

Autistic Coded Characters: Lan Wangji in the Untamed

00:00

Intro: You're listening to the Afternoona Asks ND squad, ND for neurodivergent with Sarah, J, and Fran. J is Canadian bringing up her ND family in Australia and is late diagnosed autistic. Fran hails from Germany and is ADHD-autistic. Sarah is British Chinese and part of a mixed NT-ND family. Standing up for representation, breaking down stereotypes and challenging ablest perceptions. We're here to discuss all kinds of neurodivergencies in Asian dramas with a dose of scientific research and our own lived experience sprinkled on top. Hope you enjoy.

Fran: Hi, everyone.

J: Hello, 안녕.

00:39

Kaey: Hello. Dàjiā hǎo

Jie: Hi Dàjiā hǎo.

Paid Subscription: Hello.

00:45

Fran: Okay, so welcome back to the Afternoona Asks ND podcast. At the time of recording, it's still the beginning of January. And by the time this will be released, we'll have had the Chinese New Year too. So it's only fitting to wish everyone a very happy new year now.

00:59

J: Happy New Year.

Jie: Happy New Year.

Kaey: Happy New Year.

01:06

Fran: So we're so glad to have you here today and that we're able to continue with this little pod in 2024. This has been an episode many months in the planning and it's finally here. And we're going to cover the C-drama the Untamed. Sarah, who is usually with us won't be joining us today. But instead we've invited a few guests along with J. and myself who are eager to be part of this. And I want to say a big thank you at this point that you're all making time to join us for today's discussion. As we are once again spread out over several continents, it was as always a little bit tricky to find a time where

everyone's awake. So, everyone joining from New Zealand and Australia is currently just trying to wake up with some coffee and everyone from Europe is trying to not fall asleep so it's gonna be grand.

So today we're discussing Lan Wangji, also known as Lan Zhan, from the Untamed as an autistic coded character. For those of you who haven't joined us on any previous podcasts, just gonna quickly repeat what we mean by autistic coded. So autistic coded means a character who's either intentionally or unintentionally written in such a way that they exhibit many characteristics and traits of being autistic, even if they're not officially labeled as autistic. These are usually not just surface attributes, but a character whose worldview they're very being the way they move through the world and experience and relate to everything around them is influenced by their autism. One of our favorite quotes from Christa Mullis is "for autistic fans an autistic coded character is not merely a character they would like to be autistic, or that they see a few sprinklings of autistic traits in but one who's so *obviously* autistic, they must actually be autistic." And this is so important to many autistic people because representation matters. There's such poor representation out there based on stereotypes, purely pathological depictions, and a denial of personhood. We need the public to be more aware and accepting of all the subtle and diverse ways autism can present. As Mullis said, "We need creators to be comfortable claiming the autistic label for their characters so that they no longer need the autistic coded, but can just be autistic full stop." For the podcast today, spoilt for choice in terms of the adaptations of this character, with there being a live action and animated series, the original novel, a graphic novel and audio dramas, we'll try to stick as much as possible to the representation in the live action, or the C-drama. But given that most of our group here today are really enthusiastic fandom nerds, not me, but everyone else, we will mention probably accidentally or on purpose some aspects of Lan Wangji depicted in the other sources, especially the novel, but if we do, we will try and mention that it is from the novel as source material rather than the live action. Yeah, as always, this is not a spoiler free podcast. So if you haven't watched the drama, we can only advise you to stop now and watch it first. We will definitely mention some major plot and characters spoilers. And although we will try and make this episode as accessible as possible for everyone, it will be easier to follow if you have actually watched the drama.

04:34

J: I am so excited about this. First, let me introduce our guests for this pod. I met the three of them through the Untamed/ Mòdào Zǔshī online fandom on the app formerly known as Twitter, well maybe two years ago, and all of them are autistic and have always viewed Lan Wangji as autistic coded. And to emphasize their commitment to their meta analysis of his character all three are also fanfiction writers and so have given his representation as an autistic character significant thought. This has been an episode that we have discussed doing for quite a while now. And yeah, like my lovely co-hosts tease me a bit about, I fell into the rabbit hole (this might be an app pun for this fandom) a few years ago and have yet to emerge. I know that there are many neurodivergent fans of Mòdào Zǔshī and the Untamed out there. And for many of us Lan Wangji is a beloved and treasured character. So let's get started. I'll let them introduce themselves.

05:29

Kaey: Hi, I'm Kaey going by she/her pronouns. I'm from Australia, and I fell into the Mòdào Zǔshī fandom via the Untamed in probably mid-2021. It quickly became my comfort show and I think I've

watched it at least eight times. As you can imagine, the amount of rewatching has given me a lot of ideas for fanfiction writing. And I think I've written about 14 published fics and countless thread fics so far, focusing on softer, fluffier themes, including autistic Lan Wangji.

