 大神 (big deities) in popular language. Currently, top-ranking writers make around a billion RMB yuan per year, while billions of readers follow numerous stories online. Although these writers and readers are cyber-proletariats working for and exploited by media capital, they are also a grassroots force that resists the capture of the capitalist megamachine and quests for alternative political imaginaries.³⁸

4. The Utopia/Dystopia of Immortality Cultivation and the Janus-faced Cultivator

I read three novels that will be used in this section to demonstrate how *xiuzhen* fantasy works as a playground in which the younger generation rediscovers the religious and cultural legacy of premodern China, negotiates their own position in postsocialist China and the position of China in the global market, and struggles to come to terms with the dazzling reality of neoliberal capitalism. The three novels, all serialized at qidian.com, are *The Buddha Belongs to the Dao* (*Foben shidao* 佛本是道, 20 February 2006–3 March 2007, hereafter *The Dao*), *Spirit Roaming* (*Shenyou* 神遊, 13 June 2006–16 September 2007), and *Immortality Cultivation 40K* (*Xiuzhen siwannian* 修真四萬年, 16 March 2015–4 July 2018; hereafter *40K*).³⁹ *The Dao* is worthy of attention because it exemplifies the close ties between *xiuzhen* fantasy, the magical arts fiction of the Republican period, and the *shenmo xiaoshuo* of late imperial China. *Spirit Roaming* is a “realist” type of fantasy that depicts the revival of Chinese religions in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Set in the distant future, *40K* Sinicizes the magical world of *Warhammer 40K*—a tabletop game created by Games Workshop, a British war-game manufacturing company. All three novels raise questions regarding the nature of the cosmic Dao. *The Dao* grapples with these questions through a storyline of a Hobbesian total war that leads to the rise and domination of capitalism. *Spirit Roaming* does so by portraying a fantastic world rooted in the local traditions of premodern China and striving to prevent the colonization of the Dao by capitalism. Wrestling with the same set of questions, *40K* presents the cultivation world as both a dystopian neoliberal empire and the utopian experiments of the multitude.⁴⁰

4.1. *The Buddha Belongs to the Dao: The Rise of the Demonic Dao*

Mengru shenji 夢入神機 (aka Wang Zhong 王鐘, 1984–), the author of *The Dao*, was trained as a professional chess player and enjoyed practicing martial arts and reading martial arts fiction. He was naturally attracted to the new *xiuzhen* fantasy and quickly decided to try his hand at serializing his own novel online. *The Dao*, a novel of two million characters, turned out to be a phenomenal success and kicked off its author’s career as a full-time fantasy writer and one of the top celebrities of internet literature. Not unlike many other *xiuzhen* novels serialized at that time, *The Dao* struggled to Sinicize the foreign genre of Western fantasy. Its popularity lies in how it endeavored to revive the native tradition of the supernatural and the superstitious and to build an enchanted cosmos that is distinctively Chinese. It is among one of the first waves of *xiuzhen* novels to mine the rich reservoir of the premodern *xiaoshuo* of the strange and its modern transfiguration, martial arts fiction. More specifically, it has rewritten *The Shu Mountains* and *The Canonization of the Gods*.

In the first several chapters of the novel, the protagonist, a college graduate by the name of Zhou Qing 周清, instead of starting a real job in contemporary China, becomes obsessed with practicing

³⁸ For definition and conditions of digital labor and cyber-proletariat, see (Fuchs 2014; Huws 2014; Dyer-Witford 2015). Although Jenkins celebrates the grassroots creativity of fans and other consumers (or prosumers), Fuchs argues that they are nonetheless exploited by media capital as a free labor force.

³⁹ The first and third novels are still available at qidian.com: <https://book.qidian.com/info/53234>; <https://my.qidian.com/author/4362751>. *Spirit Roaming* was pulled off when the novel was published offline, but the author’s webpage list links to the other novels in the same series: <https://book.qidian.com/info/3439785>. For the print version, see (Xu 2012).

