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Los Angeles

Fairy Tales for Adults:

Imagination, Literary Autonomy, and Modern Chinese Martial Arts Fiction,

1895-1945

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Asian Languages and Cultures

by

Lujing Ma Eisenman

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Theodore D Hutters, Chair

This dissertation examines the emergence and development of modern Chinese martial arts fiction during the first half of the twentieth century and argues for the literary autonomy it manifested. It engages in the studies of modern Chinese literature and culture from three perspectives. First, approaching martial arts fiction as a literary subgenre, it partakes in the genre studies of martial arts fiction and through investigating major writers and their works explains how the genre was written, received, reflected, and innovated during the period in question. Second, positioning martial arts fiction as one of the most well received literary subgenre in the modern Chinese literary field, it discusses the “great divide” between “pure” and “popular” literatures and the question of how to evaluate popular literature in modern China. Through a series of textual analysis contextualized in the lineage of martial arts fiction, it offers insight into

how the ideals of so-called “pure” and “popular” literatures were interwoven in the process of reviewing and re-creating the genre. Third, it scrutinizes the transformation of modern martial arts fiction in relation to the modernization of Chinese literature. Using martial arts fiction as a focal point, it examines how the genre changes common understandings of how to write and read “literature” in the period in question. It suggests that the subgenre offered a new framing and a new cognitive structure for the nature and function of literature.

This dissertation is composed of four body chapters. Chapter One focuses on the first decade of the twentieth century and argues that it witnessed the emergence of modern Chinese martial arts fiction. Chapter Two brings the *jianghu* (literally rivers and lakes) into focus as a key literary construct in modern martial arts fiction and illustrates the vacillating and intricate nature of its transformation. Chapter Three centers on the issues of historicity, fictionality, and how the changing dynamics between the two elucidate the conception of modern “literature” and a trajectory of literary autonomy. Chapter Four employs gender as a critical category of analysis and investigates the trajectory of literary autonomy through the metamorphosis of female knight-errant images spanning from the 1920s to 1940s. The concluding chapter reviews the reflections and attempts writers made in the 1930s and 1940s in order to integrate the genre into the mainstream literary discourse. By revisiting some most recent cultural phenomena, the Conclusion Chapter points out the question of how to understand and appreciate “literature” and its autonomy posed a century ago in martial arts fiction still echoes in contemporary China.

The dissertation of Lujing Ma Eisenman is approved.

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Introduction

History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now.

-- Walter Benjamin

In a 2013 interview the renowned martial arts novelist Jin Yong 金庸 (aka, Louis Cha, 1924-) said that among the books that had influenced him as a writer are “definitely martial arts novels.”¹ He recalled the books he read when he was little, such as *Huangjiang nüxia* 荒江女俠 (The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang, 1929-1931). He said, comparably, he likes Gong Baiyu 宫白羽 (1899-1966) better, because he was a good martial arts writer, telling stories that are reasonable and full of imagination.² Contemporary Chinese readers, though fascinated by Jin Yong’s works, may ponder what *The Female Knight-errant from Huangjiang* is and what kind of works Gong Baiyu had written. Many of Jin Yong’s readers may not know Jin Yong’s martial arts novels include numerous generic conventions that were originally created by these now obscure names and works.

What Jin Yong did not mention in the interview is that *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang*, while was serialized in the *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 in Shanghai, had to be expanded from a novella to a novel due to readers’ demand. When the novel was published in book form,

¹ When Jin Yong visited Xiamen in 2013, Professor Li Xiaohong from Xiamen University interviewed him about his martial arts fiction. The interview transcription was published on the Ifeng Website 凤凰文化.com, accessed on Oct. 3, 2014 at http://culture.ifeng.com/renwu/special/jinyongqushi/content4/detail_2014_01/28/33456562_0.shtml

² Ibid.

the first volume was re-printed four times within a year, and the novel had fourteen reprints in less than five years. It also generated thirteen film adaptations and numerous opera performances.³ It was one of – if not the – most commercially successful martial arts fiction written during the Republican era. Gong Baiyu, a journalist and then a writer of martial arts fiction, was a household name in post-1938 Tianjin where he published martial arts novel *Shi'er jinqian biao* 十二金錢鏢 (Twelve Coin Darts, 1938-1944) series. His novels were so popular that they were constantly sold out, and readers even composed Chinese New Year couplets 對聯 using his book title and protagonist's name.⁴ Jin Yong was about six years old when *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang* hit the market and grew into his teenage years when Gong Baiyu rose to fame by writing the *Twelve Coin Darts*. It is not surprising that Jin Yong retains vivid memory about his reading experiences with these writers and their works.

Martial Arts Fiction: Popularity and Neglect

The discrepancy between Jin Yong's lasting memory and the seeming obsolescence of the writers and works he mentioned discloses an important aspect of the history of martial arts fiction. Since antiquity stories about altruistic martial fighters and wandering knights-errant who help the weak and poor had long attracted Chinese readers. Originated from historical documents and other early texts, chivalric tales experienced a surge both in quantity and aesthetic expression during Tang dynasty, which produced scores of proto-characters and tropes and influenced the following dynasties. The popularity of a drum ballad adapted martial romance *Lü Mudan* 綠牡丹

³ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxue shi* 中國現代通俗文學史 [A History of Modern Chinese Popular Literature] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2007), 324.

⁴ Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao: yige xiaoshuojia de beiju* 淚撒金錢鏢: 一個小說家的悲劇 [Tears on the Coin Darts: A Novelist's Tragedy] (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1986), 8.

(Green Peony, 1800) in the early nineteenth century marked the convergence of “popular” and “elite” fiction and a general turn from didacticism to entertainment in the work and its kind.⁵ In the following decades, tales of chivalric characters were shared across the social hierarchy: the educated read, commented, and sometimes revised them; the illiterate listened to oral performance created by story-tellers or adapted from books, entertained and educated. In late imperial period, new narrative elements and conventions continued to appear which defined and re-defined the meaning of heroism, including the image of female martial fighter, the pairing of chivalry and romance, and the team composed of judge and knight-errant followers. With the facilitation of a flourishing modern publishing industry and the abolishment of imperial civil service examination system, chivalric tale continued to prosper at the beginning of the early twentieth century and demonstrated remarkable transitional features in both literary techniques employed and space generated for literary imagination.⁶ As indigenous martial arts 武術 was promoted as a type of “national skills” 國術 in the early Republican era, and in particular the emergence and success of the Pure Martial Association 精武會, the connection between strengthening the physical body and advancing the status of the nation was repeatedly reinforced.⁷ Accordingly, writings of and about martial arts and practitioners, both fiction and non-fiction, started to top the reading market in the mid-1920s. When the newly established

⁵ Margaret Wan, *Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (Albany: State University of New York, 2009).

⁶ Chen Pingyuan, *Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo de qidian: Qingmo minchu xiaoshuo yanjiu* 中國現代小說的起點:清末民初小說研究 [The Starting Point of Modern Chinese Fiction: A Study of Late Qing and Early Republican Era Fiction] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005), 66-90. Yuan Jin, *Zhongguo wenxue de jindai biange* 中國文學的近代變革 [Modern Transformation of Chinese Literature] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006), 1-43.

⁷ Andrew Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 185-204.

modern film industry undertook the *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* 火燒紅蓮寺 (1928-1931) film series, a “martial arts craze” was kindled, burning across the boundaries between media, space, and time. On the one hand, martial arts fiction written during this period displayed a striking setback in terms of literary imagination, exemplified by Xiang Kairan’s 向愷然 (aka, Pingjiang Buxiaosheng 平江不肖生, 1890-1957) novels; on the other hand, it was harshly criticized by the left-wing intellectuals due to its ideological stance and social impact. “*Wuxia shenguai pian*” 武俠神怪片 (martial arts-magic spirit film), the film genre that was largely adapted from martial arts fiction was banned by the Nationalist government in the early 1930s. Martial arts fiction as a literary sub-genre by the late 1920s and early 1930s formed a contested site of cultures, values, and ideologies, striated with close ties with indigenous narrative tradition, relevancy to politicized physical culture, and the changing and yet lasting sensational appeal to ordinary readers. The late 1930s and 1940s, once again, witnessed another wave of creativity in martial arts fiction, which resulted in simultaneously driving forward the diversity of literary devices created and the diminishing of space for literary imagination. Despite of all the ups and downs, in the first half of the twentieth century, martial arts fiction was the most popular literary genre and sold the most copies.⁸

This complicated yet intriguing picture of martial arts fiction and its trajectory, unfortunately, was forced to a halt as the Communist Party took over Mainland China in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Writers consequently stopped writing under political pressure. The ban, together with the institutionalization and fortification of the mainstream modern literary history dominated by the May Fourth discourse eventually drove the genre to the margin of the literary

⁸ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiake meng* 千古文人俠客夢 [The Literati’s Millenniums Chivalric Dreams] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010), 53-54.

field. As a result, although some of its generic elements were seen repeatedly employed and appropriated in the socialist-era revolutionary literature, writers and works circulated during the Republican period gradually grew unfamiliar to readers.⁹

While the Mainland China gradually closed down to the outside world in the late 1950s, writers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Chinese-speaking areas resumed the writing and reading of martial arts fiction, and produced scores of fictional works which built upon the conventions that Republican-era writers created. When the Mainland re-opened up in the late 1970s, martial arts fiction produced in Greater China quickly crossed the threshold, took over the popular market and caused a new wave of “martial arts craze” 武俠熱 in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The post-1949 martial arts fiction, including those written by Jin Yong, are called “New School Martial Arts Fiction” 新派武俠小說, and have been adapted to numerous films and television shows, which in turn increased their publicity.¹⁰ Reprints of Republican-era martial arts fiction, now labeled as “Old School Martial Arts Fiction” 舊派武俠小說, became available on market starting the mid-1980s, exemplified by the series published by the Linking Publishing

⁹ David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848-1911* (Berkeley: Stanford University Press, 1997), 123.