06:05

Jie: Hi. I'm Jie. I use they/them pronouns. I'm from the UK and I got into the fandom in 2020. I think after watching CQL for the first time. I've watched it seven or eight times, and I come back to it frequently to rewatch because it's a great comfort show, which is very weird to say when you consider the level of angst. I have written 21 fics in the fandom--I literally had to double check--that are actually published and then probably a dozen or so that are in work in progress limbo. I'm actually obsessed enough that my two bunnies are named after the main character swords: Suibian and Bichen.

06:43

Paid: And we love their exploits on Twitter. That's fantastic. Hello, I'm Paid, Paid Subscription. She/her and from Aoteroa New Zealand and I also watched the Untamed in 2021. And then I read and watched all of MXTX's works afterwards. I've written 10 published fics across Heaven Officials Blessing and Untamed fandoms now but I've also done mashups with Extraordinary Attorney Woo and the Good Place, and I'm working on some from the 91 and Marauder. fandoms at the moment. So a bit of a fandom generalist. I'll be chiming in a little later on in the author questions.

07:19

Fran: So thank you so much, everyone. I think this is the highest number of autistic people we've had on this pod, which is quite quite a fun thing we're five people here you know...

07:29

Jie: I mean if you get one autistic, we all just like kind of cluster it's like a magnetic effect. So it makes sense. We're all here now.

07:37

Fran: Okay, so we're gonna start with a little bit of background knowledge that will give a bit more context to the live action, drama and the constraints censorship in China put on the adaptation of the source material for the C-drama.

07:49

Kaey: The Untamed is a 2019 Chinese xianxia drama directed by Zheng Weiwén and Chen Jiālin and written by a team consisting of Yang Xià, Dèng Yǎoyú, Mǎ Jìng, and Guō Guāngyùn and produced by Tencent. It is based on the novel *Módào Zǔshī* by writer Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù and stars Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo as its main leads. The original novel is in the *dānměi* genre. So it's Chinese boys' love with an explicit romance between the two main characters but the live action adaptation was censored to conform with China's morality laws that include depiction of LGBTQIA+ characters onscreen. In 2022 it hit 10 billion views in China alone. This was solely on the Tencent platform and does not count the number of international views from Netflix, Viki, Amazon Prime or YouTube. It turned its lead actors into global superstars almost overnight, and that resulted in a subsequent Special Edition and two spin-offs. The economic effect of this series was astounding with Tencent earning hundreds of million yuan

in profit from subscriptions, pay to unlock bonuses, and the live action broadcast tickets, sold out fan meetings, and merchandise.

09:21

Jie: I think one thing we should culturally know is in ancient Chinese culture, it was common for the gentry to have multiple names, at least for males: a birth name, a courtesy name, and in some cases, a title. Your birth name would be used when people are very close to you, such as your family or childhood friends, and your courtesy name would be used by people who you knew but weren't necessarily close to. Your title would be used by anybody else. Your birth name and courtesy name were chosen by your family, but people generally chose their own titles. In the case of this show, however, Wei Wuxian's and Lan Wangji's titles were chosen for them by others based on their reputations. The Yiling Laozu, Yiling being a town and Laozu translating roughly to patriarch and Hanguang-jun, light bearing Lord respectively. For the sake of this podcast we're gonna use the characters courtesy names though just to avoid too much confusion. So they will be Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.

10:17

Fran: So, a quick synopsis of the actual drama. So if you haven't watched it, this is definitely now the spoiler section. So 16 years after the cultivation world celebrates his death, the cultivator and former Jiang disciple Wei Wuxian, personal name Wei Ying, has his spirit unwillingly resurrected by the young and badly abused Mo Xuanyu, who sacrifices his soul so that Wei Wuxian [can] carry out revenge on his behalf in exchange for his body. While embarking on this task, Wei Wuxian runs into friends and family from his past with generally unfavorable consequences. At this point, the series flashes back to his life 16 years ago when he met Lan Wangji, personal name Lan Zhan, during the summer lectures for cultivation disciples from the prominent clans. The story then follows both Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian as they undertake a quest to try and stop the powerful Wen clan from using the dangerous Yin Iron to increase their power over the other clans. War breaks out. The losses are heavy and heartbreaking and even the closest bonds of friendship and family are tested as the consequences of Wei Wuxian's choices play out, ultimately resulting in his death. After his spirit is brought back, due to the sacrifice summon spell we saw in episode one, he encounters old friends and rivals including Lan Wangji, who had built a close relationship with prior to his death. He and Lan Wangji set out to solve a complicated web of mysteries, and it soon becomes apparent that these current mysteries are tied to old wounds from the past. So let's get into it. What immediately resonated for you with Lan Wangji as an autistic coded character? Was there a scene that you watched and you said to yourself, oh, he's definitely autistic, or did you notice it right away? Did you maybe know beforehand? Or did it take you a while to figure it out? I actually think that for me, this is becoming quite a difficult question. Not just because I've watched the drama specifically for this podcast, and obviously, therefore knew already, but we've been discussing autistic coded characters for this pod for over a year now. And I feel like I'm so much more sensitive to it now than I was back then you kind of start to see it everywhere. So to get some of the obvious character traits out of the way, there are quite a few social anxiety related traits in his character, like he hates crowds, avoids eye contact, hates being touched without permission hates noise with well, one exception. He likes quiet places and enjoys meditating, calming music, finds pleasure in repetitive tasks, like copying scripture, loves rules, doesn't have many friends and doesn't engage in a lot of social interactions. So for me, it was incredibly obvious that he's autistic. But in a