⁴⁰ For theorization of empire and multitude, see Hardt and Negri (2001, 2004).

inner alchemy. He starts his own cultivation lineage, Tiandao zong 天道宗 (the sect of Heavenly Dao), taking human and nonhuman disciples and reaching out to the cultivation sects scattered across China. In contrast to what happened in modern Chinese history—that is, the destruction of local temples and cults and the consolidation of the nation-state—the cultivation sects not only remain intact despite the various anti-superstition campaigns but also govern a higher realm of reality beyond the national history of the modern state. The protagonist’s adventure begins in twenty-first century China; however, the contemporary world is only the lowest echelon of a multi-layered reality. As he constantly makes progress in alchemical cultivation, the higher stages of embodied existence correspond to the higher realms of reality that become unlocked to him. The leveling-up experience in video games that the reader is familiar with prepares him/her for not only the similar leveling-up in Daoist alchemy but also the reversal of the historical “progress” of disenchantment and secularization.

The reader of *The Dao* follows its protagonist in his travels from science through religion, back to primordial magic. The world of cultivation sects that rises above the secular world of the nation-state is the fantastic world enacted in old-school martial arts novels. In the first half of *The Dao*, the author rewrites *The Shu Mountains*, reenacting its cultivation sects, wondrous grottos, ferocious monsters, flying swords, and a whole range of other dharma jewels (that is, weaponized cultivation tools). It is to be highlighted that the most prestigious sect in the twenty-first-century novel is named Shushan, an homage to the cultivation sect invented by video game designers in the 1990s. Even higher than the world of immortality seekers is an alternative universe. As mentioned in the previous section, *The Shu Mountains* is an unfinished text. Its protagonists strive to become heavenly immortals or earthly immortals, the former holding positions in the heavenly court, the latter carefree travelers of the earthly realm. However, Huanzhu Louzhu stopped updating his serialization right before 1949, leaving the protagonists trapped in the human realm. By contrast, Zhou’s cultivation unveils for him first the entire human realm beyond the sovereignty of the modern state and then, more significantly, the interlinked heavenly and earthly realms as an alternative universe.

In the second half of *The Dao*, Zhou ascends to this heavenly-earthly realm. The three realms of traditional Chinese cosmology—heaven, earth, and human—are all in place. While the enchanted human realm is captured in modern martial/magical arts novels, the heavenly-earthly realm is the world of gods and demons, cultivators who have transcended the human realm, as encapsulated in *shenmo xiaoshuo* such as *The Journey to the West*, *The Canonization of the Gods*, and many others. Zhou’s cultivation does not end even in the heavenly-earthly realm, however, where his rivals and allies are from the pantheon of premodern Chinese religions. His ultimate agenda is to participate in the second round of the canonization of the gods. The Ming novel *The Canonization of the Gods* centers upon the battle between two fictional Daoist sects during the transition from the Shang dynasty (16th century BC to 11th century BC) to the Zhou dynasty (11th century BC to 249 BC). *The Dao* resituates this battle as the aftermath of a genuinely cosmic battle between founding figures in Chinese creation myths as compiled by Yuan Ke, the Chinese mythologist introduced earlier.

Whereas *shenmo xiaoshuo* mixed what is retrospectively considered myth with Chinese dynastic history, the twenty-first-century novel reinterprets myth as cosmic history and places human history within a cosmic framework. According to the cosmography of *The Dao*, the first cosmic battle broke out fifty-six billion years ago and destroyed the human realm, the remnants of which became our universe, a vast empty space in which the broken pieces of the former human realm evolved into galaxies of stars. Our planet happens to be the only place in this entire universe where mere traces of qi remain. Hence cultivation is not impossible but extremely difficult due to scarce resources. Cultivators aspire to ascend to the higher heavenly-earthly realm where qi-energy is abundant. This aspiration is explained as the origin of religion. Those who have succeeded in ascending become the supernatural gods and demons, who do not bother to return to the lower realm. Humans instead have to resort to science and technology to fill up the empty space left by the retreat of magic.