¹⁰ It is now unclear who invented the label first, but commonly the martial arts novels produced in the post-1949 period outside of mainland China are called “New School Martial Arts Fiction” 新派武俠小說, so as to differentiate it from those written before 1949 within the Mainland which are now called “Old School.” The “New School” started with Liang Yusheng’s (梁羽生, aka. Chen Wentong 陳文統, 1926-2009) novel *Longhu dou jinghua* 龍虎鬥京華 (Dragon and Tiger Fight in the Capital, 1954) serialized in the Hong Kong newspaper *Xin Wanbao* (新晚報, 1950-1997) based on a real martial arts competition between two local martial arts clans “the Taichi Clan” 太極派 and “the White Crane Clan” 白鶴派 in Macau. The most well known writers of the “New School” include Liang Yusheng, Jin Yong in Hong Kong, Gu Long, Wo Longsheng (臥龍生, aka. Niu Heting 牛鶴亭, 1930-1997) in Taiwan, and Wen Rui’an (溫瑞安, aka. Wen Liangyu 溫涼玉, 1954-) in Malaysia.

聯經出版 in Taiwan and Jilin Wenshi 吉林文史 in Mainland,¹¹ yet they seemed to become obsolete to new generations of readers, perhaps due to reasons such as language, style, and reading taste.

Literature Review

A growing body of scholarship since the early 1990s attests that martial arts fiction not only fascinates ordinary readers but also attracts scholarly attention. As a matter of fact, the majority of the existing studies is dedicated to Jin Yong and his works, now called “Jinology” 金學. For those devoted to or merely include the late imperial and Republican-era martial arts fiction, to date, much of the Chinese-language assessment has focused on individual writers and their works, which are conventionally introduced chronologically. This group of scholarship provides biographical information of authors, plot summaries of novels, interpretations of literary works, or, typically, some combination thereof.¹² Chen Pingyuan’s monograph, being a

¹¹ The Linking martial arts fiction series includes 105 volumes. It was edited and commentated by Ye Hongsheng and published in 1985. Each novel includes a general introduction to the series and a specific introduction to the writer. It provides with valuable primary source for study of the genre and the era, but has been out of print. The Jilin wenshi (Jinlin Literature and History Press) series was part of a series of “Late Qing and Republican Era Fiction” 晚清民國小說研究叢書 and published in 1987. It has also been out of print.

¹² Some sound scholarly writing or critical reviews include Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao* 民國通俗小說論稿 [On the Republican-Era Popular Fiction] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1991); Ye Hongsheng, *Ye Hongsheng lunjian* 葉洪生論劍 [Ye Hongsheng On Sword] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1994); Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji: Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shilun* 俠的蹤蹟: 中國武俠小說史論 [Traces of Knight-Errant: A History of Chinese Martial Arts Fiction] (Beijing: Remin wuxue chubanshe, 1995). Several collections of conference papers published recently offer valuable newly discovered materials or new interpretations of main writers and their works, including Chinese Department of Tamkang University ed., *Xia yu Zhongguo wenxue* 俠與中國文化 [Knight-Errantry and Chinese Culture] (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1993); Zeng Pingyuan and He Linfu eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji* 平江不肖生研究專輯 [A Collection of Studies on Pingjiang buxiaosheng] (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2013); Zhang Yuanqin and Wang Zhenliang eds., *Jinmen lunjian lu* 津門論劍錄 [On Sword in Tianjin] (Shanghai: Yuandong chubanshe, 2011). Some biographies of martial

perceptive exception, treats martial arts fiction as a literary subgenre and traces its history from antiquity till the twentieth century, while paying special attention to four distinctive generic elements, including weapons, revenge, the chronotope *jianghu*, and the roam.¹³ Although Chen acknowledges that the approach of “historical genres” may produce “far-fetched” narrative of the genre’s development and appears to be conscious of balancing methodologies of “historical genres” and “theoretical genres,”¹⁴ he paradoxically narrates a linear history of the genre. My research, in contrast, by focusing on the martial arts fiction written since the last ten years of Qing till the end of the Second World War, has shown that even within such a short time frame the evolutionary tale of generic development is not quite so tidy. Rather, it is a trajectory marked by avant-garde stance, conservative regression, critical reflection, and aesthetic advancement. Some of the fictional works written in the late Qing display notable innovation in both narrative technique and literary device, while some novels written in the 1920s employ evidently restrained narrative model. All together they point to a complex and intricate mosaic of martial arts fiction and its growth.

Concentrating on the same time span as this dissertation, Ko Chia Cian recognizes some distinctive generic conventions and explores “the allegories of nations and history in chivalric discourse.”¹⁵ By treating “the notion of chivalry as a cultural code” and investigating “how

arts writers provide useful primary source too, such as Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqianbiao* 淚灑金錢鏢 [Tearing on the Coin Darts] (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1986); Xu Sinian, *Wang Dulu Pingzhuan* 王度盧評傳 [A Commentated Biography of Wang Dulu] (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2005).

¹³ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiake meng*, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ko Chia Cian, “Main Point of Thesis,” *Guozu yu lishi de yinyu: jinxiandai wuxia chuanqi de jingshengshi kaocha, 1895-1945* 國族與歷史的隱喻: 近現代武俠傳奇的精神史考察, 1895-1945 [Metaphors of Nation and History: A Study on Chinese Chivalric Romance from 1895-1945], M.A.

protagonists are served as a symbol of a nation and how they granted the wish of the public,” Ko conducts an allegorical reading of “chivalric romance” in the historical and cultural context he constructs.¹⁶ The period in question was a highly politicized era, indeed. On the one hand, elitist intellectuals spoke out through channels like newspapers and journal then and continued to institutionalize their thinking afterwards through writing histories, and on the other, martial arts fiction had always been produced market-oriented and writers did not seem conscious of recording their understandings of literary creation. It is thus tempting to slip in a nation-focused master narrative while revisiting the era when salvaging the nation and enlightening the people remained the central concern of the society. Acknowledging the overwhelming influence of politics upon literature and culture, my project, on the contrary, aims to unveil the aesthetic features and literary autonomy that martial arts fiction illuminated and prevent it from being overshadowed by the nationalist discourse.

It is worth pointing out that martial arts fiction, as a type of popular genre, is also included in a recent project of re-evaluating the late Qing and Republican era “popular literature” 通俗文學 carried out by a group of Mainland Chinese scholars, which results in the publication of two thick volumes of *A History of Modern Chinese Popular Literature*.¹⁷ In the chapter focusing on fiction of “martial arts and secret society,” the writers at the onset lay out the theoretical premise of their analysis, including first, a recognition of the actual existence of “proto-knight-errant” 原俠 as the origin of “*xia*” 俠 (knight-errant) character and “*xia*” culture,

Thesis, National Chi-Nan University, Taiwan, 2001.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fan Boqun eds., *Zhongguo jinxindai tongsu wenxue shi* 中國近現代通俗文學史 [A History of Modern Chinese Popular Literature] (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2010).

second, an exclusion of the genre from the “realist value system,” and third, a disagreement with interpreting the genre as a “representation of the faulty national character.”¹⁸

Considering that this publication represents the most recent and authoritative evaluation of the genre in China, it is worthwhile to examine its fundamental proposition: first and foremost, it points to the question of how to understand literature in relation to reality. By presuming the actuality of “proto-knight-errant” and regarding it as the “origin” of the literary genre, the writers mark out the domain for martial arts fiction, that is, stories shall originate from and conform to the contour of “proto-knight-errant.” Although the meaning of “proto-knight-errant” is never explicitly explained, the writers list two basic models for textual analysis: one is “proto-knight-errant” combining with the “good,” and the other “proto-knight-errant” with the “evil.”¹⁹ While this premise at one point seems to acknowledge the independence of literary writing of reality by recognizing the incompatibility between the targeted subgenre and doctrines of realist literature, it repeats the conflict between good and evil as the defining element of the subgenre and accordingly restrain the reassessment within a highly ideological domain. In other words, on the one hand, this new re-assessment rejects the realist criterion, on the other hand, however, does not propose an alternative approach of interpreting the fiction. It, therefore, falls in the same formula underlining the long-reigning paradigm, that is, a foundational division between “pure” and “popular” literatures, the mentality of reading fictional works for the values they transmit, and an evolutionary narrative of genre’s development. By examining the context and content of martial arts fiction written in the first half of the twentieth century, this dissertation illuminates relationships between literature, politics, and culture. It emphasizes the subgenre as expression of

¹⁸ Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang’an, “Fiction of Martial Arts and Secret Society,” Fan Boqun eds., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongshu wenxue shi*, 342-344.

