
Transgression, Sovereignty, and the Metaphysics of Evil: A Bataillean Reading of *The Untamed*

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Abstract

From earlier onwards literature is an important site of cultural negotiation regarding the metaphysics of evil. Popular culture provides a more nuanced representation of evil by challenging the binary aspect of the good and the evil. *The Untamed*, a popular Chinese xianxia (fantasy martial arts) drama adapted from the danmei novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, exemplifies this complex non binary nature of evil. The 2019 Netflix series is a particularly rich text to enquire how the notion of evil is essentially non-binary in nature. Placing the text against a long philosophical tradition of literary enquiry into the nature of evil, the article argues that *The Untamed* explores the metaphysics of evil. It not just dramatizes the conflict between good and evil but rather deconstruct the binary itself. *The Untamed* stages a systematic deconstruction of the good/evil binary through its various characters, especially through Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangyao. While Wei Wuxian acts as a “sovereign” in the Bataille’s concept, Guangyao exemplifies how the cultivation sects act as constructors of “evil” in order to establish boundaries. Layered readings of characters are done to underline how the notions of transgression and sovereignty is reflected in the series when their actions and intentions break the binary of good/ evil concepts. The article analyses evil as socially constructed through institutional power rather than individual practice. A close reading is attempted using the concepts of transgression and sovereignty by Georges Bataille. The article further analyses how the cultivation sects with its laws and forced representations of the evil acts as an institutional apparatus which also contributes to the deconstruction of the binary of the good and the evil.

Keywords: Georges Bataille, *The Untamed*, Transgression, sovereignty, Non-Binary Morality, good/evil binary, institutional apparatus

From its early expressions in theological philosophy to its modern representations in popular culture, evil has remained one of humanity's most debated and rich concepts. Whether it is

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Saint Augustine's view of evil as an absence of good than as a fundamental substance, or Hannah Arendt's seminal concept of the "banality of evil" (118), evil is never a stable idea. It is constantly contested, negotiated, debated and reshaped by the cultural, historical and institutional contexts of the time. Literature and popular culture have often been key sites where negotiations about metaphysics of evil unfold. Terry Eagleton in *On Evil*, compares imaginative writing to philosophy, to point out how the former has always been more open about representing complexities of moral experience. It focuses on showcasing the contradictions of human actions rather than resolving them using fixed beliefs. It is in this context that *The Untamed* (2019), the Chinese xianxia drama adapted from Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's danmei novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi (The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation)*, stands out as an especially rich cultural text. The series not only dramatizes the conflict between good and evil but, more importantly it systematically breaks down the binary approach towards the concept of evil, making it more understandable.

This article argues that *The Untamed* systematically deconstructs the good/evil binary through a close reading of two main characters Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangyao using the theoretical ideas of Georges Bataille on transgression and sovereignty. These theoretical frameworks are used to examine how moral boundaries are created, crossed, and ultimately revealed as temporary social constructs. The analysis after outlining the Bataillean framework moves forward to a detailed reading of Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangyao as symbols of sovereignty and transgression. An analysis of cultivation sects as institutional apparatus that create evil to maintain social boundaries and power sums up the article.

Bataille's ideas offer a complex yet sophisticated view of the connection between limits, transgression, and social order. In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, he claims that all human societies are built on a system of prohibitions, where taboos are included to govern notions about sexuality, death, violence, and excess. He argues that transgression is not just breaking these rules; it reveals their essential role. As Bataille states, "Transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" (63). The taboo and its transgression are interdependent. Rather than an independent force, evil is a label for whatever the social institution with power pushes to the opposite side of its basic prohibitions.

In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille refers to sovereignty as a way of living that does not submit to the logic of utility, accumulation, and the future. A sovereign, focused solely on the present, acts freely. Their disinterest on calculated results seems transgressive or even threatening to the institutions of the restricted economy because it embodies the excess those institutions cannot contain. Importantly, the sovereign's transgression does not come from malice but is projected so because the social order cannot manage it. When applied to popular texts, Bataille's perspective helps us view apparent villains or morally flawed characters not as pure embodiments of evil but as figures who reveal the violence behind moral categorisation and representations. This article argues that *The Untamed* illustrates this revelation through the connected character study of Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangyao.

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Wei Wuxian, the protagonist in *The Untamed*, is a striking example in modern Chinese popular culture, of someone who systematically deconstructs the moral divide in his world. Although he starts his cultivation practice under the mainstream cultivation methods, he later on develops a practice of "demonic cultivation" that uses resentful energy. The resentful energy is what the orthodox sects view as the source of corruption and evil and all mainstream clans like the Lan sect, Nie sect or Jin sect prohibit their disciples from practicing it strictly. Wei Wuxian's choice for this forbidden practice is not because he is inclined toward evil, but out of a structural necessity. Pushed into the Burial Mounds and stripped of his golden core, he turns to demonic cultivation to survive and to protect both his foster sect (Jiang sect) and the oppressed remnants of the Wen clan.