Although an ordinary human at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist eventually cultivates himself into the most powerful being in this multiverse. He leads his cultivation sect to fight in the second cosmic battle, the new canonization of the gods, and triumphs over the Jade Emperor, the

Three Purities of Daoism, and the Shakyamuni Buddha of Buddhism to reorganize the heavenly court. In the end, he merges with the Dao to become the supreme deity of a new cosmic cycle that will last for those fifty-six billion years. Strictly speaking, what he achieves is not immortality. However, as the title of his sect “Heavenly Dao” indicates, he becomes the new cosmic order. The wild imagination of this novel has amazed its readers. However, some of them, while fascinated with its cosmic scope, began to complain about the “demonic” cultivation it portrays. The novel celebrates the inhumanity of the heavenly Dao, frequently citing the famous *Daodejing* 道德經 phrase “*tiandi buren, yi wanwu wei chugou* 天地不仁 · 以萬物為芻狗” (Heaven and Earth are beyond human benevolence, treating myriad things as straw dogs). Another expression that appears throughout the text is *sharen yuehuo* 殺人越貨 (murder and plunder). It is the title of the first chapter and captures the gist of the entire novel, whose narrator makes no attempt to whitewash the protagonist’s inglorious path toward immortality, along which he continually murders his competitors and plunders their magical tools in the human, earthly, and heavenly realms. Likewise, other immortality seekers and accomplished cultivators are completely unconstrained by moral strictures and driven only by the accumulation of qi.

Analyzing the demonic cultivators subdued by the protagonists of *shenmo xiaoshuo*, Campany reads the former as the lower class who are demonic only because they interfere with—that is, fight against—the working of the cosmic Dao (Campany 1986). I argue that the demonic cultivators in novels such as *The Dao* are no longer the proletariats but the endlessly self-enterprising human capital that seeks to identify with the ever-expanding capital. The Dao has become demonic. The Dao in fantasy novels represented by *The Dao* is global capitalism, or, more precisely, the neoliberal order that allows the economic principle of competition to penetrate and dominate all social spheres (Brown 2015). Whereas the scholarship of modern Chinese mythology aimed at systemizing premodern sources toward the end of nation-building, the fictional imagination of Mengru Shenji means to refine and perfect this mythological system so that discrete figures and stories all become raw material absorbed into Capitalist primitive accumulation. The sovereignty of the capitalist market beyond national boundaries is the new demonic Dao.

4.2. Spirit Roaming: The Three Laws of Cultivation

The Dao—a franchise consisting of the original online novel, printed books, and online games—has made its author a billionaire, a “big deity” figure in the pantheon of internet literature, a vibrant sector of China’s creative industry. By contrast, the commercial success of *Spirit Roaming* is rather limited, although the revenue shared between Qidian and the author, Xu Shengzhi 徐勝治 (1974–), is enough for the latter to give up his extremely profitable job as a securities analyst and to pursue a full-time career in fantasy literature. It is also to be highlighted that Xu is a traditional culture aficionado and known as an inner alchemy practitioner. Serialized roughly at the same time as *The Dao*, which moves from contemporary China to an immersive fantasy world encompassing the entire cosmos, *Spirit Roaming*, a novel of one-and-a-half-million characters, is a different type of fantasy whose cultivation world is merely a sector of the real-life world—China from the late 1980s to 2007, the time of the novel’s serialization.⁴¹ The protagonists are three teenage boys, Shi Ye 石野, Feng

⁴¹ Farah Mendlesohn divides fantasy into four major types: the portal-quest fantasy (in which characters enter a fantastic world through a portal), the immersive fantasy (in which the fantastic world is assumed by both the protagonist and the reader), intrusion fantasy (with the fantastic invading and disrupting the normal world), and the liminal fantasy (whose reader is not sure whether the fantastic exists or not). See (Mendlesohn 2008). I argue that *The Dao* is an immersive type that takes the traditional Chinese cosmos as an immersive environment for the characters while the reader adopts the point of view of the protagonist to explore this cosmos. Although *Spirit Roaming* may be read as an intrusion fantasy, I propose a fifth type, diffusive fantasy, to describe this Chinese text, in which the fantastic world and the normal world intertwine with one another, following the model of Chinese religions that are diffused in ordinary people’s everyday life.

