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Racism, Family Triangulation, and Gender: How the Intersection of Orientalism and the Patriarchy Frames Yu Ziyuan in *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*

The xianxia novel *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu rocketed to popularity with the 2019 release of its live action adaptation, “The Untamed” (Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation Wikipedia). Xianxia is a more fantastical spin on the wuxia genre, involving spirits, demons, and ghosts in a semi-historical China that focuses on martial arts (Xianxia Wikipedia). In the novel, the main character Wei Wuxian is fostered by one of the great martial arts sects, the Yunmeng Jiang sect, led by Jiang Fengmian. Jiang Fengmian’s wife Yu Ziyuan, however, takes umbrage at the fact that Jiang Fengmian appears to lavish more attention on his ward than his actual son, Jiang Cheng. This perceived inattention leads to conflicts within the Jiang family, as Yu Ziyuan identifies herself strongly with her son and defends him against his father’s indifference. I argue that although many fans interpret Yu Ziyuan as abusive to her children and Wei Wuxian, these interpretations lack cultural context and reflect Orientalist ideologies. Rather, she contains an intense love for her children that prompts her to interject herself into the father-son relationship, triangulating her family in an attempt to maintain the patriline against the threat of Wei Wuxian. Her insecurities and status as an object within the patriarchy pushes Yu Ziyuan into screaming fits, revealing that the patriarchy forces women to become hysterical. Her attempts to become more than an object in the patriarchy ironically leave the people around her struggling to understand her, prompting her to lash out

even further. Because the patriarchal world she lives in pushes her to screaming fits, it is the combination of Orientalism and misogyny that position her as an abusive mother rather than giving her the grace to be a messy, complicated woman trying to navigate the patriarchy as best she can. The novel ultimately reveals the ways in which women cope with the material realities of the patriarchy by forcing themselves into the patriline and attempting to fit into stereotypes that they fail at, becoming hysterical and vilified in the process.

In the move from China to an English-speaking Internet sphere, fans have viewed Yu Ziyuan as an abusive mother, as she frequently scolds her children unnecessarily harshly. At a family dinner before Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian are sent to another sect for training, she snaps at her daughter, Jiang Yanli, for “happily peeling lotus seeds” for Wei Wuxian, since Jiang Yanli “is the master, not other people’s servants!” (Ch 51). The seemingly innocuous action of peeling lotus seeds for Wei Wuxian to eat is twisted on both of them as Yu Ziyuan indirectly mocks Wei Wuxian’s status as the son of a servant, and scolds her daughter for forgetting her place. After her son Jiang Cheng attempts to placate her, she yells at him, too, telling him that “he will never be better than the person sitting next to him” and that she did not know “how she birthed such a son” who would speak up in defense of Wei Wuxian after Wei Wuxian pulled Jiang Cheng into slacking off (Ch 51). Not only does Yu Ziyuan yell at them, she also brings up their insecurities and is unnecessarily harsh to them. It is unsurprising why fans have interpreted her as an abusive mother. As of 26 May 2024, on Archive of Our Own, a popular fanfiction site, there are 3,456 works under the ‘Yu Ziyuan’ character tag, and 280 contain the tag ‘Bad Parent Yu Ziyuan,’ or other variations of this sentiment (Archive of Our Own). In other words, almost ten percent of the fan-created works about Yu Ziyuan interpret her as an abusive parent due to her scolding her children, revealing how prevalent this attitude towards her is in the fandom.