¹⁹ Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang’an, “Fiction of Martial Arts and Secret Society,” 346.

literary imagination and scrutinizes how writers managed to be creative in both literary writing and the relation between literature and reality. It offers insight into the issue of literary autonomy and its trajectory while taking in account the influences of literary tradition, political discourse, and commercial operation.

The English-use of chivalric literature appears to be more diverse methodologically compare to its Chinese counterpart. As early as the 1960s James Liu published his two-fold study on Chinese knight-errant: the “historical knight-errant” since antiquity on the one hand, and the knight-errant characters depicted in Chinese literature from the fourth century BCE to the twentieth century on the other, manifesting a popular image of nonconformity against “a rigid Confucian code of behavior.”²⁰ The comprehensive survey offers ample information on the subject for specialists and general readers alike. It needs to be pointed out that this dissertation follows Liu’s translation and uses “knight-errant” to refer to the “*xia*” used in Chinese texts, simply because Liu’s translation appears to have become a commonly used term.²¹ Other terms such as “chivalric,” “martial hero and heroine,” “martial fighter,” and “martial warrior” are interchangeable in the following chapters.

Among the succeeding scholarly works that echo Liu’s observation of Chinese knight-errant being the heretic against the orthodox, Petrus Liu’s monograph directly speaks to the issues this dissertation explores.²² Resituating “the literary genre of *wuxia xiaoshuo*” as an

²⁰ James Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (London: Routledge, 1967), xi.

²¹ Liu has an explanation of the English terminology resembling the “*xia*” concept in Chinese culture and the reason why he uses “knight-errant” as the English counterpart of “*xia*.” James Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, xii. Using his translation implies that I am aware of the fundamental differences between the Western knight and the Chinese knight-errant.

²² Petrus Liu, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

“interventionist and progressive cultural movement,” Liu sees the literary subgenre as “a thought experiment” and argues that it “invented the most important model of *nonstatist* political responsibility” (original emphasis) and provides “a concrete counterexample to the widely accepted thesis that China’s response to foreign imperialism has always been the establishment of a strong modern nation-state.”²³ Applying postcolonial theory to analyze the texts, Liu’s discussion has gone beyond “literature” noted in his book title and includes other type of medium such as film, which, however, is not effectively differentiated from literary texts with regards to both the accuracy of plot summary and distinctive representational devices.²⁴ Moreover, although Liu at the onset denounces the “traditional ‘state-centered’ interpretations” of martial arts fiction, he does not seem to shun from the nationalist perspective when analyzing martial arts novels, nor does he provide clear differentiations regarding the historical and cultural circumstances between the regions his discussion includes – namely, Mainland China from the 1920s to late 1930s, the post-1949 Hong Kong, and the 1960s Taiwan.

As little studies introduced thus far has yet examined martial arts fiction in relation to the modernization of Chinese literature, David Wang’s discussion on the late Qing (1840-1911) chivalric and court-case fiction provides an insightful exception. Wang probes in the central question of Chinese modernity and argues that the appearance of this group of works “addressed emphatically society’s urgent need to reconfigure its political and judicial powers.”²⁵ Reading the fictional works as artifacts that were deeply ingrained in “the popular imagination regarding the

²³ Ibid, 3-6.

²⁴ A salient example is the novel *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the same title film. Despite of the same title, there lie several important differences with regards to the treatment of relationships between protagonists, which however, are not seen in Liu’s discussion. Petrus Liu, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History*, 74-78.

²⁵ David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor*, 121.

agency of justice and order,” Wang forcefully asserts the “repressed modernities” they demonstrated and the late Qing as “a crucial moment in which many incipient modernities competed for fulfillment.”²⁶ As Wang notes, the “repressed modernities” he argues for offers an counter-argument to the “notion of a singular, belated modernity that informs the discourse of Chinese literature since the May Fourth period.”²⁷ That is to say, the significance of the works he investigates in relation to the issue of modernity lies in the new aesthetic and narrative developments they created, which generated important space for literary creation.

Built upon Wang’s studies, my dissertation engages in the discussion of Chinese literary modernity by focusing on the question of literary autonomy – namely, literature stands as an independent exercise of imaginary expression, free of resemblance to the real world. As Wang Guowei implied in his “wenxue xiaoyan” 文學小言 (Incidental Remarks on Literature, 1906), literature, like any type of art, shall be “an aesthetic realm of universal transcendent beauty, offering freedom from the particularities of reality.”²⁸ Martial arts fiction, due to its close ties with indigenous narrative tradition, iconoclastic implications, and sensational appeal to readers, offers an optimal site to scrutinize the trajectory of literary autonomy throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Although my argument for autonomous literary creation focuses on a later time period than that Wang has investigated, my research precisely echoes Wang’s anachronistic approach that “disturbs the myth of linear temporality in (literary) history,” revealing the conservative in a seemingly modern period and discovering the subtlety in a conventionally

²⁶ Ibid, 121, 21.

²⁷ David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor*, 18.

²⁸ Kirk Denton, “Introduction,” Kirk Denton ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 68.

perceived unsophisticated genre, thereby challenging the singularity and developmentalism that underscores the existing scholarly narrative about martial arts fiction.²⁹

Moreover, Wang's discussion points out that the issue of "justice" formed the central conflict of the fiction he examines, which was indeed the immediate precursor of the works I investigate in this dissertation. Wang's thesis – namely, a consensual notion of "justice" and a yearning for radical change it revealed – serves as the starting point of my examination.³⁰

Currently few scholars in the West study this very rich period of martial arts fiction.³¹ Literary scholars in China have tended to treat this period merely as the continuation of a long history. Within the time frame commonly divided by political events, such as the overthrow of Qing and founding of the Republic in 1911, chronological order – namely, the mentality of producing a linear narrative of generic development – has long dominated the Chinese-language studies of the genre. Most of Chinese scholarship has split the period from 1911 to 1949 into three stages with regards to martial arts genre's development: 1912-1922 is the incipient state 萌芽期; 1923-1931 is the blooming stage 繁華期; and 1932-1949 is the mature stage 成熟期. With very minor differences in the words used and the years marked, this three-stage split was first seen in Luo Liquan's 1990 history of Chinese martial arts fiction, followed by Zhang Gansheng's 1991 publication of his studies on Republican-era popular fiction and Xu Sinian's 1995 monograph

²⁹ David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor*, 22.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 121.

³¹ John Christopher Hamm published a monograph on Jin Yong's martial arts novels and the cultural identity of post-war Hong Kong. John Christopher Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006). Margaret Wan wrote a book on the early nineteenth century martial romance *Green Peony* and argues for the rise of martial arts fiction at that time. Paize Keulemans recently released his book on the nineteenth century Chinese martial arts fiction and the sound effects it depicted in relation to the cultural and political identity of Beijing city. Paize Keulemans, *Sound Rising from the Paper: Nineteenth-Century Martial Arts Fiction and the Chinese Acoustic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

also on the history of Chinese martial arts fiction. In the most recent re-assessment aforementioned, Xu, one of the two writers who wrote the chapter on martial arts fiction, appears to maintain his three-stage division.³² For tidy narratives in which one writer is succeeded by a new (and conventionally better) one, the hybridity and intertextuality of martial arts fiction is commonly overlooked. But, for my purpose, the very multiplicity of writers and their styles makes it explicit to trace how generic conventions were established, twisted, even subverted, and renewed, so as to present a mosaic of styles and aesthetic features that martial arts fiction indicated at different moments, in various localities, and by individual writers.