Junzi 風君子, and Shang Yunfei 尚雲飛, high school students in the late '80s and early '90s in a small city named Wucheng 蕪城, somewhere in Southeast China and depicted as the secret capital of China's cultivation world. The novel, one among the author's seven-book fantasy series, was advertised as China's Harry Potter story, primarily because the author, following Rowling, presents the cultivation world (the Chinese inflection of the wizarding world) as intersecting with the secular world (the magic-less, non-wizarding world).

Among the protagonists, Shi is born with psychic abilities, which bring him close to Feng and Shang, the former a self-styled inner alchemy practitioner and the latter a lay Buddhist learning cultivation from an eminent monk in the city. The Daoist Feng and Buddhist Shang teach Shi cultivation skills, and Shi eventually grows up to become the new leader of the cultivation world. The novel reveals Feng as the human incarnation of a Daoist deity—that is, a Daoist immortal holding a heavenly position. Although the youngest of the three, he is the principle alchemy master; Feng uses vernacular novels to teach Shi, making him read *shenmo xiaoshuo* such as *The Journey to the West* to decode the alchemy training embedded in the narrative. Most interestingly, Feng, clearly the author's mouthpiece, complains that *The Journey to the West*, having been redacted by Quanzhen Daoists, was corrupted by Buddhist influences that had infiltrated Quanzhen teachings. By contrast, the alchemical lessons he gives to Shi are the authentic Daoist training. Understandably, the novel downplays the role of the Buddhist boy—who is merely the other two protagonists' assistant—and prefers Zhengyi Daoism, a ritual-oriented form of Daoism intimately tied to popular cults and local societies, over the "corrupted" Quanzhen, which, more otherworldly and hence more properly "religious," has been favored by the modern, secular state (Liu and Goossaert 2013).

In the novel, the most learned cultivator in the city is a Zhengyi Daoist master. Shi becomes his disciple and joins the Zhengyi sect, which is half-real and half-fictional. It borrows the name of the real-world Zhengyi Daoism. However, the fictional Zhengyi sect is allegedly founded in the Tang dynasty and famous for its tool-refinement magic, a new invention from video games. The author is critically aware of the fictionality of his fiction and even portrays fictionalization as one of the paranormal powers acquired by the cultivators, some of whom choose to remain within the fictional worlds they have created. However, those cultivators, or fantasy writers and readers blamed for being escapist in secularist discourses, are not able to proceed to higher stages, where reality is not a fixed given but open to the manipulation of human endeavors.

Like the other *xiuzhen* novels, the plot of *Spirit Roaming* is arranged according to a series of fictional alchemical stages that Shi goes through with the help of Feng and Shang. The cultivation world is diffused in the everyday reality of the small city of Wucheng, with the headquarters of the major cultivation sects located in the recently renovated Daoist and Buddhist temples, and the cultivators—humans and nonhuman spirits of various sorts—walking side by side with the "muggles" in the streets (to borrow the term meaning people not able to practice magic from the Harry Potter universe). Cultivators appear as ordinary people—students, office workers, or small business owners—while the muggles have no idea that another reality is superimposed on their commonsensical world. The cultivation world of this novel, radically different from the brutal battlefield as enacted in *The Dao*, is regulated by three foundational laws: "*Buke dui fanren zuofa* 不可對凡人作法; *Buke jingshihaisu* 不可驚世駭俗; *Buke zai shisu zhong mouli hairen* 不可在世俗中牟利害人". First, cultivators must not inflict magic upon the noncultivators. Second, cultivators must not disrupt the public order of the secular world. Third, cultivators must not use their magical power to pursue personal gain at the expense of others.