However, I want to push back against the reading of Yu Ziyuan as solely an abusive parent. For one, the stereotype of the tiger parent in Chinese families may explain Yu Ziyuan lashing out at her son. As Charissa Cheah, Christy Leung, and Nan Zhou identify in their article “Understanding “tiger parenting” through the perceptions of Chinese immigrant mothers: Can Chinese and U.S. parenting coexist?,” Chinese parenting—which the immigrant mothers in the study reflect on as part of their own childhood in China—consists of strict discipline, social comparisons, high measures of involvement in their child’s life, and emphasis on academic performance (34-35). I want to note that the stereotype of tiger parenting comes from an American perspective and carries negative connotations. However, the Chinese immigrant mothers in the study reflect upon their experiences growing up in China to create the definition of Chinese parenting used in the research, revealing how the tiger parenting stereotype holds true in China. This strict parenting is ubiquitous to China, thus informing Yu Ziyuan’s parenting style as a character created by a Chinese author. She disciplines Jiang Cheng harshly, scolding him for shooting kites instead of focusing on his cultivation in her very first appearance in the novel (Ch 51). From the beginning, Yu Ziyuan is established as a strict, no-nonsense mother who wants her son to focus on improving his performance instead of playing around. Cultivation can be understood to be a stand-in for academic success here, as the xianxia genre is based on cultivation of an individual’s inner energy. Just as academic success is valued for its perceived ability to provide personal and financial achievements in the real world, cultivating and martial arts are valued for their ability to grant success in the xianxia world of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*. One’s success therefore depends on the time spent cultivating and the strength of one’s martial arts, and Yu Ziyuan sees Jiang Cheng’s achievements as her own, since he is her biological son. Therefore, Jiang Cheng’s success in life is the reason behind pushing him so hard,

and a way for her to succeed as both parent and cultivator. As a parent, she would succeed by raising a strong, independent man to a successful adulthood. As a cultivator, she succeeds in passing on her martial arts skills, as well as her skill in cultivation. In addition to emphasizing performance, Yu Ziyuan compares Jiang Cheng to Wei Wuxian, saying that she's "told him before, in this life, [he] will never be better than" Wei Wuxian, implying that the comparisons were frequent when growing up (Ch 51). These social comparisons serve to reinforce her status as a tiger mom, or the epitome of Chinese parenting. The tradition of tiger parenting serves as a framework with which we can understand her parenting style.

As such, seeing this strict, no-nonsense parenting as automatically abusive without considering the genre and cultural context of the novel carries undertones of Orientalism. To see Yu Ziyuan's tiger parenting style as abusive puts it in contrast with other parenting styles. If she is seen as a stereotypical Chinese mother—whose parenting style is abusive—this implies that she must be the opposite of a non-Chinese, Western mother, whose parenting style is good and non-abusive. The word "West" is used here to indicate a primarily white English-speaking world, though I acknowledge that due to colonialism and imperialism, many people who live in countries that are not part of the "West" speak English. Rather, I mean to indicate the historical "West," the one defined in post-colonial scholar Edward Said's book *Orientalism*. As he puts it, the West always has "a certain comparative sense of superiority" to the East (Said 178). In this case, there is an underlying ideology that posits the Western style of parenting as automatically superior to Yu Ziyuan's tiger parenting style, thus leading English-speaking fans to see her as abusive when she is continuing a larger tradition of Chinese parenting. Yu Ziyuan is a strict mother—and while the extent to which that crosses into abuse may be debated—there is a distinct lack of nuance in the way Western fans label her as abusive, reflecting Orientalist ideas

about the East. In addition, as she reminds Jiang Fengmian, “she is also the master of [the Yunmeng Jiang sect headquarters] Lotus Pier,” and in the world of the novel it is well within her rights to discipline the disciples of the sect like her foster son, Wei Wuxian (Ch 56). The extent to which she abuses this right, particularly with regards to Wei Wuxian, may also be debated, though she is, notably, not his mother, and does not act as such. While Wei Wuxian calls Jiang Fengmian “Uncle Jiang,” he calls Yu Ziyuan “Madam Yu” like the other disciples of the sect, indicating that their relationship is purely as a sect disciple and sect leader’s wife (Ch 51). With their relationship being non-familial, Yu Ziyuan is allowed to discipline him as she sees fit, and it would not make her an abusive parent to him. As such, seeing Yu Ziyuan as an abusive parent to Wei Wuxian would be untrue, and reading her as abusive to her children reflects Orientalist ideologies that posit Chinese parenting styles as automatically bad.