The metaphoric representation of the two weapons Wei Wuxian used, The Suibian and the Chenqing adds more depth into this transition of the character. Suibian, literally meant "whatever" was named so by accident as Wei Wuxian asked Jiang Fengmian to call it whatever he wanted. Here the irreverence in naming the weapon appalled even Lan Wangji, his partner because they are used to a system where the sword, a head band, robe and rituals carry lineage and a moral weight. Here the naming itself was a minor act of transgression hinting at the carefree attitude of the protagonist towards the moral framework of the system. Suibian, the spiritual sword that require a spiritual golden core, stands for the orthodox side of Wei Wuxian. The sword, which require the concentrated spiritual energy derived through legitimate modes of cultivation symbolises his membership in Yunmeng Jiang clan, his initial training and his place in the orthodox system before transgression.

The emotional narrative connected with Suibian comes when his sacrifice for Jiang Cheng is revealed later. He stopped carrying the sword as it became useless in his hand for, he has already given away his golden core to his brother. The world however sees this as an act of arrogance of Yiling Patriarch. He wore arrogance as a mask to prevent others from realising his loss of golden core. Wei Wuxian's sacrifice seems to the cultivation world as sheer pride which is an example of Bataille logic of institutional misreading. After his death, the sword seals itself, indicating the exceptionally high level of cultivation he achieved during his life time. Here the series gives a subversive symbolic blow: the sword of Yiling Patriarch, the embodiment of demonic evil, refused to carry belongs to one of the greatest of all cultivators. The sword later falls into the possession of Jin Guangyao and becomes an image not of evil but of power the system cannot afford, accommodate or control.

Chenqing, the black transverse flute of Wei Wuxian with red tassel becomes his weapon after his return from Burial mount. The flute is born completely outside the orthodox cultivation world. It took birth in burial mount; a space treated as a dumping yard for what the cultivation field considered resentful and condemned. He used the flute's music to control fierce corpse and resentful dark forces of the world unlike the spirit cleansing music of the Lan sect. He reversed the spirit suppression talismans of the orthodox cultivation tradition to attract spirits. Thus, his weapons and methods were all based on the concept of inversion-another way of transgression in the Bataille logic.

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Suibian and Chenqing depicts the trajectory of Wei Wuxian's character. While the former represents his carefree, relaxed youth the latter depicts his loneliness and loss. Chenqing literally means to pour out one's feelings in full pointing at a desire to be heard, yet the narrative shows how the dominant cultivation world abstained from listening to his reasons, motives and goodness. Together these symbolic weapons dismantle the philosophy of Wei Wuxian's descend. Suibian represents the before- the carefree, orthodox time while Chenqing represents the after, the time of exclusion, misunderstanding and a desire to be heard. The move from one to the other was never a moral fall. It was staged and choreographed by the orthodox sects to control the excess of Wei Wuxian's sovereign power.

In Bataillean terms Suibian operates within the restricted economy- spirited power accumulated and stored in the golden core and released as per the sect rule while Chenqing operates within the general economy, drawing upon the resentful excess energy that the orthodox sects restrict and exclude for it to function. Thus, in the series he is a man without ego who carried a sword named "whatever" and a flute carrying a name meaning to be heard symbolically indicate that he is not oriented towards competition, prestige or titles which structure the cultivation world. He is a sovereign, acting without restriction, oriented towards present and spending without accumulating and he became evil for the cultivation sects for the very same reason. The system called this evil and tried ways to condemn and expel.

Orthodox cultivation is highly limited and restricted. It allows to accumulate spiritual power through strict methods, puts personal desires below sect hierarchy, and depends entirely on socially accepted goals like order, longevity, and status. In contrast, Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation works within what Bataille calls in *The Accursed Share* "general economy" (25-26). This approach takes advantage of excess, resentment, and death – categories that the traditional cultivation world must ignore and exclude to maintain its structural coherence. By practicing these forbidden arts, Wei Wuxian proved that the moral order of mainstream cultivation world relies on exclusion and repression, rather than on some inherent moral truth or moral understanding.

The series makes it clear that Wei Wuxian intended at justice, protection, and caring for the vulnerable. He uses demonic cultivation to defend the innocent old desolate people remaining in the Wen clan – elderly individuals, women, and children who have been dispossessed and persecuted by the dominant sects. The violence attributed to him, including the deaths at Nightless City or Qiongqi Path, stems not from any innate malice but from grief, provocation, treachery and the constant persecution he endures. The story explores the idea of evil by separating the issue of moral intention from institutional categorization of individual's actions. Wei Wuxian is labeled as evil by the dominant system, not because his intentions are evil, but because his methods are beyond what the cultivation sects accepted as good. They feared his felony as destructive to their power hierarchy that they called him out as evil and deviant.