I read the three laws as an inverse secularism, a grassroots re-imagination of Article 36 of China's 1982 Constitution. Whereas Chinese religions are regulated by the state in the real world, the cultivation world in *Spirit Roaming* internalizes principles of political secularism and regulates itself. The article on religion claims that "normal religious activities" are protected by the state. However, religion is not to be used "to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens

or interfere with the educational system of the state.”⁴² Correspondingly, *Spirit Roaming's* first two laws protect the wellbeing of ordinary citizens and prohibit the disruption of public order. I argue that these laws are more than a mirror image of state secularism because they place the value of individual lives and social order above state power, which is also under regulation. Moreover, the third law, a fictional addition, keeps separate the magical world and the market governed by the invisible hand of capitalism. In postsocialist China, the cultivation world has become not just the projection of Chinese religions but, more significantly, a proxy for the new sovereignty of capitalism, which needs to be contained and controlled.

Both the state and the market are to be resisted. Among the adventures of the protagonists, I single out the first mission and the last one for further discussion. At the very beginning of the novel, when Shi enters the high school, he sees a ghost girl wandering in his classroom and notices that Feng and Shang are aware of her existence too. It turns out that the girl, who was about their age, committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. She swallowed poison together with her mother after her father, the headmaster of the high school, was beaten to death by the red guards. The three boys work as a team to help the ghost girl. They transport her to a mountain nearby, where she hides in the recently rebuilt temple devoted to a mountain spirit. Feng performs a ritual to ordain the ghost as the new mountain spirit so that she can live inside the statue of the temple and cultivate it into her new body by absorbing the qi-energy from the tourists visiting the temple. What the episode encapsulates is the revival of the “superstitious” local religion as “popular belief,” a source of revenue for local governments. In the novel, the girl, a ghost from the past, through serving as a local deity, becomes human again and merges into the everyday reality of Wucheng. By helping her, the protagonists strive for the poetic justice provided by cultivation to resist the violence of the ultrasecularist state, which took away the girl’s life and kept her a wandering ghost.

As the novel progresses, the new violence of the market starts to threaten their beloved cultivation world. In the 1990s, the boys live through the Qigong Fever. They attend the public gatherings of *qigong* masters and find them to be rogue cultivators abusing their limited power to attract followers and disrupt public order. However, the harm of these charlatans is no big deal as the secular state wastes no time in cracking their “evil cults.” What disturbs the cultivation world is a radical reform called for by demonic cultivators, the representative of whom is Qiye 七葉. Qiye is the antagonist of the novel and the doppelgänger of the protagonist in *The Dao*. He is eager to abolish the three laws and to lead cultivators to colonize the magicless world in an “equal” competition between alchemists and muggles. For him, cultivation is the means through which the human subject expands itself until it integrates itself into the capitalist Dao.

Aided by the other “conservatives” fighting to maintain the laws, the boys eventually defeat Qiye and keep their magical world from slipping into the Dao of capitalism. Both Feng and Shang decide to leave Wucheng to study at prestigious universities elsewhere, while Shi stays to go to a local college, accepting the honorific position to lead the cultivation world. At the end of the novel, the three grown-ups have a reunion at the time of the novel’s serialization. They represent postsocialist China’s new middle-class. Shi runs a chain of restaurants in Wucheng; Feng is one of the first generation of securities analysts in China (the occupation of the author); and Shang is a white-collar clerk working in Hong Kong. Having grown out of the “childish” world of magic and wonders, they are fully enwrapped in capitalist relations and ask this question on behalf of the author and his readers: “Where are we headed?”