good way, we didn't get beaten on the over the head with like the most horrible stereotypes but got a quite, I don't know quite nuanced and consistent performance by the actor who played Lan Wangji, which I really, really enjoyed.

13:40

Kaey: I think at the time, I didn't immediately notice Lan Wangji as autistic coded. But on my second rewatch, I began to notice how he held himself apart from everyone else, and how he was always that silent and steady presence near Wei Wuxian. He talks so little, and when he had something important to say, or when his emotions really overwhelmed him, that's when he spoke. The first time his autistic traits really made me notice was in the nighthunt scene in episode two before the flashback. Jiang Cheng is trying to get a reaction from him by being as snide as possible but here's Lan Wangji as a silent, extremely self-contained presence, and doesn't even meet anyone's gaze. He just waits until the conflict is done before acting decisively and telling his disciples to stay safe. To me, it highlights a reluctance to indulge in unnecessary conflict, to only be verbal when it's safe, and most importantly, to stay true to your own principles, even if it's by remaining silent. I think these traits only become more and more obvious during the episodes post flashback where he is the silent protector who always stays true to his own personal ethics irrespective of what the world is telling him those ethics should be.

15:00

J: For me it was that first rooftop scene, I could just feel it on a visceral level how irritated Lan Wangji was this annoying person who was blatantly violating so many Lan clan principles and then to hear this person saying, "Why are you so inflexible?" and just Lan Wangji's expression like you could feel the emotions that were raging in him while Wei Wuxian calls him unreasonable and pedantic, you know, that Wei Wuxian just doesn't respect the rules. And just from that moment, the light bulb went on, and I said, "Yep, he's one of us." And it continues on then, with Xichen telling him later on, "Hey, I think it's time for you to make some friends." And I kind of coughed and like laughed and said, "Oh, this sounds familiar." And after that, it was just the little things that added up the sensory stuff like, you know, I don't touch other people that he said it at Biling Lake and, you know, the way too crowded about the square at like Tanzhou. And mostly, it was just his entire being stood in opposition to the presumably neurotypical people around him. Like that depth of feeling and the sense of ethics are part of it. Sure. But time and time again, we get examples of how he really is outside of others in his social circle, like when you get the sense all the way through that when he's referred to as the peerless Hanguang-jun it's not just because of his cultivation, or his fighting skills, or his academics, or his sense of righteousness, but that literally, he's without others who understand him save for his closest family. And even then it's obviously not always the case.

16:28

Jie: When I first watched the show, I don't think I noticed how autistic coded he was partially because it was my first C-drama. So I just spent a lot of time very confused about the aforementioned given, courtesy, and title names. And I was like, "Why are they calling this person three different things." I'm very like, it didn't make sense. And then it was later that I sort of briefly thought about it. Sometimes when you're autistic yourself, you just kind of look at these behaviors, and you see them as normal, because that's what they are to you. And then later on, I read the book and then I started reading and writing fanfiction and I really took the time to think about all of the characters. And then I realized how

much the idea of him being autistic just fits for me. It wasn't so much like a single scene as all of his actions when viewed as a whole. He's quiet but he speaks when he's around those he's comfortable with. He doesn't like to touch people but will if it's people he cares about. There's just so many traits that other people already said and they're just they're all there.

17:34

Fran: I had that same experience with Suspicious Partner as you describe like I...it was only like the rewatch where I suddenly realized okay, I actually resonate really with this character. So yeah, I see what you mean.

17:47

Kaey: Yeah, it's really that rule abiding Lan disciple that he really brings out the autistic traits there. He knows every single one of those 3000 Lan rules, and he seems to stumble across each and every one in his journey to establish that strong inner core of justice. As an autistic person, myself, rules are so important to me. And I do see that reflected in Lan Wangji. But he had to find out in the hardest way possible, but following one set of rules should not come at the expense of your own morals and ethics.

18:24

Fran: I sometimes wonder if like maybe, you know, like the people who made up those rules were also autistic, because why would you put all those things in rules like I'm sorry, but they went like really into detail...[laughing]

18:37

Paid:...literally carved in stone.