In addition, the fundamental distinction that Chinese scholars draw between “traditional” and “modern” martial arts fiction lies in the observation that in modern narrative, knight-errant no longer follow the righteous judge. In other words, a shift of focus from the state-sponsored authority such as the judge to knights-errant and their social group, in Chinese scholarship, marks the birth of modern martial arts fiction.³³ Pinpointing to a similar stateless terrain in martial arts fiction as the manifestation of its modern nature, my research, however, reveals that as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, martial arts fiction had already created an autonomous space without the existence or intervention of the state. This autonomy of knights-errant free of the state’s control and regulation generated important space for literary imagination and creation. As the narrative focus shifted away from morality, martial arts fiction took part in a variety of socio-political issues by means of divergent literary devices. This way, it opened up new possibilities for innovations in both narrative techniques and literary imagination. In the

³² Luo Liqun, *Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi* 中國武俠小說史 [A History of Chinese Martial Arts Fiction] (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1990), 197. Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 28; Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji*, 99. Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang’an, “Fiction of Martial Arts and Secret Society,” Fan Boqun eds., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongsu wenxue shi*, 356.

³³ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxueshi*, 302.

meantime, compare to the chivalric and court-case fiction that David Wang studies, a stateless terrain that my texts display differentiates themselves from their immediate precursor – namely, Wang’s texts. In the fictional works that Wang examines, the state was still heavily invested or involved in the issue of “justice” – the central concern of the texts. It is at the juncture of existing scholarship that I argue, martial arts fiction created in the first decade of the twentieth century marked a fundamental departure from their precursor and announced the commencement of its modern phase. Moreover, its continuation in the following decades reveals the complicated trajectory of literary autonomy in modern China.

Compare to the explicit developmental mindset embedded in the accounts of martial arts fiction aforementioned, the tenacious evaluation of fictional works measured by the conformity to nation-oriented ideology and values has been implicit. Despite of the repeated cries for “re-writing the (Chinese) literary history” among Mainland scholars since the mid-1980s, the realist literary doctrine and edifying function had long formed the two basic parameters used to assess literary works. On the one hand, the notion of realist representation demands a direct relevancy of literature to the real world, expressed by slogans such as “objective observation” 客觀的觀察 and “real description” 真實的描寫.³⁴ On the other hand, the instrumental mentality requires that literary works generate certain types of impact on the reader. Social or cultural values transmitted through literary works, in this reigning mode of writing and reading, bridge “objective” literary representation and its enlightening function. Literary works, therefore, shall either reveal the darkness of reality for the purpose of social critique, or promote positive values

³⁴ Shen Yanbing, “Ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo” 自然主義與中國現代小說 [Naturalism and Modern Chinese Fiction], Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudie pai wenxue ziliao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派文學研究資料 [Materials on Studies of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies Literature] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 689.

so as to improve national character 國民性. Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that martial arts fiction, in particular its modern shape – the subject of this dissertation – has been marginalized and even neglected in the mainstream literary history. Even in the most recent attempt that Mainland scholars made to re-assess popular literature, “popular” 俗 literature is juxtaposed with “pure” 純 literature by using the criteria that the latter has governed for decades. To justify the “value” of the so-called popular literature – martial arts fiction being one of the most prominent sub genre, scholars classify it as the “inherit and reform school” 繼承改良派 that “preserved the truthfulness of history” 為歷史存真, so that it is qualified to be placed next to pure literature and achieve the ideal dynamics between the two – namely, “two wings fly(ing) together in unison” 雙翼展翅.³⁵ A salient example is how two martial arts novels written by Xiang Kairan are assessed: *Jianghu qixia zhuan* 江湖奇俠傳 (Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant in the Jianghu, 1923-1927) won Xiang unheard of fame and success among readers in the 1920s but is noted as “has exposed his flaws,” mostly due to the depictions of “unreal” 奇 phenomena, while *Jindai xiayi yingxiong zhuan* 近代俠義英雄傳 (Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes, 1923-1926) is praised for its patriotic sentiment and nationalist stance, thereby “making his strength known.”³⁶

But that is not to say that ideological judgment remains to be the singular criterion in re-assessing the late Qing and Republican-era literary field. Rather, it has become a consensus among scholars in the past decade that the “tradition” that the May Fourth writers condemned including both writing and other literary practices never just halted facing in the midst of the sea

³⁵ Fan Boqun, “General Introduction” 緒論, Fan Boqun eds., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongshu wenxue shi*, 5, 6, 27.

³⁶ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 298-299.

change of Chinese society. Rather, it continued to exist with innovated aesthetic expressions and operational exercises while engaging with the “modern” projected mainly with western literary ideals. It is precisely at the core of this ferment that the literary was asserted and the alternative modern emerged. Michel Hocks, for instance, argues “the New Literature must be seen as but one style of modern Chinese writing, coexisting and competing with other styles throughout the pre-War decades.”³⁷ By focusing on the concept of “style” 文體, including its meaning in traditional literary practice and the implications contextualized in the discourse of *tiyong* 體用 ([Chinese] essence and [Western] application), Hocks paints a complex and diverse picture of the literary practices in modern China. Similarly, invoking the term of “style” but in a very different sense – namely, the “densely illusive and intricately wrought style” of classical poetry, Shengqing Wu engages in the discussions about the dynamics between the traditional and the modern and illuminates “the splendor of Chinese lyricism,” particularly the “mutually transformative power of the modern and the archaic.”³⁸ Literary sub-genre with long indigenous tradition and a large readership such as chivalric stories, thus, came to form a contested site that reveals the friction between convention and innovation, sensational appeal and nationalist concern, market and ideology. That the left-wing intellectuals and the state harshly criticized and even banned martial arts fiction and film exactly attests to its importance at the time – both as presenter of popular imagination and as carrier of literary autonomy.

Dissertation Overview

³⁷ Michel Hocks, *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911-1937* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 5.

³⁸ Shengqing Wu, *Modern Archaics: Continuity and Innovation in the Chinese Lyric Tradition, 1900-1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

This dissertation examines the emergence and development of modern Chinese martial arts fiction in the first half of the twentieth century and argues for the literary autonomy it manifested. It engages in the studies of martial arts fiction from three different perspectives. First, approaching martial arts fiction as a literary subgenre, it partakes in the genre studies of martial arts fiction and presents a general picture of how the genre was written, received, reflected, and renovated during the period in question. Acknowledging the unprecedented popularity the genre had accomplished, this project attempts to decipher its generic appeal by analyzing the landmark conventions, key literary devices, and distinctive narrative patterns at the intersection of influences generated by literary tradition, imported concepts, and reading habit. It treats the genre as a contested site fraught with tensions and conflicts among different understandings about literary creation and contributes to the politics embedded in the modern Chinese literary landscape. The narrative of what happened to this genre during the designated time frame is conducted in a theme-based fashion, instead of the chronology order that most of the Chinese scholarship follows. Each of the four chapters focuses on one particular theme and offers one aspect of the genre development. All together, they elucidate how issues related to narrative models and aesthetic features were brought up at different moments and consequently responded by different writers using a variety of narrative strategies, which simultaneously altered the trajectory and drove the development of the genre.

Second, positioning martial arts fiction as one of the most well received subgenre in the Chinese literary field, this dissertation participates in the discussion of the “great divide” between “pure” and “popular” literatures and the question of how to evaluate popular literature.³⁹

³⁹ Theodore Hutters, “Qingmo minchu ‘chun’ and ‘tongsu’ wenxue de da fenqi” 清末民初“純”和“通俗”文學的大分歧 [Great Divide between Pure and Popular Literatures in the Late Qing and Early Republican Era], *Tsing-hua zhongwen xue bao* 清華中文學報 [Chinese Journal of Tsing-hua University],

Although scholars may not agree with when and how the “great divide” was created, it has become a consensus that it was a man-made divide and resulted in the marginalization of popular literature in the mainstream literary history.⁴⁰ Through a series of textual analysis in the lineage of martial arts fiction, this dissertation offers insight into how the ideals of so-called “pure” and “popular” literatures were indeed interwoven in the process of reflecting upon and re-creating the genre. On the one hand, writers of so-called “pure” literature took part in the writing of martial arts fiction and subverted the existing generic assumption by means of intertextual strategies; on the other hand, martial arts writer learned from the New Culture camp and produced innovated writing devices. Both approaches generated important space for literary imagination and facilitated the advancement of literary autonomy. Seen in this light, it is clear that even the most recent attempt of re-assessing the “divide” and the effort of “juxtaposing both wings” 雙翼齊飛 predictably falls in the pitfall of presuming the existence of the “divide,” instead of undertaking the issue without embedded prejudice.

Third, this dissertation scrutinizes the transformation of modern martial arts fiction in relation to the modernization of Chinese literature. In indigenous literary tradition, historiographical writing had long dominated the realm of narrative. Fictional writing, therefore, had long been a subset of the historiography-based narrative tradition and bore a close kinship with historical writing until the late imperial period when its distinctive creativity was gradually recognized by Chinese critics. It was, nevertheless, not until the beginning of the twentieth

No.10, (Dec. 2013), 219-251.

