



The Innovation of the TV Drama *Nirvana in Fire* in the Adaptation of Alternate Historical Novels

Yufei He

University of Culture and Arts, Mianyang 621000, Sichuan, China

Abstract: The popularity of costume dramas has driven the adaptation of historical novels, yet the historical fiction elements within these novels pose significant challenges for adapters. Many current TV dramas adapted from fictional works are set in specific historical periods to address the complexities of adapting fictional fiction. However, the TV series *Nirvana in Fire* has distinguished itself by preserving the alternate historical setting of its source material, while still being recognized as a high-quality costume drama by audiences. This paper examines the innovative adaptation strategies employed in *Nirvana in Fire* as a case study, focusing on its approach to adapting alternate historical novels.

Keywords: alternate historical novel; *Nirvana in Fire*; adaptation

1. Introduction

Costume dramas have long been a prevalent genre in the realm of television series. Correspondingly, historical novels have emerged as a highly favored source material for adaptation by production teams. In the context of novel creation, the term “alternate” predominantly denotes a fictional backdrop that departs from actual historical events[1]. The hallmark of this genre of novels lies in the fact that the story settings are typically either fabricated or creatively transformed time-spaces devised by the authors. This allows for unrestrained flights of imagination, unshackled by the constraints of a particular dynasty, and has thus given rise to a plethora of outstanding works[2].

The television series *Nirvana in Fire* is an adaptation of Hai Yan’s novel. It narrates the tale of Mei Changsu, a prodigious strategist, who tenaciously endeavors to redress the long-standing injustice endured by the Chi Yan Army and purge the court of malevolent elements. Despite maintaining an alternate historical backdrop in its narrative, the series meticulously adheres to the costume and etiquette norms of a specific historical era. Concurrently, the spiritual essence it imparts remains congruent with traditional cultural values. It can, therefore, be aptly regarded as having made a significant and fruitful attempt to innovate the adaptation paradigm of alternate novels.

2. Upholding the Alternate Background of the Original: Respecting History in Adaptation

The television series *Nirvana in Fire* is set against the backdrop of the Southern and Northern Dynasties period in China, specifically during the reign of the state of Nanliang. Nanliang, the third dynasty within this historical era, had its capital at Jiankang, which corresponds to present-day Nanjing. However, upon close examination of the series, it becomes evident that while *Nirvana in Fire* adheres to the historical setting of its source material, the narrative deviates significantly from the actual history of Nanliang. Apart from the depiction of the capital and the royal family, there is scant correspondence between the series and the historical record of Nanliang. For instance, Nanliang existed for a brief 56 years, whereas the “Daliang” depicted in the series is portrayed as having a century-long history.

Adhering strictly to historical accuracy may limit the potential of television dramas to reach the pinnacle of historical storytelling[3]. However, it is crucial to recognize that *Nirvana in Fire*, as a work of fiction, prioritizes the themes of justice and loyalty over historical replication. A rigid pursuit of historical fidelity and an overemphasis on aligning the plot with historical events could strip the series of its core essence. The true value of *Nirvana in Fire* lies in its ability to engage viewers with its moral and ethical themes, rather than in its strict adherence to historical facts.

3. Clothing Etiquette: Reviving the Ancient Style and Charm

The television series *Nirvana in Fire*, while an alternate history, demonstrates a meticulous approach to the costumes, props, and etiquette, aiming to evoke an ambiance reminiscent of ancient China within the bounds of historical plausibility. The series does not rigidly adhere to a specific dynasty for these elements; instead, it draws inspiration from various eras to create a rich and authentic backdrop. For instance, the costumes are influenced by those of the period prior to the Tang

Dynasty, the props reflect those of the Song Dynasty, and the etiquette is primarily inspired by the Han and Tang Dynasties. As producer Hongliang Hou has stated, “Although the novel is fictional, we aspire to convey the most authentic traditional Chinese essence to the audience through our meticulous attention to costumes, settings, and martial arts.”

The series stands out for its elaborate and opulent costumes, which are a key attraction for audiences of historical dramas. In contrast to some recent costume dramas that have focused on the extravagance and beauty of clothing to the detriment of historical accuracy, *Nirvana in Fire* provides a detailed and historically informed approach to character attire. The description of characters’ clothing in the original work is succinct, yet the series maintains a strict adherence to the clothing style. All officials and nobles are depicted wearing loose garments and sashes, with their hair styled to one side, a look that has historical precedent and is fitting for an alternate historical narrative. Women’s attire is predominantly waist-length skirts, a style that has been prevalent throughout Chinese history, making it appropriate for the series’ setting. Additionally, the clothing of different characters is designed to reflect their individual traits. Changsu Mei, for example, dons simple attire that aligns with his character as a brilliant but unassuming commoner in the martial world; Princess Nihuang, as a female general, wears more masculine clothing, yet with softer color schemes that balance her warrior image. Members of the Hanging Mirror Division are predominantly dressed in dark colors, befitting their role as the royal family’s warriors.

Despite the lack of detailed description in the original work, the production team has carefully crafted clothing and accessories that align with the characters’ personalities during the adaptation process. This attention to detail not only enhances the portrayal of the characters on screen but also contributes to the series’ overall antique charm and historical depth.