18:40

Jie: [Laughing] It's a conspiracy. It's a conspiracy, the entire Lan clan is autistic. You heard it here first, guys!

18:47

Fran: Okay, so yeah, for me, this whole rule things and the that it shouldn't come at the expense of your own morals and ethics was kind of like a really great character arc. Like and kind of the best character arc you could give an autistic coded character, like being almost obsessed with rules is often a very stereotypically autistic trait. And we've discussed in other podcast episodes, some of the reasons for that, like reducing the amount of decisions that you have to make providing like a framework that reduces complexity, and thereby overwhelm. And it's often portrayed as a trait that makes autistic people inflexible, which we also see in this series, in the early episodes, especially, but the series also shows us how this rule obsessed person that doesn't seem to have any friends and isn't very social is an extremely loyal friend if he wants to be and how he eventually decides to kind of like leave the safety of the rules behind and how he decides that there is a person that is way more important, and also because it's just the right thing to do.

19:58

Jie: Yeah, you really do see him and follow the rules very rigidly, especially in the Cloud Recesses study arc when he's still only a teenager. I think that's something that many of us can identify with. It certainly is for me. It's not really until he sees the injustice that's done to Wei Wuxian that he starts to recognize that perhaps not all of the rules are reasonable and just. And this strong sense is just something I personally really identify with. It's really hard to go against what you've been taught for what you know is right. But Lan Wangji definitely does it especially later in life. And watching him turn against the things he grew up believing as he finds his own sense of right and wrong, really just stuck with me. Like I really love that about him.

20:42

Fran: I wonder if like part of why, you know, there was the 16-year gap was because of his autistic people hate change, and they kind of like need time to process things. So he needed those 16 years to kind of like, figure it out...[laughing]

20:58

Jie: [laughing] What do you mean you changed the detergent? I need 16 years for this...

21:02

Kaey: [laughing] That is just the right amount of time.

21:10

J: But another thought about the safety of rules to guide you, I just, I just love that he finds refuge in quoting the Lan precepts when he needs to, like so many of us when we need help, and we have to rely on our internal scripts to get through...

21:23

Kaey: Definitely, Lan Wangji definitely relies on that scripted speech. And also I've seen it mentioned his reliance on idioms. Others who have more understanding on Chinese idioms have spoken about his use of these to convey as much information as possible in a shorter period of time, which anyone who is autistic is like, yes, that is essential. The Lan rules definitely lend themselves to becoming a form of communication in and of themselves, with there being 3000 of them. And we definitely see Lan Wangji making use of this by telling where we stand at various points, not to slouch, not to have more than three bowls of rice, that there is no alcohol permitted in Cloud Recesses, and that bedtime is at 9pm. This reliance on a set of rules that have framed his existence for so many years must be second nature to him. And something that he can count on in times of emotional distress. For example, when he's around Wei Wuxian.

22:23

Jie: Yeah, the bedtime at 9pm. It's it's past that here. So I'm a terrible Lan. I should've been in bed half an hour ago. But I think we can all identify with that, to some degree. When things get stressful, it's really comforting to feel to sort of call back to familiar rules that you know, when you understand and are like established.

22:44

Kaey: Yes, exactly.

22:47

Fran: I tried to explain that to a friend recently. When I like go to a cafe or something, I'm often overwhelmed because they don't always in Germany have menus. So you're like, what do you have? I don't know, I need something to choose from. And I've just decided on a drink that I'd like semi-like and that I know most cafes have. And I tried to explain to her why when I panic, I just like order that drink, even if it's not actually what I want just to like end the situation. And it was like it's a really hard concept to grasp, I think for neurotypical people just like to have these rules and these guides in place to kind of like, yeah, save you.

23:26

Jie: I hadn't even thought about the fact that I do that too. Like I order the exact same drink, like all the time because I don't want to have to think.

23:36

Kaey: You know what to expect in all situations then. And so you notice that in Cloud Recesses era, and afterwards during this search for the Yin Iron, Lan Wangji is often very short with Wei Wuxian. He really likes to use words, single words such as "ridiculous" and "boring" usually when Wei Wuxian is trying to get a reaction from him, or is actually trying to become friends with him. To me, these exclamations reveal moments when he's unable to contain his emotions, but because his brain doesn't vibe with the spoken word, or within a single words that although they might seem mild to us, sound like expletives for him. His high emotions don't let him be more creative than that. But someone who's incredibly well educated and probably has a huge vocabulary stored in his brain, this must be very frustrating to only have access to a small number of words, which probably increases his emotional turmoil, further locking his mind down. I imagine after a few encounters with Wei Wuxian, he's probably had to come up with methods of communication just to save himself so that means scripted responses are his best friend. What's interesting is that the scripted responses include Wei Wuxian's name, Lan Wangji uses Wei Wuxian's personal name quite a lot in so many different terms that he's able to convey quite a lot of information and emotion into syllables. Yes, I did watch several tiktoks recording Lan Wangji every time he does say "Wei Ying" in the show for research.