This illustrates the logic of Bataillean transgression. Wei Wuxian does not reject the moral demands of the cultivation world – he operates within its values and genuinely cares

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about justice and protection. However, his actions go beyond what the order can contain. In Bataille's sense, he is a sovereign figure; he focuses on the present, acts without hesitation, and sacrifices his own spiritual energy and ultimately his life for those who were innocent and needed protection. The cultivation world responded by labelling him as the Yiling Patriarch, the ultimate embodiment of evil, and organized a hunt for his destruction which became an act of institutional violence. This violence is how a restricted system defends itself against the excess it cannot accept.

If Wei Wuxian is a sovereign transgressor in the Bataillean terminology, Jin Guangyao showcases the institutional mechanisms that generate and propagate evil. He is the illegitimate son of Jin Guangshan a womaniser and the cruel leader of the powerful Lanling Jin sect. Born to a prostitute, his childhood was traumatised by denial and insult which chiselled him into a complex character. His rise from social rejection and parental denial to the position of Chief Cultivator, the highest political office in the cultivation world, happens out of decades of careful service, self-denial, treachery, political alliances etc. Despite all the strategies and slow building of social capital, he gets exposed and falls out of favour for the scheming, murders and criminal acts. Yet, the series leaves space for the audience to view these acts as strategies of a desperate one, who lived in constant denial of love, power, social-familial acceptance and recognition despite being talented and worthy.

The strict hierarchical sect system that decides recognition, resources, and power on the basis of birth and alliances causes Jin Guangyao's crimes. It is not defiance of the sect system that turned him into evil, but rather his internalisation of its power politics is the thing that infects him. Despite being shut out and insulted, he attempts to function within the power structures of the sect system to gain acceptance and social status. His evil, thus, reflects the institutional violence that shaped him. This shows how forbidden categories are formed as stated by Bataille. The cultivation sects need such forbidden category of evil to control individuals and practices. They require moral outsiders like Wei Wuxian or Jin Guangyao to exert their power. The term evil does not stand for those who cause harm, but for those whose existence disrupts the system and its smooth manifestation of control.

The series does not give its audience the easy comfort of straightforward condemnation. The final confrontation in the Guanyin Temple where Jin Guangyao detailed his humiliations, the recognition he was denied, and the violence against his mother urges the audience to have a moral consideration of the character. He defends his actions not to evade responsibility. Revelation of the unexpected role Nie Huaisang played in Jin's exposure deepens the moral irony of the story. He manipulated events over a decade to achieve revenge for his brother's death. Here he becomes both the agent of justice and agent of cold, calculated vengeance. The villains are also the victims.

Beyond Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangyao, *The Untamed* delves into a deeper critique of the cultivation sects exposing them as institutional apparatus that create, enforce, and normalize the good versus evil divide in support of their own legitimacy. The sect system poses itself as cultivators of virtue and spiritual truth through the suppression of demonic

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energy. Yet, the series systematically exposes this self-portrait as ideological and a means to legitimize a specific distribution of power that benefits the dominant sects, especially the Lanling Jin clan.

The "discussion conferences" held acts as means to strengthen the power of the most dominant sect, even though it is positioned as platforms for collective moral discussions and judgements. The decision to hunt and eliminate Wei Wuxian is made not through fair moral discussion but through manipulating collective fear, silencing dissent, and strategically using half-truths and lies. The moral agreement in the cultivation world is a product of institutional power rather than a true reflection of shared values.

The Untamed here examines how institutions legitimise and normalise moral categories through symbolic violence. The cultivation sects naturalise a specific moral framework in which demonic cultivation is projected as inherently evil and orthodox cultivation as essentially virtuous aligning it with the power distribution in the sect hierarchy. People and sects on the peripheries, like Wei Wuxian with his demonic cultivation, Jin Guangyao with his illegitimate birth, and the left outs of the Wen clan with their defeated status, are labelled evil not because their actions, but due to their positions within this institutional structure. *The Untamed* excavates the institutional, historical, and political factors that create moral categories and how they are naturalised. Presenting the perspective of the characters who are labelled as evil and by presenting their nobility and clarity of their actions and motivations the audience get to critically perceive the process of moral categorization itself.

Seen as a story of heroism, loyalty, and romantic devotion on one side, *The Untamed* evokes a serious interrogation of the notion evil on the other side by raising philosophical questions on how evil is constructed, institutionalised and used a power apparatus. Through Wei Wuxian, Jin Guangyao and a critique of the cultivation sect system, the series shows how any society categorise evil for its own benefit. Application of Bataille's ideas of transgression and sovereignty reveals that what is referred as evil can be the excess of a sovereign individual who refuses to submit to the power system; or the violence springing out of marginalisation and rejection and a denial of recognition. In *The Untamed*, rather than any individual characteristics, evil becomes a category collectively accomplished by power structures whose own violence stays masked until the series brings it to light.

This interpretation goes beyond one cultural text to modern popular culture traditions like Chinese xianxia and danmei genres, as they grapple with issues of social legitimacy, marginalisation and cultural acceptance and can offer complex philosophical insights. *The Untamed* does not focus on the question of who is evil, but rather upon the dilemma of who holds the power to define evil.

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