To read Yu Ziyuan as purely abusive also erases her complexities as a person, including the love she feels for her children and her protection of both Jiang Cheng (as an extension of her) and Wei Wuxian. When she is about to die in a siege upon her home, she sends both Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian away to find her daughter, and hugs Jiang Cheng “with a lot of strength, as if she hated that she could not turn Jiang Cheng into a baby and bury him back in her stomach so that nobody could hurt him, and nobody could separate the two of them” (Ch 58). This hug reveals everything she could not outright say to him, what she was trying to show him as she pushed him to get better and succeed: that she loves him. By expressing her wish to bring him back into her body and thus turn him into a literal extension of her, she reveals how she sees Jiang Cheng as a part of herself. Burying him back into her stomach would render this immaterial extension tangible and allow her to physically protect him. In addition, when a representative of a different sect threatens her into punishing Wei Wuxian using her whip Zidian,

she says that “after he has taken this beating [from Zidian], he won’t be healed even after a month” (Ch 57). However, after Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng escape the destruction of Lotus Pier not even an hour after the whipping, “Wei Wuxian realized, other than the places where he was whipped feeling hot and itchy, moving was not a huge problem” (Ch 58). Not only did Yu Ziyuan hold back when whipping Wei Wuxian with Zidian, but she also lied to the sect representative Wang Lingjiao about the severity of his punishment. In doing so, she attempted to protect him from further punishments such as the one Wang Lingjiao suggested, cutting off his hand, on the grounds that being whipped by Zidian was enough of a punishment (Ch 57). Later, when she sends Jiang Cheng away to escape the rival sect’s siege, she sends Wei Wuxian with him, too, saving him from being killed with the rest of the Yunmeng Jiang sect disciples (Ch 58). It is clear that while she may not like Wei Wuxian—she blames him for the destruction of Lotus Pier—she does, in fact, protect him as much as she is able to (Ch 58). Yu Ziyuan, therefore, is a complex woman who loves and protects her children, and this protection extends to Wei Wuxian despite her personal dislike of him.

This protection of her children also manifests as interjecting herself into the father-son relationship, triangulating the family dynamic in an attempt to preserve her son’s place in the patriline. In the novel, a rival sect calls disciples of other sects to theirs for education. In this education camp, Wei Wuxian and his love interest Lan Wangji are trapped in a cave and must defeat a monster (Ch 55). After Wei Wuxian is rescued from the cave and is recuperating at home, Jiang Fengmian, the sect leader of the Yunmeng Jiang sect, praises him for killing the monster, then chastises his son Jiang Cheng for his jealous words towards Wei Wuxian and his achievement of killing the monster, reminding him to keep their family’s motto about achieving the impossible in mind (Ch 56). It is at this moment that Yu Ziyuan enters the room, immediately

jumping to her son's defense by saying, "Yes, he doesn't understand, what has this got to do with this? As long as Wei Ying [Wei Wuxian] understands the motto it's fine!" (Ch 56). The crux of the argument is laid out plainly in her opening words in this scene: Yu Ziyuan hates the fact that Jiang Fengmian appears to be favoring Wei Wuxian over Jiang Cheng, and accuses him of not knowing which one is his son. As the narration notes, Jiang Fengmian had "heard these kinds of questions countless times over the many years," revealing just how often Yu Ziyuan fights with Jiang Fengmian over Jiang Cheng (Ch 56). Notably, it is Jiang Cheng's relationship with Jiang Fengmian that sparks the arguments: Yu Ziyuan believes that Jiang Fengmian doesn't recognize his son as his by treating Wei Wuxian better than Jiang Cheng. The father-son relationship is triangulated with the presence of the mother, Yu Ziyuan, who inserts herself into the relationship, taking up arms against her husband for perceived slights against their son. As associate professor of social work Simon Chan's case study detailed in his article "The manifestation of family triangulation in Asian-Chinese families and its relevance to father-son conflict" proves, family triangulation is not just a Western concept, it also applies to contemporary Chinese families (Chan 403-404). In other words, the "father-son conflict echoes both hidden mother-son attachment and hidden father-mother conflict" (Chan 403). This is especially apparent with both the ways in which Yu Ziyuan sees Jiang Cheng as an extension of her and how Jiang Fengmian's (lack of) relationship with his son reveals his conflict with his wife. In addition, Jiang Cheng only refers to his father in formal terms, calling him "Father," while he refers to his mother with a more intimate word that translates to "Mom" (Ch 51). The formality of his address reveals how close he is with each of his parents. With Jiang Fengmian, who chastises him for his inability to grasp his family's motto, thus implying he is unfit to be sect leader since he cannot understand their family's values, he is reserved and distant in his

address. With Yu Ziyuan, who defends him from his father and sees him as an extension of her, he is intimate and caring. Indeed, when caught between his parents, Jiang Cheng ends up choosing to stand by his mother's side (Ch 56). Both the close relationship between Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Cheng and Yu Ziyuan's conflict with her husband are revealed through her interjection into the father-son relationship, just as Simon Chan describes in his case study. Yu Ziyuan interjects herself into the father-son relationship in order to protect her son, triangulating the father-son relationship.