25:15

Jie: And as for his communication, we should absolutely talk about his echolalia. We see it really clearly during the love confession in the book where he just echoes back every word that Wei Wuxian has said to him, rather than like coming up with his own confession. He's just so overwhelmed that he's just like, "I'm just going to repeat back the same thing you said, because I don't know what else to do." And to me, it feels like the words "Wei Ying" became something of a stim at some point to kind of cope with those big emotions.

25:46

Kaey: Yeah, definitely. By being able to listen to the change in the tones used when speaking Wei Ying's name in the further into the drama you go. It sounds like "Wei Ying" is also something that is

reassuring to him. So if he grasps hold of everything that embodies Wei Wuxian, his lodestone, he'll get through this particularly when the world is big and complicated and scary.

26:13

J: Oh, absolutely. Oh, and what stayed with me the most for this, I'm thinking of all the images in scenes of his devotion that just played out in front of us, like the cliff scene in episode 33, and his flogging for preventing others from entering the Demon Subdue Palace and fighting his own clan in Episode 42. And his declaration on the steps of Carp Tower that "walking the single plank bridge until it's dark, indeed, isn't bad," that even the image of him kneeling in the snow was a young child and waiting to see his mother and how he would continue to go to the Jingshi and wait there month after month. Like there's this quote from Wei Wuxian, when he says, "When everyone admired my power and wanted to flatter me, you were the only one who scolded me. But right now and everyone wishes I was dead. They hate me and cast me aside. You're the only one standing by my side." And I think this really encapsulates it. This unwavering steadfastness that he has that others don't. I mean, unless we want to argue that playing the long game for revenge, like Jin Guangyao or Nie Huaisang suffices. But I think that's a different thing altogether. And so we'll just, we'll just set that aside. [Laughing] So this loyalty has stayed with me, from the first time I watched it, and it's this loyalty that transcends death and tests family connections and upends, long held beliefs. And it's a huge part of what made me love this character, and keeps me coming back. It's always resonated for me this quality of loyalty and believing in someone so strongly. And thank goodness Wei Wuxian's worth it though.

Fran: Yeah.

27:44

Jie: And also, I feel like, that's also a really scary thing as an autistic person to have that kind of like, level of loyalty and believing. So the kind of the faith that Lan Wangji has in Wei Wuxian is also really kind of inspiring in its own right, because that's a terrifying thing as an autistic person to be like, "Yes, I trust this person is gonna, like, always follow the right path. And I know that I'm like, I'm gonna stay by their side." it's really scary.

28:16

Fran: But also that he hasn't moved on after those 16 years of not knowing if he's alive or not, or basically being more or less convinced that he isn't I just like, you know, like still holding a torch for him.

28:28

Kaey: Yeah, it's really such a big thing. If we look at how that loyalty developed, we can see that, that Lan Wangji really had to struggle through a lot to get there. Like Wei Wuxian said, when everyone admired and flattered him, Lan Wangji scolded him, much of which probably derived from his rigidity. Lan Wangji had been bound by his rules so much, and his own belief of what path he had to take, that being confronted by an ultimate path to the same end really must have destabilised him. And yet, by spending so much time with Wei Wuxian, seeing how powerful Wei Wuxian's beliefs were, he really was able to adapt. Change can be pretty scary for an autistic person. And he changed a lot.

29:15

Fran: Yeah, I couldn't agree more. And here we're kind of like back with the whole prejudice against autistic people that they don't feel emotions, because this loyalty just shows how incredibly deep his feelings really are. And that was what really struck me with the character. This, it's kind of like this whole double empathy problem we always go on about in this pod, which basically just means that neurotypical people, misunderstanding autistic and other neurodivergent people is just that a disconnect in communication. Both sides struggle to understand the other side. And with Lan Wangji we had this perfect example of his seeming lack of expressions, be it in his speech or in his face, and I kind of just hope that just like Wei Wuxian would have learned that and NT people watching this series over time also learned to read him better, because although on the surface, he looked like he didn't really say anything, or he didn't really show any emotion, if you can actually attune to it, there's so much expression in his words, like we said earlier, and his eyes and his actions. And I just really applaud the understanding the writer and the actor must have had of this character to kind of like, portray it in such a consistent and nuanced way. And to just like really bring it across. Like, I don't know, I think one of one of my favorite scenes were like the maybe five smiles we got from him and like the whole 50 episodes, and they were all for Wei Wuxian, and they were all so incredibly meaningful and like made me so happy.

30:43

Jie: I think all of my favorite scenes involve the...one of the smiles because it's just like, there's, it's such a tiny smile as well, but you just see his whole expression soften, and it's I really love that. It's just, it's amazing.

