

From *Wuxia* to Cultivation Games: Reimagining Chinese Cosmology in Digital Space

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Xiuxian (修仙) or cultivation games is a rapidly emerging genre in Chinese gaming market, which simulate the journey of spiritual practitioners seeking immortality through practicing a set of martial and mystical arts (Qiang & Hao, 2023). Drawing on Yuk Hui's concept of "cosmotechnics" (2017; 2021), which examines how different cultures integrate cosmic and moral orders through technical activities, this research investigates how cultivation games translate traditional Daoist spiritual practices and epistemological frameworks into digital game experiences.

Cultivation games often adapt the popular web novel genre of cultivation fantasy into interactive experiences where players progress through stages of spiritual advancement, manage resources, create magical elixirs, and engage with traditional Chinese cosmological systems. Unlike their predecessors in the *wuxia* genre, which focused primarily on martial arts combat and chivalric themes, cultivation games emphasize the systematic progression of spiritual cultivation and the mastery of mystical arts. The emergence of cultivation games represents a significant evolution in the digitalization of Chinese cultural elements.

The study traces the lineage from *wuxia* to cultivation games, beginning with the influential "Three Swords" of the 1990s – *Xuan-Yuan Sword* (*Xuan Yuan Jian*, Softstar, 1990), *Chinese Paladin* (*Xian Jian Qi Xia Zhuan*, Softstar, 1995), and *Jian Xia Qing Yuan* (Seasun, 1997). These three games, which all had 'jian' (sword) in their titles, established the foundation for Chinese cultural elements in gaming while simultaneously creating formulaic patterns for later *wuxia* games.

According to Chen (2013, 163), *wuxia* games dominated "more than half of the market in China". The popularity of *wuxia* games also extends beyond China's borders. Often perceived as a shared tradition in Asia, *wuxia* has become a common motif in East Asian MMORPG design (Chan, 2006). One such example is the South Korean game *1000 Years* (Actoz Soft, 2001). However, the adaptation of *wuxia* in games creates an imbalance between *wu* (martial aspects) and *xia* (cultural-philosophical elements). As

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Mi and Chen observe, "the elements of *xia* are diluted while *wu* is greatly amplified since overpowering strength is the primary drive or determinant of these games" (2006, 18; as cited in Zhang 2016, 334). This privileging of combat mechanics in *wuxia* games is further emphasized by Cao et al., who note that "*wu* symbolizes the visual representation of character power, which is more pronounced in gaming media compared to other artistic forms" (2023, 38).

Cultivation games, on the other hand, represent a distinct approach to incorporating Chinese cosmology. While *wuxia* games mostly use cultural elements as backdrop, cultivation games adapt traditional Chinese cosmological and alchemical concepts into their core gameplay mechanics. For example, such integration can be seen through two primary structural frameworks derived from Chinese alchemy traditions: *nei dan* (inner alchemy) and *wai dan* (outer alchemy). These frameworks are transformed into progression systems and gameplay mechanics that mirror Daoist cultivation stages such as *lianqi* (qi-refinement), *zhuji* (foundation-building), and *huashen* (spirit-transformation).

The research employs textual analysis of contemporary cultivation games, such as *Immortal Way of Life* (Chalcedony Network, 2019) and *Amazing Cultivation Simulator* (GSQ Games, 2020), to demonstrate how these titles incorporate traditional Chinese epistemological frameworks, such as the *wuxing* (Five Elements) system and *feng shui* principles, into their gameplay mechanics. Drawing on Yuk Hui's concept of "cosmotechnics" (2017; 2021), this paper argues that cultivation games represent a potential fusion of cosmic and moral orders through technical activities. Unlike *wuxia* games, which often commercialize a broader "Asian-ness" for market appeal, cultivation games engage with specific Chinese cosmological and mythological frameworks to create unique gameplay and narrative experiences.

The lineage from *wuxia* to cultivation games demonstrates how specific Chinese cosmologies, especially Daoist epistemologies, have been reimagined and revitalized through digital games. This study challenges the Western-centric perspectives in game studies by analyzing how Chinese cosmology, religion, and philosophy manifest in computer gaming practices. By examining cultivation games as culturally specific artifacts, this research not only expands game studies beyond Euro-American frameworks, but also contributes to more specific discussions in religious game studies (Heidbrink et al. 2014; Giuliana 2023; De Wildt & Aupers 2019; Wagner 2013) and mythological game studies (Asimos 2018; Galanina & Salin 2017; Vandewalle 2024; Yoon 2021; Qin 2023).

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