The close connection between mother and son is reflected in the depictions of their personalities and Jiang Cheng's inheritance of his mother's whip, which reflects their abrasive temperaments. When Yu Ziyuan is introduced in the novel, her mocking smile is described "to be precisely the same as Jiang Cheng" (Ch 51). Interestingly, when her husband is introduced, there is no comparison between him and his son, indicating that Jiang Cheng inherited most of his mother's looks. While it may be natural for Jiang Cheng to inherit Yu Ziyuan's appearance as her son, it is a visual representation of how he is also similar to her in temperament. Both of them are blunt and abrasive, with short tempers and sharp tongues. After Yu Ziyuan lashes out at everyone when Wei Wuxian is recuperating, accusing Wei Wuxian of being Jiang Fengmian's bastard son, Jiang Cheng flees the room, shouting, "Go the fuck back to your bed to lie down!" when Wei Wuxian tries to follow him, revealing his abrasive nature (Ch 56). Although Wei Wuxian only wanted to reassure him that the rumors are false, Jiang Cheng yells at him to send him away so he can avoid talking about his feelings. In doing so, he reflects what his mother does when instead of talking to Jiang Fengmian and clarifying once and for all if Wei Wuxian is his bastard son or not, she yells at her husband, her children, and Wei Wuxian. Yu Ziyuan and her son both turn their anger out on other people rather than attempt to peacefully mediate. This habit of

lashing out instead of having conversations is reflected in their shared weapon, Zidian. Zidian is a whip that “still has the buzzing of purple electricity” down it (Ch 10). A whip can only be used to hurt; it has no capacity to heal, or to mend. The swords that the cultivators carry can be used to break binds and defend, but Zidian can only harm. The electricity that runs down Zidian reflects the nature of the weapon: electricity, when applied at sufficient voltage, can hurt, and can only heal with very specific circumstances and voltages as a defibrillator. Although Zidian is a spiritual weapon—which in the novel means it possesses some agency in carrying out its masters’ commands—because it is a whip, it can only be used as a weapon, never as a tool to save lives. Likewise, Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Cheng use their hurt as a weapon against the people around them, turning their anger outwards instead of trying to mend their interpersonal relationships: their lashing out at other people is reminiscent of the lashings of a whip. Zidian thus becomes a symbol of Yu Ziyuan and her son. This is further reinforced through Jiang Cheng’s inheritance of the whip that stayed by his mother’s side as she married into the Jiang family. When Yu Ziyuan knows she is about to die, she gives Zidian to her son, thereby passing down her legacy to him (Ch 58). Notably, it is her whip that is passed down to Jiang Cheng, not her husband’s sword. Whips appear to be a specialty from her natal sect, as the maids she brings with her as part of her dowry are also seen using whips to fight (Ch 58). This inheritance of Zidian represents their shared propensity to lash out at the people around them in anger. In doing so, the similarities between mother and son are reinforced and the bond between mother and son strengthened, creating a mother-son relationship and complex.

The mother-son complex is furthered through the establishment of Yu Ziyuan’s inferiority complex, which she projects onto her son. When discussing who should be sent to a rival martial arts sect for education, Jiang Fengmian allows Wei Wuxian the choice to go or not, whereas it is