31:01

Fran: Yeah. Okay, so what were some aspects of the depiction that you thought were done really well, that Wang Yibo absolutely nailed, or were there any that you felt were a bit off or any that you thought could have been handled better or that you had, that you wish had been better addressed?

31:21

J: It's the obvious one, and you already hinted at it. And the reviewers have commented on to how he managed to convey depths of emotion with the most micro changes to his expression and using his eyes to do this. And Lan Wangji's appearance is canon. Like there's that line from the novel when Lan Wangji says to Wei Wuxian "the face doesn't show anything. Listen to the heartbeats." And yes, the context and that scene is that Lan Wangji doesn't act like others when he's been drinking and he doesn't blush to appear intoxicated, like other people, but I think it's a good analogy that in his daily life in various situations, he does not express himself as others do, like in the temple scene in episode 47 when Wei Wuxian is explaining to Su She like that Wangji has this "indifferent expression for everyone," not just him in particular, although I guess he's not noticing how Wangji is looking at him.

32:13

Jie: Personally, I adore Wang Yibo's depiction of Lan Wangji. I think it's perfect casting. Yibo has actually revealed in a past interview, he has ADHD. And he's also pretty shy unless he's around people he's really comfortable with. So I think he probably sought some element of that part of Lan Wangji's character from within himself. However, when you think about how expressive he is, with wide dramatic facial expressions that fans often turn into memes, it's amazing that he managed to control his features

to those perfect micro expressions, especially if you watch some of the behind the scenes footage and watch him swap from like, Wang Yibo to Lan Wangji back to Wang Yibo. And it's it's so clear cut where the snap is of in character out of character in character. It's, it's very cool.

33:08

Fran: I think that's why, you know, like, I really love about this depiction, that it's so consistent, that he like, you know, like, consistently managed to keep his expression neutral because that really is not an easy feat. It really isn't.

33:23

Kaey: I do agree Wang Yibo did a wonderful job at depicting Lan Wangji. His ability to emote while saying very little, if anything, and using micro expressions is such a talent. I'm really in awe of that. And one of my favorite things to do during my work rewatches is to track the progression of his expressions throughout the episodes from the tension in his face from anger, to the very soft and gentle smile at the end, when he looks at Wei Wuxian and Lan Sizhui, the expression of a man who sees his whole world in front of him.

33:58

Jie: That little soft smile is like one of my favorite screenshots from the entire show. Just it's, I love it. It's so beautiful.

34:07

Kaey: It's beautiful.

34:10

J: So that covers the actor aspect of it as an autistic coded character from the writing side, there isn't a lot that springs to mind. I think we've remarked in other dramas that we wish we'd see the toll of being autistic in the everyday world better represented like we see the surface traits and the quirkiness and the sensory struggles but to see an autistic coded character trying to find a balance in their daily life. It's not depicted often like yeah, no Noh Ji-uk in Suspicious Partner, the exception of course. So in many ways, Cloud Recesses is the ideal place for a young autistic Wangji, a place of peace and predictability where he was able to recharge and regulate himself. But more on that when we get to our discussion about Cloud Recesses.

34:50

Fran: I think for this kind of fantasy genre drama, it's a bit difficult too to say we miss certain aspects of the struggle that can come with being autistic, but it's kind of difficult. To compare the world in the drama with real life, like you say the circumstances of his life being of like a higher class as a cultivator, where like a certain amount of aloofness or arrogance as other people will probably understand his behavior might just be attributed to that class or status. And the way he lives in his case was kind of like perfect for an autistic person. So like everything that we saw, kind of like matched with that. And within the story and the life they set for him, I kind of didn't really think there was anything the story commanded to be shown for it to make sense as like an autistic character, like we had in Extraordinary Attorney Woo where just due to the pressures off her job, they should have kind of shown how she

recharges and deals with that stress. So that the character the autistic character, kind of like makes sense as an autistic person. But because he kind of like lives in this world, that's kind of like perfect for him, that doesn't really arise.

36:01

Jie: One thing I do wish we'd seen is Lan Wangji being more talkative in private scenes. In the novel, his actual words are very rarely written. But he does have lines where it says, "Lan Wangji went on to explain things to Wei Wuxian," and sort of fill in the blanks between his death and resurrection. And it would have been really nice to see the way that he lets his guard down more around Wei Wuxian or around his brother and sort of speaks more openly rather than just going and "Mn" and "Wei Ying."

36:34

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, that's right. Well, it was nice to see that kind of like Wei Wuxian kind of like understood him without much communication, it would have still been nice to have some communication.

36:48

Kaey: Definitely. And I think the scripts, taking into account the limitations from censorship, the team, or the script that the team presented for Lan Wangji's character was really a great balance that worked with both Wang Yibo's strengths, and the material in the original novel.

