

# The Evolution of Female Roles: A Study of Chinese Fantasy (Xianxia) Web Novel Adaptations (2016-2025)

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**Abstract.** Following the boom in adaptations in 2016 focused on Chinese fantasy intellectual properties (xianxiaIP), exemplified by *The Journey of Flower*, between 2016 and 2025 a considerable volume of Chinese fantasy literature online was adapted into film and television productions. Using textual comparison and literature review methodologies, along with data from databases such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Baidu Scholar, this study examines the representation of female characters in these adaptations in three dimensions: costumes, makeup, and props; the evolution of female characters' personalities; and their interpersonal relationships. The research finds that costume, makeup and prop designs suffer from homogenization and stereotypes; while female characters' personalities have evolved with the times, they remain constrained by the "Chinese fantasy idol drama" (xianxia idol drama) paradigm; their interpersonal relationships have shifted from romance-centered to focusing on "female-led growth" and female mutual assistance—though romantic narratives remain predominant and formulaic. This study aims to provide insights for optimizing the portrayal of female characters in Chinese fantasy dramas and promoting industry development.

**Keywords:** Chinese fantasy (xianxia) online literature; screen adaptations; female character portrayal; costumes/makeup/props; interpersonal relationships.

## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on the trend of adapting "Xianxia IP" represented by *The Journey of Flower* in 2016, which has promoted the industrial process of film and television adaptation of online novels. Due to the fact that online literature adaptations often rely on the original traffic and fan base of the works, film and television adaptation has shown a certain degree of lag. With the changing context and aesthetic taste of the times, the concept of Xianxia dramas is no longer limited to a single love narrative, but gradually presents more diverse and profound themes. This study is of great significance for the portrayal of women in film and television dramas, especially in works centered around women. This study focuses on the specific aspects of character relationship setting, personality transformation, and costume design, with a focus on the period from 2016 to 2025. It examines the evolution of female characters in Xianxia style online literature works in terms of character shaping after film and television adaptation. This article uses text comparison method, literature research method, interdisciplinary analysis method, narrative analysis method, and historical comparison method to analyze and explore the theme of the article, and will use CNKI database, Baidu Scholar Google Scholar, Collect and study data from databases such as Wanfang Data and Clarivate Analytics.

## 2. Costume, Makeup, and Props

As one of the most visually impactful elements in film and television art, costume, makeup, and props not only shapes character images and creates an atmosphere of the times, but also carries profound cultural connotations and identity symbols. It is the "signifier" in the visual language system, which constructs a cultural dialogue space between the work and the audience through variations in color, material, and shape.

The clothing materials and styles of female characters in Xianxia dramas often relate to their personalities, backgrounds, and behaviors, making their images more three-dimensional and vivid [1]. However, from a feminist perspective, in recent years, female costumes in Xianxia dramas have generally shown a serious tendency towards homogenization, deviating from the beauty and form of traditional costumes [2]. Whether it's Hua Qiang in *The Journey of Flower*, Bai Qian in *Enternal Love*, or Jin Mi in *Ashes of Love*, during her teenage years, she often wore light- and light-colored clothes. However, as the characters grew up or rose in status, their clothing became luxurious and heavy, with colors concentrated in red, black, gold, and other tones. Xianxia dramas often enhance characters' personalities through clothing colors - gentle and kind people wear light colors, strong and decisive people wear strong colors - but ignore the multidimensional and complex nature of female personalities. In fact, gentle women can also be resolute and decisive, and strong women may also prefer soft and comfortable clothing. However, in film and television creation, this diversity is often replaced by a singular visual expression.

Xianxia dramas shape the personality tone of female characters through basic makeup, while special makeup plays a crucial role in major character transitions. In *The Journey of Flower*, when Hua Qiang first appeared on the stage, she hardly applied powder and daisy, but only modified her eyebrows. The popular cross eyebrows were used to properly show her stubborn and unyielding character, while her makeup after she became a demon god turned into an elongated and upward raised eyebrow. The thick black eyeliner matched with the red lip makeup, and reflected each other with the red demon god mark between her forehead, turning her from a weak girl into a powerful and intimidating demon god image vividly.

The makeup design of female characters in Xianxia dramas also has stereotypes. For young and innocent female characters, makeup is mostly fresh and elegant, emphasizing a "bare face feeling", such as Hua Qiang in the early stage of *The Journey of Flower* and Zhao Ling'er in *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*. Although this makeup design is in line with the character's age and personality, it also invisibly conveys the concept of "female innocence and value bound to appearance", as if only pure appearance can reflect female purity.