a given that Jiang Cheng must go (Ch 51). Angered at Jiang Fengmian giving Wei Wuxian such care, Yu Ziyuan responds by telling Jiang Cheng that she's "told him before, in this life, [he] will never be better than the person sitting next to [him]," then goes on to say that it was because she "wasn't as good as other people's mothers" (Ch 51). In this exchange, Yu Ziyuan refers to Wei Wuxian and his mother—a cultivator whom Jiang Fengmian was rumored to be in love with before her marriage to his servant (Ch 56). Not only does Yu Ziyuan compare herself to Wei Wuxian's biological mother, but she also identifies her failings and inferiority relative to Wei Wuxian's mother as the reason why Jiang Cheng will never be better than Wei Wuxian. In doing so, she outwardly blames herself, but also implicitly her son. If she *and* Jiang Cheng were better, she implies, perhaps Jiang Fengmian would give them the same amount of care and attention as he does Wei Wuxian. Though she yells at her husband, she only mocks him for "raising another person's child so well" instead of blaming him for not treating Jiang Cheng well (Ch 51). Rather than blaming her husband for his treatment of their son, she turns her feelings of failure inwards to herself and outwards onto Jiang Cheng. In doing so, she perpetuates her own inferiority complex and projects it onto her son. Yu Ziyuan also implies that there is nothing anyone can do to change her and her son's inferiority. Their inferiority relative to Wei Wuxian and his mother, Cangse, is inherent to them: something that Jiang Cheng inherits from Yu Ziyuan just as Wei Wuxian inherits his skill from Cangse. Yu Ziyuan says that Jiang Cheng will never be better than Wei Wuxian, and, because Cangse is dead, Yu Ziyuan can never be better than her: Cangse will be perpetually a memory who can not age or do wrong, while Yu Ziyuan is alive and yelling. By outright telling Jiang Cheng that he will never be better than Wei Wuxian, Yu Ziyuan pushes her inferiority complex onto her son, forcing him to share her feelings of failure and insecurity.

Yu Ziyuan's feelings of insecurity are reinforced by the monomyth that Wei Wuxian fulfills, but her son does not, tying her anxieties and inferiority complex to the patriline and her place within—or rather outside—it. Wei Wuxian's defeat of the monster in the cave with his love interest, Lan Wangji, is reminiscent of the third step of the monomyth, which, as Sharareh Frouzesh describes, is "the trial or task which involves a confrontation with a monster, the killing or overcoming of whom is achieved through the help of others" (Frouzesh 5). Upon the completion of these steps, the hero becomes eligible to become king, joining and continuing the patriline, and, as Frouzesh argues, the "victory over the monster is, thus, central for the possibility of filiation and investiture for the hero" (Frouzesh 5). Importantly, it is Wei Wuxian who defeats the monster in the cave, not Jiang Cheng, who is the heir to his father's sect. By completing this task, Wei Wuxian's hero's journey is furthered, and the possibility of inheriting Jiang Fengmian's position as sect leader surfaces. Though Wei Wuxian is not Jiang Fengmian's son, his completion of this central step to the monomyth threatens Jiang Cheng's position as heir. It is this threat to her son's position in the patriline that sparks Yu Ziyuan's argument with Jiang Fengmian: when she overhears her husband chastising her son for not understanding the family's motto—yet another threat to her son's position, as the insinuation that Jiang Cheng does not understand the sect motto is that he is not fit to inherit the sect—she asks her husband, "Do you or do you not remember, between the one lying down and the one standing up, which one is actually your son?" (Ch 56). This exchange reveals her anxieties regarding her son's position in the patriline: Jiang Fengmian's biological son may be Jiang Cheng, but if he treats Wei Wuxian as his son, especially after Wei Wuxian completes the third task of the monomyth, the blood patriline is threatened. In addition, as a woman, Yu Ziyuan is not considered part of the patriline unless her son inherits the sect, which would locate her in the family line as the mother of the

sect leader. Since her inferiority complex is tied so closely to her anxieties regarding the patriline, her sense of self is defined by the patriarchy as well. Yu Ziyuan's identity, therefore, is inextricably linked to the patriline and her place within it; any threat to her son's position is also a threat to her future position in the family. As such, Yu Ziyuan's projection of her inferiority complex onto her son takes a different dimension: she projects her insecurities onto Jiang Cheng in an attempt to push him to succeed and reclaim his rightful position as the true heir to the Yunmeng Jiang sect and the patriline, thus allowing her to enter the family ancestry and gain a sense of self.

Indeed, there is a longstanding tradition of Chinese women reinforcing the patriline through their relationships with their sons, a tradition that Yu Ziyuan continues by placing her hopes onto her son's shoulders in an attempt to locate herself in a patriarchal society. In his chapter, "Women as Outsiders: Princesses, Defilement, and Buddhist Salvation," P. Steven Sangren describes traditional Chinese femininity and how women were left out of patrilineality and turned to their sons as a source of salvation, mirroring the ways that Yu Ziyuan places expectations upon her son in order to reestablish her standing in the patriline. As he puts it, "Enjoined to leave their natal families and systemically defined as outsiders in their families of procreation, alienated by the often overt hostility of mothers-in-law and, sometimes, indifference of husbands, young Chinese mothers seek emotional solace and support in their relations with their children, especially sons" (Sangren 245). This puts Yu Ziyuan's high expectations for her son into a different light: while she may berate her son for shooting kites instead of focusing on his cultivation, it is ultimately in order to comfort herself with ensuring he becomes the best sect leader he can be in the future (Ch 51). Thus, she invests herself emotionally in both her relationship with Jiang Cheng and her hopes for his material future. These hopes are that Jiang