37:09

Many people in the fandom actually think that Lan Wangji is not the only neurodivergent character in this story, but have argued that Wei Wuxian actually has ADHD or is ADHD-coded. So since we recently did a podcast on ADHD, I'd like to know do you guys agree with this?

37:32

J: Oh, absolutely. And I liked that there's so many people in the fandom who headcanon Wei Wuxian as having ADHD. And I know Franzi as we're watching the lecture scenes in Cloud Recesses and episode three, and we're messaging each other about like, "Oh, just a bit of trouble focusing." And it's like, you know, having trouble with the lectures and yeah, all the shenanigans that he's getting up to. And I did one of those online self quizzes, like, you know, "could I have ADHD?" And I answered as if I was Wei Wuxian. And I think I've got about 90% probability. And so just looking at the possible list of traits in adults, you know, the forgetfulness and the impulsivity and the disorganization, difficulty, difficulty focusing on tasks, restlessness, risk taking, excessive talking, wow, a lot of this really sounds familiar. I'd like to also add in the whole creativity and brilliance, the hyperfocus, the resilience and the innovation. And yeah, so much of this sounds like our Wei Wuxian.

38:28

Jie: I can absolutely read Wei Wuxian as having ADHD. He's disorganized and chaotic, which is described aptly in the book when Lan Wangji first visits the Burial Mounds and they describe the Demon Subdue Palace cave, which is where Wei Wuxian basically lives at that point as having flags, sabers, boxes, blood tattered bandages, and unfinished fruits littering every surface. Even in the show, we see scattered talisman papers all across his makeshift desk. There's even a scene where he

explodes one of his inventions which always makes me laugh, he just kind of like goes for it and thinks about the consequences later, which damn if that isn't ADHD.

39:11

Kaey: He really does take the Jiang motto to heart which is "attempt the impossible" to me that's such an ADHD motto. There's nothing like a challenge to motivate someone with ADHD to do something.

39:25

Jie: There's also the way that like he flits from one thing to the next as we see in the scenes in the market place in Caiyi town but also he like hyper fixates for so long on problems that he forgets to eat and sleep which I absolutely identify with.

39:42

J: Part of what I believe attracts Lan Wangji to Wei Wuxian is that he doesn't think like everyone else. And I mean we have the scroll thrown at his head by Lan Qiren when he hears about Wei Wuxian's fourth path of using resentment is proof of that early on, you know, and Lan Wangji sees that he is unconventional and although you might deride him at first over time, during those first episodes, he not only recognises Wei Wuxian's skills and fighting, not just with him on the rooftop, but also Biling Lake, he also discerns that wow, like this guy is intelligent, and he's bold, and he's analytical, and he sees things others miss. And I think for Wei Wuxian as well it went beyond just trying to annoy this fuddy duddy stick in the mud for kicks. But he sees an intellect equal to his own and real skills and a similar set of ethics. And then by episode eight, like he's just a goner [laughs].

40:31

Fran: [Laughs] It took that long?

Kaey: I think I saw Wei Wuxian as ADHD sooner than I saw that Lan Wangji is autistic. I see many of those traits and in including everything that we've mentioned before, such as poor impulse control, a famously bad memory, and his lightning-fast mind. Look at how he invented a new cultivation method in three months while he was in Burial Mounds, he's always thinking 10 steps ahead of everyone else and absolutely cannot stop himself from showing that. If Wei Wuxian has a thought, then everyone else is going to know about it. Jin Guangyao actually describes him as the untamed hero in a way that isn't complimentary and that it is only a matter of time before public opinion swung against him. And I think a lot of ADHDers can really empathize with this speaking up for things that the majority support is pretty easy. But speaking up for something that only the minority support can be much more difficult.

41:33

J: And I also feel for him growing up with his ADHD under Madam Yu and but would have just made his life hellish while we kind of already know that it was. And I think that he does reflect upon himself and internalise it and recognise that yeah, perhaps he was a bit much for others sometimes. There's that quote from Jiang Wanyin's visit to the Burial Mounds that echoes the one you mentioned: "And it's when you're standing on their side, you're the bizarre genius, the miraculous hero, the force of the rebellion, the flower that blooms alone, but the second your voice differs from theirs you've lost your mind. You've ignored morality, you've walked the crooked path." So others saw him this way. And yet

others like Wangji and Jiang Wanyin recognise the situation, and Wei Wuxian didn't pay much heed to it.

42:21

Jie: I felt like when Kaey was describing Wei Wuxian's ADHD, it was just like a checklist calling me out just then I was like, "Ooh, Oh, dear." But um, I think any of us with ADHD can identify with this, I have absolutely had the experience where when I'm on one side, I'm viewed really positively. And then the second, I say something they disagree with, suddenly, I'm a problem. And I think both my autism and my ADHD play into that a lot people kind of admire those traits in me, as long as I'm still doing what they think I should be doing. I can imagine Wei Wuxian would have found this frustrating to some degree if he'd had the time to really look at his own feelings rather than just being in a constant state of survival following the fall of Lotus Pier.