⁴⁰ Most of Mainland scholars hold that the “divide” was formed during the New Culture movement around 1920s, for instance, Fan Boqun, “General Introduction,” Fan Boqun eds., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongsu wenxue shi*, 18-19. Theodore Hutters recently argues that it could be traced back to the late Qing when Liang Qichao and his peers advocated “New Fiction.” Theodore Hutters, “Qingmo minchu ‘chun’ and ‘tongsu’ wenxue de da fenqi,” 221.

century that a systematic discussion of fictionality appeared. As “*wenxue*” 文學 (literature) divorced itself from the comprehensive entity of historiography and became an independent intellectual discipline, how to define its meaning and function remained to be one of the fundamental questions. Due to the domestic unrest and foreign incursion the Qing faces, late Qing intellectuals such as Liang Qichao approached literature, in particular fiction, with an instrumental mindset, highlighting its edifying function and downplaying its imaginary nature. Literary creation, therefore, became part of a large project aiming to salvaging the country and enlightening the people. This utilitarian mentality of writing and reading fictional works continued in the May Fourth period, and the distance between literature and reality was pushed even more intricately closer due to the impact of literary realism. The dominant May Fourth discourse pinned down “literature” in the narrow discourse marked with key terms such as ideology, morality, nation, reflecting life, and so on. It was highly limiting not only with regards to literary assessment but also literary creation. Using martial arts fiction and its transformation as a focal point, this dissertation examines the changes that happened to the understandings of how to write and read “*wenxue*” in the period in question. Through this study of modern martial arts fiction, it suggests the new framing and new cognitive structure regarding the nature and function of literature. Instances to be analyzed in the chapters demonstrate that modern martial arts fiction not only pointed out paths to literary imagination, but, more importantly, opened up important space for literary autonomy. It needs to be pointed out, however, the trajectory of generic transformation was never evolutionary, nor a neat one. Rather, it was marked with inventive movements, conservative setback, subversive re-creation, and innovated advancement. The trajectory of literary autonomy, unsurprisingly, paralleled this process.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is composed of four chapters. All together, the chapters paint a complicated and yet intriguing picture of how modern martial arts fiction emerged and transformed in the first half of the twentieth century, which paralleled the trajectory of a growing literary autonomy.

Chapter One focuses on the first decade of the twentieth century and argues that it witnessed the emergence of modern Chinese martial arts fiction. The last decade of the Qing reign was marked with political uncertainty and reconfigurations of its cultural and racial identity, as old ideas were appropriated for new purposes and new concepts were imported to tackle contemporary anxieties. Martial arts fiction, due to its close ties with indigenous narrative tradition and iconoclastic implications, offered a familiar and productive platform for intellectuals, activists, and writers to express their concerns. Marked by a common absence of the state in their stories, four fictional works examined in this chapter respectively address four contemporary issues. They not only pronounced a departure from the late imperial chivalric and court-case fiction that featured with an authoritative state, but also generated important space for literary imagination and creation.

Chapter Two examines the *jianghu* (literally rivers and lakes) as a key literary construct in modern martial arts fiction and illustrates the vacillating and intricate nature of its transformation. Narrating a critical chronology of the literary concept from being a geographical term in early Chinese thought to an autonomous terrain depicted in Xiang Kairan's 1920s novels, this chapter on the one hand, acknowledges the powerful impact that Xiang's *jianghu* construct had generated on his peers and later writers. On the other hand, it suggests that Xiang's *jianghu* – a stateless terrain – continued the invention that writers initiated at the beginning of the century

and mimicked the reality, i.e., the warlord rule. In other words, it is not so much of Xiang's invention as of his popularity that made his *jianghu* an epoch-making concept. As later writers continued to write about the *jianghu*, such as Gong Baiyu and Wang Dulu 王度盧 (1909-1977), the *jianghu*, ironically, remained an autonomous realm in the fictional works for chivalric characters but turned more regulated – namely, less space for literary imagination – as it reached what critics think of maturity.

Chapter Three centers on the issues of historicity, fictionality, and how the changing dynamics between the two elucidate the conception of modern “literature” and a trajectory of literary autonomy. The incipient literary autonomy underscored in the first chapter, however, did not continue in an evolutionary pattern. Rather, it went through stages of setback, critique, reflection, and re-invention in the following decades. Focusing on the *baishi xueyi* 拜師學藝 (literally bowing the master and learning martial skills) trope recurring in Xiang Kairan's novel and the news report/anecdote of students dropping out of school after reading martial arts fiction, this chapter analyzes the fictional works created from 1920s to 1940s, revealing a growing consciousness among writers of writing literature creatively and of urban readers reading critically. The changing perceptions of modern “literature” throughout this period, this dissertation demonstrates, also point to the formation of modern subjectivity in readers of urban spaces like Shanghai and Tianjin.

Chapter Four employs gender as a critical category of analysis and investigates the trajectory of literary autonomy through the metamorphosis of female knight-errant images spanning from the 1920s to 1940s.⁴¹ If the gender imagination analyzed in Chapter One signals

⁴¹ For the origin of the concept of “gender as a category of historical analysis,” see Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec. 1986), 1053-1075.

an avant-garde stance for equal rights between men and women, it witnessed a moderate reversal in the martial arts novels written in the 1920s. On the one hand, these novels indicate a consciousness of the multiple identities and obligations pertaining to their female protagonists; on the other hand, they appear to be unclear about what defines female heroism and how. Female warriors portrayed in these novels, therefore, capture a moment of uncertainty with respects to the meaning of heroism, female subjectivity, and dynamics between physicality and sentimentalism. These reservations gradually turned into progression in the novels written in the 1930s and 1940s through diverse creations of female knight-errant images, which together pointed to a path to female subjectivity.

As a matter of fact, in the late 1940s and early 1950s as the socialist government was established, writers examined in this dissertation all stopped writing martial arts fiction, voluntarily or involuntarily. Martial arts fiction, in particular those written and circulated during the first half of the twentieth century – the subject of this dissertation – was soon marginalized in the official literary history and gradually grew obsolete to the general reader. Reflections on how to write martial arts fiction conforming to the mainstream literary doctrines, however, did not stop. The concluding chapter reviews these reflections and attempts writers made in the 1930s and 1940s in order to accommodate the genre to the realist ideals. By revisiting some most recent cultural phenomena, the Conclusion Chapter points out that the question of how to understand and appreciate “literature” and its autonomy posed a century ago still hears its echo in contemporary China.

Chapter 1:

Anarchism, the Politics of *Xia* Culture, and the emergence of Modern Martial Arts Fiction,
1895-1911

The twentieth century has a new ideology (*zhuyi*); it is the anarchism of Russia. The anarchism of Russia guarantees that it will be pivotal to civilization in the twentieth century. Why? The aims of the anarchists are high, their understanding broad, their hopes are great; imperialism steps back and nationalism retreats before it.

Ma Xulun, “The new ideology of the twentieth century” (1903)

We speak of a cultural revolution, and we must certainly see the aspiration to extend the active process of learning, with the skills of literacy and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups, as comparable in importance to the growth of democracy and the rise of scientific industry.

Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*

Introduction

From antiquity, the image of the wandering martial hero in China has formed a counterpoint and imposed potential challenge to Confucian-based orthodox relationships. Arguably originated from historical documents such as Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*) and other early texts, characters such as “roaming knights-errant” and altruist “assassins” have inspired numerous literary creations and consequent adaptations into traditional-

style operas and contemporary films. Although it is hard to draw the boundary between historical narrative and literary creation, particularly at the beginning of the chivalric formulation, martial heroes stood out in the bulk of Chinese vernacular literature due to their two-fold qualities: on the one hand, they disregard mainstream social norms and conventional practices; on the other hand, they follow a code of ethics centering on requiting favors and righting injustice, through the means of physical act. While the imagined free roaming that chivalric characters conduct has lent Chinese readers a sense of freedom with regards to physical movements, the eccentric undertone of chivalric stories offered alternative experiences for readers to explore outside of social norms – it made this literary subgenre even more attractive, indeed.

This heterodox connotation of chivalric tale was broadened and elaborated when it resonated with the imported concept of anarchism in the last fifteen years of the Qing reign when the accountability of the Qing court was severely undermined by domestic unrest and foreign incursion. Chinese intellectuals and activists, disillusioned with the Qing state and its attempts to make changes particularly after the signing of the Shimonoseki Treaty in 1895, were desperate searching for methods and resources to salvage the country. Anarchism, among other imported ideas and concepts, soon became “part of the mainstream of modern Chinese thought” due to its very claim of “dismantling the old culture and the old society, as well as the very legitimacy of the state.”⁴² It was within this intellectual context that indigenous Chinese chivalric tale attracted the attention of Chinese writers who employed the genre and engaged in a variety of socio-political issues. Moreover, revolutionaries and political activists lived out chivalric ideals by dressing with swords, naming themselves after martial heroes, and acting like unorthodox martial

⁴² Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1.

characters.⁴³ These mimicking of chivalric personas in real life, in turn, generated important space for literary imagination and creation, which marked the vibrancy of the time period with regards to literary invention. In an era of political uncertainty and social turmoil, stories of ancient chivalric characters, due to its iconoclastic implications and contemporary relevancy, offered a familiar and yet innovated platform for both writers and political actors to express and materialize their opinions with regards to the on-going cultural and social changes.