4. Inheriting the Essence of Traditional Culture

Historical television dramas possess a distinctive capacity to articulate the spirit of national traditional culture and the quintessence of traditional aesthetics. The inheritance of traditional Chinese cultural values in the television drama “*Nirvana in Fire*” is a significant factor contributing to its critical acclaim.

4.1 The Virtue of a Gentleman

In the rich tapestry of Chinese history and culture, the Confucian virtues encapsulated by the terms “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness,” which have been renowned and revered as the “five constants” for centuries, lie at the very heart and form the unshakable cornerstone of the traditional Chinese value system. These profound virtues, deeply ingrained in the social fabric, find remarkable and vivid expression in the acclaimed television series *Nirvana in Fire*.

Take the character of Changsu Mei as example. In the wake of King Yu’s tragic suicide, when chaos and uncertainty reigned, Changsu Mei’s benevolence shone through with resplendent clarity. His unwavering protective actions towards his wife and children were not merely acts of personal loyalty but manifestations of a deep-seated sense of care and compassion that is quintessentially associated with the virtue of benevolence. It was a display of putting the well-being of others before his own, a trait that endeared him to viewers and exemplified the Confucian ideal.

Mengzhi, on the other hand, personified righteousness in a most noble manner. Fully aware of the potential consequences, he willingly and resolutely forsook the allure of fame and fortune that beckoned in the complex and often treacherous court environment. His sole motivation was to assist Changsu Mei in the arduous task of clearing his name, a selfless pursuit that mirrored the age-old Confucian tenet of standing up for what is right, regardless of personal sacrifice. His actions became a beacon of moral rectitude in a world where expediency often triumphed.

Jingrui Xiao, hailing from a noble lineage, could easily have let pride and status cloud his judgment. Yet, his propriety was a sight to behold. Despite his own elevated social standing, he consistently demonstrated respectful deference to Changsu Mei. Whether it was in formal court settings or more intimate gatherings, his every gesture and word bespoke of a profound respect for hierarchy and the proper code of conduct, a vivid illustration of the Confucian principle of propriety that dictates how individuals should interact and behave in society.

Last but not least, Mei Changsu’s wisdom was the linchpin around which much of the series’ intrigue revolved. His astute understanding of court politics was nothing short of masterful. He could decipher the convoluted webs of intrigue, anticipate the machinations of his enemies, and devise strategies that would outwit them at every turn. This was not just shrewdness; it was the application of wisdom in its truest sense, using knowledge and insight to navigate the perilous waters of power and ensure justice prevailed. In *Nirvana in Fire*, these characters and their actions brought the timeless Confucian virtues to life, making them accessible and relevant to a modern audience.

4.2 The Wisdom of the King

The art of imperial intrigue is a perennial theme in historical dramas. *Nirvana in Fire* diverges from the norm by re-

jecting the glorification of Machiavellian tactics, instead affirming the triumph of light and justice. King Yu and the Prince, both mired in factional disputes, meet with failure, while King Jing's ascension to the throne symbolizes the fulfillment of the people's expectations for a wise ruler. Echoing Mencius's philosophy, "The people are the most valuable, the state is second, and the ruler is the least", the series underscores that the true path of a monarch lies not in the pursuit of power but in the restoration of peace and prosperity. As Changsu Mei articulates to King Liang, "The world belongs to the people," this statement encapsulates the people-oriented ideology that has been a hallmark of Chinese culture since antiquity.

Although *Nirvana in Fire* is set against an alternate historical backdrop, the spiritual values it conveys are in harmony with traditional cultural norms. This alignment is a key reason for its broad acceptance among audiences. By embedding authentic cultural elements within a fictional narrative, *Nirvana in Fire* not only garners recognition from a wider viewership but also facilitates comprehension for international audiences who may not be well-versed in Chinese history. This approach is instrumental in promoting and disseminating Chinese television dramas globally, as it provides a more accessible entry point into the rich tapestry of Chinese culture and values.

5. Conclusion

The television series *Nirvana in Fire* represents a pioneering endeavor in the adaptation of alternate historical novels, successfully bridging the gap between historical fiction and the preservation of traditional cultural values. By maintaining the alternate historical backdrop of its source material while meticulously adhering to the costume and etiquette norms of a specific historical era, the series has crafted a narrative that resonates with audiences both for its historical authenticity and its moral depth.

The series' innovative approach lies in its ability to respect the alternate history of the original work while infusing the narrative with the essence of traditional Chinese culture. This dual focus on historical accuracy and cultural heritage has enabled *Nirvana in Fire* to stand out as a paragon of quality in costume drama, earning its reputation as a "conscience costume drama" among viewers. The series' portrayal of Confucian virtues and its rejection of Machiavellian politics in favor of a people-oriented ideology have not only made it accessible to a broad audience but have also facilitated its international appeal, serving as a conduit for the global dissemination of Chinese cultural values.

Nirvana in Fire has demonstrated that the adaptation of alternate historical novels can be a vehicle for cultural inheritance and innovation. It has shown that by grounding a fictional narrative in the rich soil of historical and cultural authenticity, television dramas can offer a compelling and educational viewing experience that is both entertaining and enlightening[4]. As such, the series serves as a model for future adaptations, highlighting the potential for historical dramas to enrich our understanding of the past while also providing a platform for the exploration of enduring moral and ethical themes. Through its innovative adaptation, *Nirvana in Fire* has not only entertained but also educated, offering a profound reflection on the enduring values that continue to shape our world.

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