4.3. Immortality Cultivation 40K: Multitude against the Empire

The question above is taken up by Sun Junjie 孫俊傑 (1983–), who serialized 40K, which exceeds the length of ten million characters, under the *nom de plume* Woniu Zhenren 臥牛真人 over a three-year period. The third novel I analyze was published in the second half of the 2010s, when the narrative conventions of xiuzhen fantasy were considerably more developed, and the author was a

⁴² For the English version of Article 36, see <https://www.usconstitution.net/china.html#Article36>.

relatively more experienced internet literature writer. Approximately one century after the New Culture movement, fantasy writers began to break the science-religion-magic/superstition triad. To begin with, the Chinese fantasy novel *40K* refashions magic in the *Warhammer* universe, converting the magical world based on the history of magic and superstition in premodern Europe into a cultivation world that splits into a neoliberal Empire that embodies the heavenly way of *The Dao* on the one hand, and a quasi-socialist Federation implementing the basic laws from *Spirit Roaming* on the other.

The still-expanding *Warhammer* universe in the Euro-American West, as elaborated in numerous rule books, video games, and spin-off novels, is set in the far future (40,000 AD) and centered upon the Imperium of Man, a galaxy-spanning empire established by the human race. The Imperium wages war against the Xenos, all non-human life forms in the universe. Technologically advanced, human and alien civilizations nonetheless turn to magic to empower their troops. The *Warhammer* lore explains magic as the ability of some genetically mutated humans (and aliens) to draw powers from the Warp, an extradimensional realm underlying our four-dimensional universe. Beyond the material universe, the Warp, also aptly named the Immaterium, is sheer chaos occupied by daemonic entities that constantly threaten to possess the psykers—intelligent beings capable of magic—and ruin them. This explains the Imperium's ambivalent attitude toward magic, which is either carefully regulated or strictly banned.

In *40K*, the Chinese Imperium of Man is a futuristic intergalactic empire built by Daoist alchemists. While the source of magical power in the *Warhammer* universe is the extradimensional Immaterium, the Chinese cultivation cosmos is not divided into the material and the immaterial. Not associated with demonic possession, alchemical cultivation is a legitimate and honorable practice in the Chinese Imperium. However, just as not all humans (or aliens) are psykers, not all intelligent beings are capable of qi cultivation. The magician–muggle divide of *Spirit Roaming* is replicated. Moreover, there are various ranks of the cultivators depending on the particular stages of cultivation they have achieved. The Chinese Imperium is a hierarchical society governed by top-ranking cultivators, who exploit the labor of lower-rankers, non-cultivators, and colonized aliens to excavate and process the numinous stones across the universe. This dystopian empire is the new cosmic order envisioned by novels like *The Dao* and is the worst nightmare for the young boys in *Spirit Roaming*.

Among the countless *xiuzhen* novels published in the early twenty-first century, *40K* distinguishes itself thanks to its genre-swapping experiment. It is science fiction and fantasy. As introduced earlier, *xiuzhen* fantasy reinvents not only inner alchemy but also the laboratory outer alchemy and the exorcist thunder ritual. What is cultivated is not just the qi inside the human body but also other qi, various magical objects. In *40K*, the dharma jewels transform into technological gadgets ranging from personal computers to space fleets, and the cultivators into scientists and engineers. In the Chinese Imperium, cultivators receive their training at cultivation schools (research universities) and then work for cultivation sects (capitalist corporations). They write mysterious heavenly scripts (source codes), build elaborate dharma jewels (automatic systems), and work on the mortal body to release its limitless potentials.

Interestingly, inner alchemy is still privileged over outer alchemy, in *40K*, in which bodily cultivation consists of seven stages: *lianqi* 煉氣 (qi-refinement), *zhuji* 築基 (foundation-building), *jiedan* 結丹 (elixir-formation), *yuanying* 元嬰 (the primordial embryo), *huashen* 化神 (spirit-transformation), *fenshen* 分神 (spirit-differentiation), and *heti* 合體 (reintegration with the Dao). In the first stage, the cultivator learns to draw the cosmic qi into her body. The foundation to be built is an artificial neurological network for the better circulation of qi. On this foundation an elixir will be formed, which is not the magical potion in outer alchemy but a new self-consciousness running on the refined qi. When this consciousness becomes mature, the cultivator arrives at the stage of the primordial embryo, her second birth as a new numinous being. Once this new spirit self is born, it can exist independently of the mortal body and generate its own virtual reality. On the sixth and penultimate level, the spirit self will be able to manipulate not just simulated environments but also the physical reality in which it is located. Eventually, the cultivator will lose herself in the cosmic Dao and become truly immortal.