Xianxia dramas shape the personality tone of female characters through basic makeup, while special makeup plays a crucial role in major character transitions. But there are also stereotypes in the makeup design of female characters in fantasy dramas. For young and innocent female characters, makeup is mostly fresh and elegant, emphasizing a "natural look". Although this makeup design is in line with the character's age and personality, it also invisibly conveys the concept of "female innocence and value bound to appearance", as if only pure appearance can reflect female purity.

### **3. The Evolution of Female Character Personality Portrayal**

Xianxia dramas adapted from online literature often make significant changes to their plots and character Settings to cater to popular trends and traffic demands. Female-oriented xianxia works are more likely to be shaped into "xianxia idol dramas", showing a tendency towards typification and character homogenization.

#### **3.1. Vertical Comparison**

Adaptations of online literature into TV dramas and films often rely on the original work's traffic and fan base. However, due to lagging behind the popular trends, screenwriters need to adjust the plot and characters. As a result, the heroine's personality is reshaped while retaining the characteristics of the original work to serve the new plot. Over the past few decades of the development of online literature, "character setting" has become the most important factor in online literature creation because it encompasses the author's committed imagination of readers' reading needs [3]. Although the "strong heroine" has become an inevitable trend nowadays, film and television adaptations have begun to take the heroine as the core of the story's development. However, in order to conform to the format of idol dramas, it is inevitable to add some plots related to love, resulting in the "drastic

modification" of the plots and personalities of some characters. This section will focus on discussing the heroine Xiao Lanhua in *Love Between Fairy and Devil* and make a certain comparative analysis with the heroine Liao Tingyan in *When Destiny Brings the Demon*.

The TV series version of *Love Between Fairy and Devil* differs significantly from the original work. The heroine in the original work, Xiao Lanhua, comes from an ordinary background. She has neither the bloodline of a divine maiden nor any special abilities. She is just a fragile ancient orchid. In a situation of isolation and helplessness, she relied on her wisdom and willpower to turn danger into safety many times, regarding "survival" as her top priority. Her instinct for survival even transcended the boundaries of the cycle of life and death. The TV drama takes "love and peace" as its theme, adding Settings such as sweet daily life, rivals in love, and supporting characters, making the plot closer to the narrative of love. The intensification of the love line has weakened the independence and adaptability of the female protagonist in the original work, and her original personality has been overshadowed by the idealized theme of "great love". "It integrates the contradiction between the individual character level and narrative design in *Love Between Fairy and Devil* with an irrefutable logic" [4]. The distinct individual spirit in the original work was assimilated by the romanticized ending, and the subjective value of the characters was dissolved.

Unlike *Love Between Fairy and Devil* which almost completely deviates from the original work, *When Destiny Brings the Demon* is based on the original work but changes the core character setting of the heroine, Salted Fish. The heroine of *When Destiny Brings the Demon*, Liao Tingyan, has transformed from a purely laid-back character, that is, someone who is somewhat world-weary, lazy and has no ulterior motives, into a sunny and cheerful girl. The so-called "salted fish" character is not reflected in the plot or the actors' performances, but constantly appears in the heroine's lines. This has weakened the most distinctive "anti-inspirational" setting in the original work, causing it to lose its original appeal.

From the comparison, it can be seen that *Love Between Fairy and Devil* has constructed a "parallel world" based on the original framework, softening the image of the male lead and deifying the identity of the heroine to cater to the market. Although *When Destiny Brings the Demon* has undergone minor changes, it has lost the spirit of the original work in the process of "perfecting" the female lead. The former gains popularity through love reinforcement, while the latter loses its appeal due to a false persona. The commonality between the two lies in that the adapted works generally dissolve the imperfections of the original characters, making their personalities tend to be similar. This reflects a common problem in modern ancient costume dramas - over-reliance on love storylines to advance the plot while neglecting the compatibility between character logic and plot. It also reveals the potential influence of popular drama templates on subsequent works.

### 3.2. Horizontal Comparison

Since the huge success of *The Journey of Flower* in 2016, the adaptation of xianxia ips has made rapid progress. Due to the popularity of a TV drama, screenwriters and directors have begun to play the "safety card", lacking innovation and hoping to replicate success. The popular xianxia TV series *The Journey of Flower*, *Eternal Love* and *Ashes of Love*, which are relatively close in timeline, share the same narrative logic in terms of plot and character development, especially in the plot and character development centered around the heroine. The innocent and cheerful heroine grew up after going through some hardships and crises.