Cheng inherits his father's position of Yunmeng Jiang sect leader, and that he is a strong, capable sect leader. This is also an attempt for her to find her place within the patriarchy: as a woman, she is left out of the patriline and can only ensure her place within it through her son's inheritance of the sect. Because her inferiority complex is tied to the patriarchy, it is only when she is visible within the patriline that her sense of self becomes realized, increasing her emotional reliance on her son's succession of the sect. Yu Ziyuan is especially invested in her son's inheritance due to her strained relationship with her husband, which also threatens her legacy within the family. Yu Ziyuan's relationship with Jiang Fengmian is actively antagonistic, as she yells at him for perceived slights against her son. In other words, she attempts to preserve her son's place in the patriline by shouting at Jiang Fengmian to stop disregarding their son and accept him as heir. Jiang Fengmian deals with this by closing himself off from her and placing a physical separation between the two of them: "Yu Ziyuan's quarters in Lotus Pier were separate from Jiang Fengmian's quarters" (Ch 51). Due to how distant she is with her husband—as indicated by their separate quarters in their home—Yu Ziyuan latches onto her son for emotional support: she invests much of her energy into making sure he grows up to be strong and inherit his place within the patriline, which would allow her to find a place within the patriline as the sect leader's mother. In doing so, she mirrors a larger and longer tradition of Chinese women trying to survive a patriarchal society by doing the exact same thing: latching onto their sons for emotional support in their husband's indifferent at best, actively hostile at worst, household.

This hostile household is exacerbated by her position in the marriage economy, which denigrates her to an object in the patriarchy, prompting Yu Ziyuan to become hysterical, especially when faced with rumors that threaten her son's place within the patriline. As Elaine Showalter puts it in "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," women who were "faced with real

responsibilities and problems... fled from stress by choosing a sick role in which they won continued sympathy and protection from the family. Thus hysteria provided a solution to the feminine conflict between idealized sex roles and quotidian realities” (Showalter 303). While Yu Ziyuan’s hysteria may not manifest in the ways commonly thought of—the “daily fits of crying and screaming” described in Showalter’s article—it does show itself in her constant scoldings of her husband and children (Showalter 300). There is an almost unreasonable aspect to her tirades, as she lashes out at the people around her for rumors that they can’t control (Ch 56). These rumors insinuate that Wei Wuxian is Jiang Fengmian’s bastard son, which threatens Jiang Cheng’s place within the patriline, tying her hysteria to her anxieties about the inheritance of the sect (Ch 56). Her hysteria is further exacerbated by her place in the marriage economy as constructed by the patriarchal society she lives in. When the circumstances of her marriage are described, Yu Ziyuan herself is never mentioned: it is the “Meishan Yu sect [that] suddenly suggested a marriage with the Yunmeng Jiang sect” (Ch 56). Indeed, because “Jiang Fengmian did not like Yu Ziyuan’s personality and believed the two of them would not be a good pair, he tactfully and politely refused many times” (Ch 56). His reluctance to get married is clear, and his beliefs about Yu Ziyuan’s personality chafing with his own come to fruition. Notably, he is the only one named in this exchange, and the marriage eventually comes down to his decision after the woman he loves, Cangse, elopes with his servant (Ch 56). Yu Ziyuan is not mentioned at all in this exchange. Rather, the Meishan Yu sect and Jiang Fengmian are the primary actors, as the Meishan Yu sect puts pressure on Jiang Fengmian to accept the marriage proposal by taking advantage of his youth and lack of support (Ch 56). Yu Ziyuan, then, is treated as an object to be foisted off onto Jiang Fengmian through marriage, albeit one that he accepts reluctantly and only after Wei Wuxian’s mother is no longer an option for marriage. It is these material stressors—her

objectification at the hands of the patriarchy, her less-than-welcoming husband, and the rumors that threaten her son's place within the patriline—that prompt her into her hysterical fits of scolding. By forcing the people around her to acknowledge her screams, if not listen to her, she can be a person, instead of only existing as an object in the patriarchy.