Focusing on the chivalric stories published in the last fifteen years of Qing, this chapter examines the interval between the flourishing of late imperial chivalric and court-case fiction 俠義公案小說 at the end of the nineteenth century and the resurgence of what was later called the “Old School Martial Arts Fiction” in the 1920s. It is a short and yet crucial period in the long tradition of chivalric literature, with old narrative elements being re-interpreted, new plotting repertoire created, and diverse issues addressed. Characters, images, and motifs of classical chivalric stories were appropriated to address contemporary issues, and new concepts, ideas, and practices were introduced to formulate new generic conventions. This chapter, on the one hand, scrutinizes the subtle while important changes taking place in this literary sub-genre and discusses what these changes have meant to understand its transformation; on the other hand, pays attention to the core elements that remain unchanged and explains its unfailing attractions in a rapidly changing society. Unlike most critics who evaluate the genre as either “reflecting” the history or allowing readers to escape from tumultuous reality,⁴⁴ I read chivalric stories written

⁴³ Chen Pingyuan, “Lun wanqing zhishi de youxia xintai” 論晚清志士的遊俠心態 [On the “Wandering Knight-Errant” Mentality among Late Qing Intellectuals and Activists], The Chinese Department of Tamkang University ed., *Xia yu zhongguo wenhua* 俠與中國文化 [Chivalry and Chinese Culture] (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1993), 227-233.

⁴⁴ The former, see A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi* 晚清小說史 [A History of Late Qing Fiction] (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1955), 163. The latter, see Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular*

during this period as pieces echoing the trendy anarchist thinking that downplayed or even negated the role of the state. This stateless realm offered a discursive and important space for writers and readers to imagine and explore possibilities corresponding to contemporary society. The conflict of good versus evil – the central concern of chivalric stories created in the past centuries – was consequently replaced with a wide range of socio-political issues. These issues, including the function of tradition in an anti-tradition era, evolutionary thinking and ethics of social reform, gendered politics, and patriotic sentiment, together manifested this short period's freedom in literary creation and open up imaginative landscape about how literature converses with life and vice versa. This emphasis on literary imagination and the shifted focus away from the state in the writing of chivalric tale, I argue, marked the emergence of modern Chinese martial arts fiction and has profoundly influenced later writings of martial heroes.

In the following I begin with a brief account of the political and cultural conditions in the immediate post-1895 period, highlighting major social and political events, their impacts on the state and society, and the relevant intellectual undercurrents. The historical reconstruction aims to provide a context for textual analysis carried out afterwards and, in particular, points out that indigenous *xia* 俠 (chivalric) culture and a cry for politicized body promoted in the nationalist discourse together played an important role in the reconfigurations of the country's cultural identity. More importantly, chivalric narrative became even more powerful when its physical quality and iconoclastic implication connected with the imported anarchist concept and stories. The genre therefore provided a robust cultural resource for writers to engage in issues that went far beyond the realm of morality. I then introduce four pieces of fictional works written by four writers from all walks of life, including the novel *Xianxia wuhua jian* 仙俠五花劍 (Immortal

Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 10, 20.

Knights-Errant and Five Flower Swords, 1901, hereafter *Immortal Knights-Errant*) written by Haishang jianchi 海上劍癡, short story “Dao Yusheng Zhuan” 刀餘生傳 (Biography of Dao Yusheng, 1904) by “Cold Blood” 冷血, novel *Guige haoxia tan* 閨閣豪傑談 (Tale of the Boudoir and Chivalry, 1904) by Wang Miaoru 王妙如, and novel *Rexue hen* 熱血痕 (Traces of Hot Blood, 1907), attributed to Li Liangcheng 李亮丞. Published in the first decade of the twentieth century, these four tales were all organized centering on one or one group of heroic character(s), and displayed some fundamental differences from their precursor – namely, the late Qing court-case and chivalric fiction. They lay stress on very different topics, such as the tradition of supernatural fiction 神怪小說, ethics of social reform, equal rights for men and women, and patriotic sentiment. In addition, a sense of distrust of the state or even a disregard of the state was foregrounded in these fictional works – another feature signaling the modern nature of these works. Altogether, I argue, they marked a departure from traditional chivalric and court-case fiction and generated important space for literary creation. I end this chapter with a brief discussion of the significance and profound impact that these works have produced upon later writers.

Before I proceed, it is worth explaining the etymological and generic meanings of “martial arts fiction” that this chapter examines. Closely related to the late Qing chivalric and court-case fiction that David Wang has meticulously studied, “martial arts fiction” here is a loosely defined term referring to the fictional works that include elements of chivalric and heroic fiction, as well as generic elements created in earlier texts such as Tang tales.⁴⁵ Martial arts fiction to be investigated in this chapter may also show influences of other literary subgenres and traditions, for instance, historical fiction and literati jotting notes 筆記. Some primary elements

⁴⁵ David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 117-182.

that may define martial arts fiction include characters trained with martial arts and magic, images of self-justified arbiter, the motif of revenge, the value of morality, unique martial weapons, and so on. It matters that these tales are titled with “xia” 俠 (chivalry) or “yi” 義 (righteousness) as readers would know what to expect, but what essentially defines them is the character-type—chivalric protagonist, male or female, and their heroic deeds. Protagonist may cover a wide range of figures, such as immortal swordsman or swordswoman trained with martial arts 劍仙 and outlaws motivated by chivalric spirit and striving for self-defined “justice.” Although what constitutes “chivalric” and “heroic” varies in different historical moments and literary contexts, the protagonist of this genre always strives for some sort of cause, be it personal vision or national prospect.

Anarchism, Evolutionary Thinking, and the Politics of *Xia* Culture

The last fifteen years of Qing is characterized by failure and humiliation, reaction and action. The signing of the Shimonoseki Treaty in April 1895 between the Qing and Japan crystallized a vital moment not only in the history of China, but also that of Chinese literature. It marked a turning point of the dynamics between the Qing and its Western counterparts, as “the notion of adopting Western ideas became the mainstream intellectual position in China.”⁴⁶ A desire to strengthen the polity, among other concerns, became the prevailing mood among officials and intellectuals, despite of the approach to be taken. How to improve the Qing governance and its efficiency in handling domestic issues and international affairs was the most acute question. Calling for open practices of policy-making and for a public space in the political realm, more and more journals as well as newspapers and politicized literati groups appeared

⁴⁶ Theodore Hutters, *Bring the World Home*, 24.

between 1895 and 1898. Debates developed regarding the practice of autocratic monarchy, how to draw the line between the “public” and the “private,” established and spread the concept of “popular right,” and lay the basis for modern formulation of concepts like state, nation, citizen, etc. For the first time in Chinese history, the possibility emerged that autocratic monarchy may not be the only form of government. Changing the way that power was distributed and structured had become possible.

Looking to the West for answers to these issues, Yan Fu’s translation of Thomas Huxley’s (1825-1895) *Ethics and Evolution* in 1896 supplied one of the most important imported intellectual resources that influenced the on-going debates. Despite the problems in Yan’s rendering and interpretations,⁴⁷ *On Evolution* 天演論 was to be Yan’s “most resounding success.”⁴⁸ The fundamentals of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary ideas include “struggle for existence,” “natural selection,” and “survival of the fittest.” Yan Fu was overwhelmingly concerned with the implications of Spencer’s social Darwinism for the sphere of human action. His translation not only caused a stir among literati contemporaries, but also revolutionized values and readers of younger generations in China.⁴⁹ Darwin’s theory and its implications in the human society created a fairly complex sensation among Chinese intellectuals: on the one hand, it gave them hope that China could still catch up with the western powers and even triumph over the competitors, as long as it were to grow into a “fit” nation. On the other hand, the undertone of

⁴⁷ Huang Kewu, “Yan Fu tianyan zhixue de neihan yu yiyi” 嚴復“天演之學”的內涵與意義 [The Implications and Significance of Yan Fu’s Discussion of Evolution], *Journal of Institute of Modern History*, (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2004), 129-187.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yan Fu and the West* (Harvard University Press, 1964), 99.