In contrast to *Spirit Roaming*, *40K* presents its cultivation world not as a mere sector of its universe. Instead, the cultivation world is the Imperium, a galaxy-spanning dystopia governed by brutal force like its *Warhammer* counterpart. The Chinese Imperium is structured like a pyramid, whose ranks correspond to the seven stages. Located at the bottom is a vast population of non-cultivators who are not able to change their fate. Ascension to the upper echelons is the goal cultivators strive for. However, the majority of them cannot go beyond the first three stages to create a new self—that is, a capitalist self. The novel explicitly enacts the fourth-level cultivators as entrepreneurs. Higher up, the Imperium is governed by a small number of cultivators at the fifth and sixth levels, who serve as corporate leaders and governmental officials. Although the final level remains a mystery, it is easy to assume that the ultimate Dao is the Dao of capitalism.

The protagonist of this novel, Li Yao 李耀, lives on a planet located at the margin of the Imperium. His planet leads a newly-formed Federation of *xiuzhen*, which breaks away from the Imperium of *xiuxian*. The author of *40K* plays with the synonyms of *xiuxian* and *xiuzhen*. I have explained that *xian* means transcendent(s)/ascendant(s) while *zhen* is understood as either authenticity or perfection. In *40K*, the Imperium is a neoliberal empire of *xiuxian*, with *xian* signifying the compulsive climbing of the human capital who is always afraid of being left behind. However, the possibility of *xiuzhen* remains open, *zhen* indicating the authenticity of an uncorrupted human heart or the perfect society yet to come. Pursuing *xiuzhen*, the Federation is a political entity where radical human enhancement through science and technology is regulated by law and morality. The goal of cultivation is not the ascension of the individual but authenticity, reinterpreted as social equality.

The novel begins with the protagonist's young adulthood, who is an orphan struggling for survival by scavenging digital wastes. Thanks to the Federation's public cultivation/education system, he grows into an accomplished cultivator and charismatic leader who firmly believes that a cultivator's duty is to protect rather than exploit the less powerful and disenfranchised. The novel is a Bildungsroman of the protagonist as well as the Federation, an intriguing political imaginary that evolves from a state into a cosmopolitical association. In the early parts of the novel, the Federation is depicted as a nation-state, within whose geographical boundaries the cultivators and non-cultivators have momentarily overcome their class divide. The cultivators protect the non-cultivators against the aggressions of the demons from the Warp, while the non-cultivators provide their labor to sustain the Federation's military excursions into the territories of the demons. However, it is soon revealed that the demons are genetically mutated humans seeking asylum in the Warp, which turns out to be the final frontier of the Imperium's colonial expansion. The Federation is no different from the Imperium.

One of the most crucial decisions made by the protagonist is to declare war against the Imperium instead of fighting against the demons and to invite the demons, the racial other, into the Federation. Later in the novel, the protagonist forms another alliance with artificial intelligence, a non-human, non-carbon-based life form. However, the Federation does clash with some evil supercomputers that brainwash humans and turn them into fleshy robots programmed to perform various tasks until they drop dead. What is evil, as implied in the text, is not technology per se but the capitalist reduction of the proletarians into docile machines. The society run by these supercomputers is a more advanced version of the Imperium, as the transformation of humans into fixed capital is a far more efficient means of exploitation than the self-cultivation of the human capital. The target of the Federation's rebellion is galactic capitalism or its foundational practice, *xiuxian*, while the subject of the Federation's *xiuzhen* emerges from the alienated classes, races, and species.