43:14

Fran: There's a lot of agreement in neurodivergent communities that ADHD-autistic friendships are something very special. And it's something that often seems to puzzle people because the most stereotypical traits seem to be opposites to each other. But personally, I think these two characters are just a perfect example of why it just works. Somehow, however it does, but it just works. So does anyone want to talk about how they think that these combined neurodivergencies of those two characters interact and their relationship as we see it in this drama.

43:50

J: There's that Venn diagram that's online in various sources of overlapping ADHD and autism traits as a possible explanation for why we see so many commonalities in our neurokin. And many of us are auDHD as well like have both autism and ADHD. There are examples in this series where they do complement each other Lan Wangji remembers the things that Wei Wuxian has forgotten. Wei Wuxian small talks and charms information on the various people during their investigations, and they seem to balance each other out well, and it works for them. And so the author herself said about these two characters in an interview in 2023: "Lan Wangji has always maintained a cold and silent appearance, but in truth since his teenage years, he was already enraptured by Wei Wuxian. I think that deep in his heart, he's filled with yearning for the kind of freedom Wei Wuxian inhabits so easily. Furthermore, these two people are deeply similar at the core of their personality, at the core of who they are, they are the same kind of person. This is also one big reason why they come to love each other so deeply." And yes, I think that's true.

44:59

Kaey: I always feel emotional when I think about these two people, two neurodivergent characters finding each other and being able to love each other so freely. It makes it even more poignant as we watch Wei Wuxian's character grow and develop through the episodes with post flashback Wei Wuxian, observing that he really was annoying, and prone to loudly speaking his mind, even when no one asked, he feels that his poor impulse control really had been obnoxious for everyone around him, including to Lan Wangji. And yet here he is at the end of the show, with Lan Wangji being the only one to stand by him.

45:36

Jie: And they really do complement each other in this amazing way. Like J. said, about, like, Wei Wuxian will do the talking, but Lan Wangji will do the remembering, and I think every autistic needs their their ADHD, like emotional support person who can be there to speak for us, and we don't want to do it.

46:02

Fran: But also every ADHD person either needs an autistic person to provide the routine and to kind of like remind them of appointments and things like that...

46:09

Jie: ...and remind them to eat and remind them to sleep and remind them to drink. Yeah, all those things.

46:15

J: I was gonna say you guys have basically described my, my life because I'm autistic, my husband has ADHD. And yeah, we've been together for 30 years as of the end of this month. And, wow, this is exactly our dynamic. This is kind of how we, how we get around in the world and how we, you know, our daily lives, this is it. One of us is kind of like taking on all these tasks and one of the other is taking on all the other tasks. And I mean, you know, it's it's kind of a joke that he's he actually is like the person that has to like call tech support and asked to like call any government agency or has to call anyone he has to do all the phone calls. Because, you know, he just he knows over the years that you know, he has to do that side of things. And meanwhile I'm the organiser schedule reminder. Yeah, all that kind of stuff. So that's how it works.

47:04

Jie: And in a modern alternate universe, it would absolutely be Wei Wuxian like phoning to make all the doctor's appointments and calling tech support. Like there's no way you can convince me that Lan Wangji ever makes a phone call. He will do a text if he has to. And even then it's very questionable. [Laughing]

47:21

Kaey: [Laughing] It's a very good seamless relationship.

47:25

Fran: [Laughing] Is there a fic about this...

47:29

Jie: There are so many modern fics where, I feel like you just see Lan Wangji is refusing to reply to texts with more than "Mn" or "Okay."

47:38

Kaey: Or a thumbs up [Laughing]

47:42

Fran: Okay, so we're actually planning to do a separate podcast on autistic and ADHD friendships and partnerships in Asian dramas, so we'll probably going to revisit that topic in that podcast. So yeah, look forward to that.

47:58

Jie: So that's the end of part one. When it comes to these characters, we have a lot to say. So we're going to cut this in half and part two is going to be coming up very soon. We'll see you guys then. Bye.

48:10

Fran: Goodbye for now. See you next week.

48:13

J: Bye for now.

48:14

Outro:

Thank you for listening. We hope you've enjoyed our pod. Follow us on our Instagram at Afternoona Asks, or our website, www.afternoonaasks.com. To get more Kdrama content from a writer's lens, follow our sister pod Afternoona Delight. For any BTS fans out there our other sister pod Afternoona Army is here for all your needs. If you want to hang with us and other kdrama fans, do consider joining us our Afternoona Delight Patreon. There are different levels for you to access. Go to www.afternoonadelightpodcast.com to sign up. Finally, if you have any questions for us, please feel free to contact us via socials or our email, afternoonaasks@gmail.com. We look forward to hearing from you. Until next time.