With the changing trends of The Times, many TV dramas nowadays still cannot shake off the setting of "men taking the lead". For instance, at the beginning of the story, the male lead of *The Journey of Flower* is the powerful immortal Changliu, while the heroine is just an orphan. In *Eternal Love*, the male lead is the crown prince of the Ninth Palace, while the heroine is an ordinary person. The male lead of *Ashes of Love* is the son of the Heavenly Emperor, while the heroine is a grape spirit with low magic power.

Song Geng mentioned it in his article *The Overbearing CEO: Cinderella Fantasy and Chinese-style Neoliberal Femininity*: In many TV dramas and novels in China, "overbearing CEO" is a

recurring theme, stereotyped depicting the love story between a rich and domineering man and a girl of mediocre origin. This presents a Cinderella-like fantasy. Faced with the huge disparity between the male and heroines, the heroine is always forced to change herself to adapt to the male lead in order to match him [5]. This model is carried forward in xianxia dramas: Even though "strong heroine" dramas emphasize the growth of women, the male lead still maintains the narrative center and the power logic of a "domineering CEO" at critical moments by "saving a beauty as a hero".

In the article A brief analysis of the "mechanical reproduction" characteristic in Mainland Chinese mythological fantasy TV dramas: A case study of *Ashes of Love*, Liu Yanzhen proposed the concept of "semiotization" and conducted an analysis of the functions and characteristics undertaken by the characters [6]. This concept is equally applicable to character archetypes in Xianxia dramas: the male lead is invariably defined by his powerful status and authority; female supporting characters are invariably either jealous antagonists or the heroine's loyal confidantes; while male supporting characters are typically confined to the role of a devoted admirer or are paired romantically with the heroine's best friend. These archetypal characters constitute a "semiotic system" within genre television.

Among these idol dramas of the xianxia genre, the love storyline holds the most crucial position. The entanglement of love and hate between Hua Qiang and Bai Zihua in *The Journey of Flower* is the main thread of the entire drama, presenting the narrative logic of women growing up through hardships. *Eternal Love* and *Ashes of Love* also follow a similar pattern. After going through hardships, the heroine grows from innocence to maturity, and love becomes the key driving force for her growth.

Therefore, although they are not of the same origin, the audience can almost completely predict the direction of the story and the changes in the female protagonist's personality. The "Strong heroine" drama takes the heroine as the core and narrates from the heroine's perspective, which is the rise of feminism. However, certain innovative breakthroughs are also needed to expand the existing film and television market. Blindly drawing on the experience of predecessors may not necessarily be accepted by the audience.

### 3.3. Discussion and Implications

In pursuit of traffic and popularity, nowadays, TV dramas have overly similar character designs and plots, and there is a certain degree of stereotypical shaping in the character Settings of the heroines. Even the heroine images with distinct personalities and different characteristics in the original work are all the same after being adapted into the TV series. Perhaps it is due to the wider audience of TV dramas and films that they are forced to be "perfectly beautified".

Although the world view of xianxia dramas is grand and the background is diverse, the love line always occupies a core position. Once love becomes the sole narrative driver, the growth of characters is prone to imbalance, and there will be a disconnection between the plot and the character design. If the spirit of the original work can be retained, and the love story and the main plot can be reasonably balanced, the logical consistency of the characters can be strengthened, and diversified paths can be explored on the theme of "female growth", a more ideal balance and breakthrough can be achieved between business and art.

## 4. Interpersonal Relationships of Female Characters

Driven by themes such as "eternal love" and "tragic love doomed by fate," works such as *The Journey of Flower* and *The Eternal Love* idealize female sacrifice and resilience through stories where "love is a trial." Despite a large audience, these formulas eventually became monotonous and tiresome. At the dawn of the 2020s, creators broke free from the mold of "tragic romance." While retaining the emotional dimension, they incorporated female-led character development and independent storylines. This change reflects the audience's desire for complex female characters, transforming the relationships between characters from romantic dependence to love that coexists with personal

fulfillment. It offers an essential perspective for examining male-female interactions, female relationships, and the female condition.

#### **4.1. Diversification of Interactive Relationships Between Female Characters and Other Characters**

In Chinese fantasy TV dramas around 2016, the relationships between female characters were often simplified to "competition and opposition." For instance, in *The Eternal Love*, the interactions between female supporting roles and the female lead were mostly confined to the level of competing for male characters, lacking positive and constructive interactions with one another. But after the 2020s, creators have gradually begun to emphasize the support and companionship between female characters, liberating their relationships from the pattern of "female rivalry" and incorporating more warmth of friendship. "The relationships between female characters have gradually been endowed with more narrative significance, no longer confined to the mode of love rivals or competition, but have shown a shift towards mutual assistance and alliance." [7]. In group dynamics, female characters status has also strengthened. Around 2016, in these works, they were often appendages of sects or families, gaining some voice only through their family's prestige. But after 2020, as in *The Legend of Shen Li's*, Shen Li, as the Demon Realm's Prince, takes on responsibilities traditionally held by male characters. Such settings break the mold of previous "supporting roles," establishing female characters as key drivers of plot and group progress [8]. Data shows that during the broadcast of *The Legend of Shen Li's* on Tencent Video, female viewers accounted for over 65% of the audience. Comments such as "Queenly demeanor" and "The heroine exudes a powerful aura" topped the list, confirming that female-centered narratives have become mainstream.