⁴⁹ On the influences of social Darwinism in China, see James Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), James Pusey, *Lu Xun and Evolution* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), and Andrew Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tale: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

this narrative also pointed to another possibility that the failures the Qing was experiencing could snowball if it were to fail to grow into a “fit” nation. Competition was cruel and they needed to react immediately; this realization intensified the sense of crisis that Chinese intellectuals experienced. The combination of these two sentiments was largely responsible for a strong utilitarian tendency among those who debated about the various ways to save the nation and a mentality that expected immediate effects of social reform.

The biological origin of Darwin’s theory and the prevailing sense of crisis quickly directed intellectuals to issues such as national character and how to improve it. The physical body and intelligent mind stood at two ends of the question; their combined advancement pointed to a possibility of an improved people. Yan Fu’s essay “On the origin of [national] strength” 原強 registered this thinking: race-salvation and nation-strengthening fundamentally lay in “encouraging the people’s strength,” “awakening the people’s wisdom,” and “renewing the people’s morality.”⁵⁰ Measures to be taken in order to achieve the goal Yan Fu iterated included prohibiting opium smoking and foot-binding, improving the stamina of populace, opening modern schools and teaching western knowledge, and setting up parliament and implementing constitutional monarchy.⁵¹ This way, human body, in particular “fit” in both physicality and intelligence, was included in a highly politicized discourse that aimed to salvage the country and enhance the quality of the people.

⁵⁰ Yan Fu, “Yuan qiang” 原強[On the origin of [national] strength, 1895], Wang Shi ed., *Yan Fu ji* 嚴復集[Works of Yanfu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 5-15.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Following this direction, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), among other advocates,⁵² zeroed in on women's inadequacy in a prospect of to-be-modernized China and strongly promoted women's education. Liang stated, as mothers, women's abilities directly determined those of the next generation.⁵³ Women had become the weakness of China in the narrative constructed by Liang and other advocates of reform. This connection between women and the nation implied that both the initiation and ultimate goal of the late Qing "feminist" movement were designed to achieve national ends rather than to address the identities that these women might be shaping for themselves. Women's "new role as 'female citizen' was, therefore, open to limitless manipulations."⁵⁴ Moreover, the "new women" discourse was embedded with a paradox since the beginning: on the one hand, it was a top-down, male-centered master narrative; on the other hand, the targeted subject – the female population – was mostly illiterate and bound-feet passive audience. Questions such as "whose ideal woman," "for whom to follow," and "how to evaluate the effect" became critical. Liang Qichao, for instance, introduced figures such as Madame Roland of France as "the first heroic woman in modern times" and the "mother" of the

⁵² Kang Youwei, *Datong shu* 大同書 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1935), 193. Tan Sitong, "Ren xue" 仁學, Cai Shangsi and Fang Xing eds., *Tan Sitong Quanjì* 譚嗣同全集 [A Complete Collection of Tan Sitong], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), vol. 2, 304.

⁵³ Liang Qichao, "Lun nüxue" 論女學 [On Women's Education, 1897], Zhang Pingxing ed., *Liang Qichao quanjì* 梁啟超全集 [A Complete Collection of Liang Qichao], Book 1, vol. 1, 33. In her discussion of Chinese women in revolution, Ono Kazuko notes that it was "under the influence of such ideas [the theory of evolution] bourgeois urban women's liberation was advocated for the first time." Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, Joshua Fogel trans and ed., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 25.

⁵⁴ Joan Judge, "Citizen or Mothers of Citizens? Gender and the Meaning of Modern Chinese Citizenship", *Changing Meaning of Citizenship in Modern China*, ed. Merle Goldman and Elizabeth J. Perry, Harvard University Press, 2002, 24. Andrew Morris, "'To Make the 400 Million Move': The Late Qing Dynasty Origins of Modern Chinese Sport and Physical Culture", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42.2 (Oct. 2000), 883-88.

French Revolution” as a role model for Chinese women to follow.⁵⁵ Xue Shaohui 薛紹徽 (1866-1911), an active female writer of the time, however, from women’s perspective proposed a different understanding of the “new women” project. She introduced Madame Roland in the *Biographies of Foreign Women* 外國烈女傳 that she co-edited with her husband Chen Shoupeng 陳壽鵬 (1857- ca. 1928), portrayed her as a victim of the violence in the French revolution, and lamented that she was sacrificed for the national machine.⁵⁶ While the paradoxical nature of the “feminist” discourse yielded ambiguity and ambivalence, it also generated important space for writers who later created female characters to contest, negotiate, and engage in the discussion. This space for imagination and creation enabled martial arts fiction to materialize and fantasize the contemplations and considerations pertaining to the woman’s question in the following decades.

The sovereignty crisis and an urge for change at the turning point of the twentieth century must have reminded Chinese intellectuals of their predecessors back in the Warring States period (475-221 BCE) that was characterized by political uncertainty and chaos. Images of heroic envoys, roaming knights-errant 遊俠 and loyal assassins recorded in historical documents such as the *Records of the Grand Historian* (91 BCE) started to carry new meanings in the light of contemporary concerns. Scholars and intellectuals including Liang Qichao, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1868-1936), Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), and Lu Xun (1881-1936) unanimously turned

⁵⁵ Liang Qichao, “Luolan furen zhuan” 羅蘭夫人傳[Biography of Madame Roland, 1902], Xia Xiaohong ed. *Liang Qichao wenxuan* 梁啟超文選[Selected Works of Liang Qichao] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1992), 346-362.

⁵⁶ Qian Nanxiu, *Politics, Poetics, and Gender in Late Qing China: Xue Shaohui and the Era of Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 160-165.

to the “chivalric spirit” 武俠精神 and explored its contemporary implication.⁵⁷ Liang Qichao, for example, revisited Chinese traditional chivalric narrative when introducing the Japanese bushido – the code of honor and morals developed by Japanese samurais – and argued for warrior worship.⁵⁸ Presenting Japanese bushido as the mental discipline for Japan’s recent winning over the Russian in the 1904-05 Japanese-Russian War, Liang juxtaposed the Chinese chivalric narrative with the Japanese bushido and refreshed the long-existing Chinese chivalric culture with contemporary contingency. In Liang’s view, bushido spirit – a worship of physical and military power in patriotic terms, shaped and enabled Japan’s victory over Russia. Therefore, in order to achieve the same victory over challenges that Qing was facing, Chinese people shall restore its long neglected tradition of chivalry and re-install it to the society.⁵⁹

While Liang was inspired by Japan’s victory, Zhang Taiyan, a loyal Confucian and ardent supporter of revolution, looked inward at indigenous philosophical resources and proposed his conception of “*ruxia*” 儒俠 (Confucian knight-errant). In the same-title essay Zhang presented knight-errant as the last type of Confucian and stated that they contribute to the society as much as orthodox Confucians.⁶⁰ Although the image of *xia* (knight-errant) had long been perceived in Chinese cultural history as the untamable and heterodox, Zhang legitimized it

⁵⁷ Chen Guo’en, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue de guannian yu fangfa* 中國現代文學的觀念與方法 [Views and Methodologies of Modern Chinese Literature] (Taipei: Xinrui wenchuang, 2012), 200-201.

⁵⁸ Liang Qichao, “Zhongguo zhi wushidao” 中國之武士道 [The Chinese Bushido, 1904], *Yinbingshi heji* 飲冰室合集 [A Collection of Yinbing Studio] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), vol. 24, 3. It is also worth noting that the first Chinese intellectual who is said to have noticed the Japanese worshipping of warriorship was Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848-1905). Chen Pingyuan, “Lun wanqing zhishi de youxia xintai,” 236.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ Zhang Taiyan, “Ruxia pian” 儒俠篇 [On Confucian knight-errant], *Zhang Taiyan quanji* 章太炎全集 [Complete Collection of Zhang Taiyan] (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1982), vol.3, 11-12.

as part of the orthodox Confucian discourse by integrating it into his discussion of Confucianism.⁶¹ In other words, Zhang “reformed” the traditional image of knight-errant and constructed it as the “*daxia*” 大俠 (Grand knight-errant) who benefited the nation and the people rather than requiting favors and requiring revenge.⁶² Zhang was not the first to connect Confucianism with knight-errantry. The earliest juxtaposition of “*ru*” 儒 (Confucian) and “*xia*” 俠 (knight-errant) was said to be Han Fei 韓非 (c. 281-233BCE). In his widely circulated quote, Han Fei uttered, “Confucians break the forbidden through writing, while knights-errant do it by force” 儒以文犯禁，俠以武犯禁。⁶³ Confucian and knight-errant, in Han’s statement, stood at two ends of social spectrum: Confucian is characterized by literacy while knight-errant by physical strength. Zhang, however, interpreted *xia* as a type of Confucian and left out completely its implications of illegality and heterodoxy in Han Fei’s statement.