In her attempts to be seen as a person rather than an object, Yu Ziyuan tries to become the trope of the female knight-errant of the Chinese wuxia genre, yet ultimately fails, prompting her to lash out again. As Yining Zhou, PhD candidate in the Department of English at Memorial University of Newfoundland, writes, the female knight-errant takes advantage of the *jianghu*, a world outside the government of imperial China, to “socialize and interact with men, master martial arts skills to fight men as equals, and have autonomy in love and marriage” (Zhou 8). Yu Ziyuan can be seen as an example of this female knight-errant, as she has mastered martial arts skills to fight off and alongside men as equals, facing a formidable opponent when her home is besieged (Ch 58). Although the female knight-errant appears to be equal in status to men, they are only conditionally accepted by society, and must confine themselves to domesticity or retreat into exile after they execute their missions, which usually consists of either revenge or fixing society (Zhou 8). When Yu Ziyuan marries Jiang Fengmian, she confines herself to the domestic sphere. However, she symbolically exiles herself by separating her quarters from Jiang Fengmian's: she has no interest in becoming the symbol of domesticity in her marriage, and in fact “often went on night hunts after marrying Jiang Fengmian” (Ch 51). As such, Yu Ziyuan manages to combine both endings for the female knight-errant in an attempt to be accepted in a patriarchal society and deal with the material realities constructed by said patriarchal society. In reality, her status becomes ambiguous within the patriarchy because of the blurred lines. As Zhou puts it, the female knight-errant exists outside of the patriarchal social order as an “unideal wife”

(Zhou 9). Likewise, Yu Ziyuan is invisible to the patriarchy, denigrated to an object within the marriage economy, although she interjects herself into the father-son relationship to uphold and become legible within the patriline. However, this attempt fails as she dies before her son can become the sect leader, and she is relegated to invisibility once again until her son can rebuild the Yunmeng Jiang sect (Ch 58). When alive, her invisibility is exacerbated due to her ambiguity in the patriarchy as neither the perfect housewife nor the self-exiled female knight-errant. This ambiguity places stress upon her relationships with the people around her—who do not know where to place her in the patriarchy—leading her to lash out at the people around her and fans to interpret her character as abusive.

Ultimately, reading Yu Ziyuan as purely abusive dismisses the love she has for her children and reflects Orientalist ideologies that posit the West as inherently superior to the East. Rather, the intense love she has for her children prompts her to interject herself into the father-son relationship in attempts to uphold the patriline, especially as it is threatened by Wei Wuxian and his completion of the monomyth. The mother-son axis is revealed through her interjection, with frequent comparisons drawn between Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Cheng, and his inheritance of Yu Ziyuan's signature weapon that symbolizes their temperaments and of her inferiority complex. This complex is tied to her anxieties regarding the patriline, revealing how her sense of self is related to the patriarchy and her place within it. Despite her interjection, however, she remains an outsider in the patriline, as she is but an object within the marriage economy, which prompts her into hysterical fits. To cope with her position as an outsider, she latches onto her son and his future for emotional support, pushing him to inherit the sect so she may become visible within the patriarchy. She also attempts to find a place within the patriarchy by becoming the trope of the female knight-errant. However, she fails at following the trope to

one of its two conclusions, straddling the line between housewife and exile. The patriarchal world she lives in cannot deal with this ambiguity, and she ultimately fails at becoming visible to the social order. Her invisibility to the patriarchy leads her to screaming fits that, when combined with the Orientalist lens, have led fans to interpret her as an abusive mother instead of giving her the grace of being a complicated woman trying to survive her patriarchal world. The patriarchal social order within the novel and Yu Ziyuan's attempts to navigate it reveal the ways in which social constructs find themselves in the worldbuilding of fictional universes, prompting characters to react in various ways that may vilify them. Note that while the novel contains social constructs like the patriarchy, as readers we apply our own ideologies to the novel, in this case Orientalism. It is the intersection of the social constructs inside and outside the novel that let us form interpretations of characters within the novel. Acknowledging the ideologies we apply to the worlds we read allows us to better understand the characters, giving them the grace to be human.

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