#### **4.2. Dual Impacts of the Shift in Narrative Style**

In recent years, Chinese fantasy TV series have tried to add more growth arcs and a sense of responsibility to female characters, not just limited to love stories, but love narratives still dominate. For example, the tenacious character of Xiao Lanhua in *Love Between Fairy and Devil* is often framed within romantic narratives, with the finale concluding with the lovers' reunion—underscoring romance's central role in the overall story. This shows that while female-led narratives have emerged as a trend, they remain constrained by romantic frameworks in narrative logic [9].

The in-depth portrayal of the relationship between women has expanded the scope of expression of traditional Chinese fantasy TV series, but its expression is still limited. Many works still rely on fixed patterns such as "misunderstanding-conflict-reconciliation"

or "villain-transformation-alignment" to promote the plot development. This "predictability" undermines the complexity and authenticity of female relationships to some extent, showing that while these dramas break traditions, they have not fully broken free from the safe model of market-oriented creation [10].

#### **4.3. Driving Factors for the Elevation of Female Characters' Status**

The rising status of female characters in groups not only reflects the growing female consciousness in modern film and television creation, but is also closely linked to commercial needs. In recent years, female viewers have gradually become the main consumer group of Chinese fantasy TV dramas, prompting producers to continuously strengthen female-led narratives. While this trend has granted female characters greater initiative in power structures and plot progression, it may also give rise to a contradiction: being "female-led in form yet romantically dependent in substance." Some works still adopt the "romance and power" framework to cater to the market, without fundamentally expanding female subjectivity. This indicates that the trend of female-centered characters, driven by industrial logic, carries a certain utilitarianism.

## 5. Conclusion

In the process of film and television adaptation of Xianxia style online literature works from 2016 to 2025, the portrayal of female characters has shown distinct characteristics and development trajectories in terms of costume, personality, and character relationships. There are both breakthroughs in tradition and unavoidable problems. In terms of Costume, makeup, and props, although its design can to some extent conform to the character's background, emotions, and identity, becoming an important auxiliary means of shaping female characters, the phenomenon of similarity and stereotypes is significant. The shaping of female character personalities in the vertical dimension is influenced by the lag of film and television adaptation and the paradigm of "fairy puppetry". The character of the original female lead will be adapted to meet popular trends and plot requirements, and some characters may even undergo "magic changes". Horizontally, influenced by the mindset of replicating successful cases, the personalities of female protagonists in different fantasy dramas exhibit a high degree of similarity. The development of relationships between female characters is most significant, gradually shifting from a focus on love and female competition between women from 2016 to 2019, to incorporating elements of "big female lead" cultivation and emphasizing female mutual assistance after 2020. Moreover, the core position of women in the group continues to rise, with some characters even taking on key responsibilities for driving the plot and the development of the group.

Overall, although there have been breakthroughs in the portrayal of female characters in Xianxia dramas during this period due to the awakening of female consciousness, they are still constrained by factors such as industry creative inertia and pursuit of commercial interests. If the future creation of xianxia dramas can break through the rigid thinking of the costume industry, break free from the constraints of the "fairy doll" paradigm on character personalities, balance love narratives and female growth lines, innovate character relationship shaping models, it is expected to create more profound, diverse, and modern audience aesthetic and value pursuits of female characters, and promote the high-quality development of the xianxia drama industry.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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Yes no changes	Yes with minor revisions	√	Yes with major revisions	No
<b>Please expand on any weak areas in the checklist and offer specific advice as to how the author(s) may improve the paper.</b>				
<p style="text-align: center;">This study examines female character portrayals in Chinese fantasy (xianxia) web-novel adaptations from 2016 to 2025, focusing on costumes/makeup/props, personality construction, and interpersonal relationships. It finds that although female characters show greater visibility and thematic depth, their visual design and personality development remain constrained by homogenized aesthetics and love-centered “xianxia idol drama” formulas. Overall, female roles are shifting from romance-driven narratives toward themes of personal growth and female solidarity, yet commercial pressures still limit the full realization of diverse and independent female subjectivity.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">However, some linguistic details need to be revised.</p>				