Both *xiuxian* and *xiuzhen* have generated their respective stateless subjects in *40K*, which inserts a utopian strand into the dystopian imagination of *Warhammer*. The narrator explains the protagonist's name Yao 耀 (sparkle) as “*jishi shenchu heian senlin, ye yao chengwei shanyao de huoguang* 即使身處黑暗森林·也要成為閃耀的火光” (Although located in a dark forest, [we] strive to become flames that sparkle). The novel is such a sparkle. While *Spirit Roaming* presents fiction-making as a paranormal power of the cultivators, *40K* further associates the fifth and sixth levels of cultivation, spirit-differentiation and spirit-transformation, with the creation of virtual reality and the

reconfiguration of given reality. I propose to read the virtual reality of authenticity-cultivators as an ideal society imagined by the multiple others. Their quest for radical change is the “spirit-transformation” that pushes the individual and social bodies toward the utopian Dao beyond the worldly powers of the state and the market.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I identified the roots of contemporary *xiuzhen* fantasy as the mass-market fantasy texts from the Euro-American West, the early form of Chinese fantasy in martial arts fiction (together with films and video games), and the premodern *xiaoshuo* of the strange. *Xiuzhen* novels are committed to reinventing Daoist alchemy, an indigenous practice at odds with the modern Western categories of science and religion and as a result dumped into the trash can of superstition. Fantasy, imaginative literature devoted to the magical/superstitious, provided a shelter to alchemy and other unwanted elements in Chinese religion and culture and consequently suffered state suppression in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the rise of digital technologies, the revival of Chinese religions, and the bewildering postsocialist condition have all contributed to the resurgence of fantasy, a playground for the resurrected magical/superstitious.

I also demonstrated the destabilization of the modernist triad of science, religion, and superstition in *xiuzhen* fantasy novels, which, as represented by *The Ephemeral*, have radically reimaged inner alchemy, outer alchemy, and other practices associated with the quest for *xianhood*. Ancient magic is represented as established and emerging technoscience to overcome the limitations of the physical body, while practices of bodily cultivation foundation an alternative model of religion, one that is neither defined by faith nor secluded within the private realm. Since this alternative religion is the organizing center of society, economy, and politics, the task of *xiuzhen* fantasy is not to tell reality-escaping and wish-fulfilling stories but to provide its writers and readers with a platform for thought experiments responding to the postsocialist condition.

On this platform, the stateless subject of martial arts fiction has developed into the demonic cultivator, or, the neoliberal subject that is self-possessed, self-governed, and self-enterprising and seeks constant ascension and ultimate integration into the cosmic Dao of capitalism. This demonic cultivator is the protagonist of *The Dao*, the antagonist in *Spirit Roaming*, and the future human race that builds the Imperium in *40K*. In my analysis of the novels, I contrasted *The Dao* with the latter two, which both imagine possible resistance against the demonic cultivator and his dystopian Dao. In this regard, the new stateless subject is also the authenticity-cultivator.

In *Spirit Roaming*, the fantastic cultivation world stands for local society striving to maintain its autonomy against the encroachment of the state and the market. The authenticity-cultivators in this world are subjects embedded within the indigenous traditions of premodern China. In *40K*, the Federation against the Imperium learns to build a posthuman subject that transcends the modern, Western, bourgeoisie Man of the *Warhammer* Imperium and his Chinese counterpart, the demonic cultivator. Various non-/sub-/super- human others across the class, race, and species divides are welcome into the posthuman. The very authenticity to be cultivated is the relationality and adaptiveness of the posthuman subject.

Although the utopian imaginaries analyzed in this article are merely tiny sparkles in the dark forest of our neoliberal present, I believe that to imagine otherwise is the first step toward changing our perception and construction of reality. In the end, I assert that Chinese *xiuzhen* fantasy is not a derivative genre that imitates mass-market fantasy from the West or replicates Chinese narratives of the strange in the premodern and modern periods. It is the convergence of both sides that helps the *xiuzhen* writers and readers to tackle current pressing questions for the global community, such as “Where are we headed?” and “What is to be done?”.

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