Both Liang’s and Zhang’s re-interpretations of indigenous chivalric culture were also different from Sima Qian’s depictions of roaming knights-errant and political assassins – they have served as proto-type of indigenous chivalric narrative for over two thousand years. In Sima Qian’s biographies, knights-errant were mostly from the grass roots and wandered within society and outside of social institutions. The strong grass-root orientation and anarchist inclination were continued in later chivalric writings. The heterodox individuality and freedom of social obligations that chivalric narrative implied had also inspired admirations among Chinese poets

⁶¹ Zhang Taiyan, “Ruxia pian,” 12.

⁶² Chen Pingyuan, “Lun wanqing zhishi de youxia xintai,” 241.

⁶³ Han Fei, “Wudu” 五蠹 [Five Vermin], in Fang Keli, *Zhongguo zhexue mingzhu xuandu* 中國哲學名著選讀 [Selected Works of Chinese Philosophy Classics] (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1996), 72.

and scholars.⁶⁴ Ironically, Liang and Zhang, as discussed above, made use of traditional chivalric narratives and submitted them to the discourse of nationalism – the political doctrine that was alien to traditional chivalric narrative. Moreover, what Sima Qian painted as “commoner knights-errant” 布衣之俠, “knights-errant of remote villages” 鄉曲之俠, and “knights-errant of alleys” 閭巷之俠 were also re-packaged as sublime figures in the master discourse that spoke not to personal freedom but to grand ideas such as “nation” and “the public.”⁶⁵ This loss of individuality and iconoclasm in the re-interpretation of indigenous chivalric narrative revealed not only how cultural resources were appropriated for political agenda but also a generally inevitable trend of submitting self and community to the nation.

Indigenous chivalric culture, together with the imported anarchist idea, had also inspired radical enactments, exemplified by political assassinations in late Qing and early Republican China. Targets were mostly the Japanese and Manchu officials – enemies of a projected Han-ruling China. According to the *Wanqing xiaoshuo mu* 晚清小說目 (A Catalogue of Late Qing Fiction) compiled by A Ying 阿英 (aka, Qian Xingcun 錢杏邨, 1900-1977), fictional works that contained anarchist advocates were introduced into the Qing China as early as the late nineteenth century and took up roughly a third of the translation works.⁶⁶ Arif Dirlik also notes that most of the classics of anarchism were already available in Chinese translation by the early 1910s, and

⁶⁴ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiake meng*, 12.

⁶⁵ Wang Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1-16.

⁶⁶ Chen Jianhua, “‘Xuwudang xiaoshuo’: Qingmo teshu de yijie xianxiang” 虛無黨小說: 清末特殊的譯介現象 [Fiction of the Anarchist Party: A Unique Phenomenon in the Late Qing (Literary) Translation and Introduction], *Journal of the East China Normal University* 華東師範大學學報, Vol. 4 (1996), 67-73.

some made their way beyond radical periodicals to mainstream journals and newspapers.⁶⁷ These translations served as the medium through which central European radical thinking were transmitted to China, including “problems of political and economic democracy, economic equality and justice, the relationship of the individual and society, ... the place of women in society,” and so forth.⁶⁸

Due to the aggressive political prospect that anarchist thinking pointed to and the on-going revolution in countries like Russia – one of the places where anarchism originated, Chinese intellectuals and activists embraced and celebrated the arrival of anarchism. Liang Qichao, for instance, published an essay titled “On Russian Anarchist Party” 論俄羅斯虛無黨 (1903) in his biweekly journal *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 (New Citizen, 1902-1907) and explained the basics of the concept to his Chinese readers. Although scholars have different opinions regarding the influence of Liang’s essay on the real-life assassinations, anarchism served as an important source of revolutionary ideas in the first few decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁹

Imported anarchist idea and indigenous chivalric culture coincided on two correlated aspects: on the conceptual level, they both demand social justice and lay stress on the distrust between individual and any officially formed social organization; on the level of implementation, they both emphasize physical act which may even include certain degree of violence. Given the resemblance between these two ideals, it is not surprising to see revolutionaries, political

⁶⁷ Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 27.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 27.

⁶⁹ Chen Pingyuan states that Liang Qichao’s two essays on the Japanese bushido and the Russian anarchist party had “little impact” on “the late Qing assassination and its promotion.” Chen Pingyuan, “Lun wanqing zhishi de youxia xintai,” 245.

activists, and assassins of the late imperial China identified themselves as modern “*xia*,” used names taken from traditional chivalric stories or foreign imports such as Japanese bushido and Russian anarchists stories, and redefined “*xia*” as someone sacrifice self for racial improvement and national salvation.⁷⁰ They implemented “chivalric spirit” in daily life, in particular deeds related to reform and revolution. The best example was, perhaps, Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907) who self-identified as “Female Knight-errant from the Mirror Lake” 鑑湖女俠, often dressed with a sword, and signed her poetry with the sobriquet, “*nüxia*” 女俠 (female knight-errant). Her self-constructed image fulfilled the imaging of female knight-errant, except that her cause was political reform. It is worth pointing out, however, that although this kind of employment of the *nüxia* identification continued its popularity into the Republican era, the motivation and nature grew very differently from the late imperial period. Rather than striving for grand ideas such as “nation,” “people,” and “country,” self-identified chivalric acts were largely set for a specific purpose. Shi Jianqiao 施劍翹 (1905-1979), for instance, identified herself as a “*nüxia*” and invoked popular sympathy 同情 after she assassinated the old warlord Sun Chuanfang 孫傳芳 (1885-1935), revenging her father’s death.⁷¹

Enactment of chivalric spirit was also popular at the grass root level, exemplified by the Boxer movement in northern China at the end of the nineteenth century. Many of the Boxers

⁷⁰ Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to this topic in the past decade, including Ko Chia-cian, *Guozu yu lishi de yinyu: jinxiandai wuxia chuanqi de jingshenshi kaocha, 1895-1945*, Chen Yi-lung, *Wanqing geming dangren de shangxia jingshen yu shijian* 晚清革命黨人的尚俠精神與實踐[Late Qing Revolutionaries’ Chivalric Spirits and Practices], M.A. Thesis, Tung-hai University, Taiwan, 2006, Wu Runkai, “Fuchou yu geming: wanqing ansha chao touxi” 復仇與革命：晚清暗殺潮透析[Revenge and Revolution: An Analysis of Assassination Wave in Late Qing China], *Twenty-first Century*, vol. 98 (2006), 66-75.

⁷¹ Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: the Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 35-42.

were from areas that were said to have had long tradition of martial arts practicing.⁷² It is not clear whether their action was informed by chivalric stories they heard, or heroic opera they watched. When they marched towards the capital city slaughtering western missionaries and Chinese converts, they claimed their martial magic could confront the power of western guns, which caused a harsh critique of martial arts as part of the tradition and the theme of popular literature during the May Fourth anti-tradition movement. Contrary to the sublime effect evoked by political activists using the chivalric identity to assassinate political opponents, the Boxer Movement added upon the chivalric culture a quality that was labeled as “feudal” and “backward” in the post-May Fourth mainstream historiography. It also formed a piece of ideological stain that caused modern martial arts fiction to be castigated over and over again at various historical moments.

Employments of indigenous chivalric resources in political discussion and activism during the last decades of the Qing reign were important to the emergence of modern Chinese martial arts fiction. They illuminated the sensational appeal of chivalric narrative among the elite and the general public, and indicated its aesthetic capacity and ideological flexibility in engaging in the social and political issues. Moreover, they revealed clues to understand the intriguing *xia* politics at the turning point of the twentieth century: the undermined role of the Qing court, the disillusioned Chinese elite, the imported concept of anarchism and its advocates of dismantling the state and practicing radical measures, the widely circulated evolutionary thinking and the politicized body, indigenous chivalric culture and its emphasis on physical strength and social justice. Negotiations and appropriations between all these factors may have well been translated into the creation of chivalric stories written in the first decade of the twentieth century: chivalric

⁷² Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 46.

stories inspired political acts in the real world, and radical enactments in turn generated more and diverse materials for writers to create chivalric stories.

Zhang Gansheng estimates that the last chivalric tale that was “relatively influential” before the founding of the Republic (1911), is the *Cases of Judge Peng* 彭公案 (1892).⁷³ Zhang states that by the end of the nineteenth century, traditional chivalric fiction had reached the end of its tether and the next wave of mass production will have to wait until Pingjiang Buxiaosheng published his *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant in the Jianghu* (江湖奇俠傳, 1923-27, here after *Marvelous Knights-Errant*).⁷⁴ Zhang, nevertheless, has overlooked several consequential factors that contradict his argument. First and foremost, he completely leaves out the in-between period – namely, the period this chapter concentrates on. As my following analysis shows, the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed not only flourishing publications of chivalric stories but also diverse themes they addressed. Second, martial arts fiction published during the in-between period created important new conventions, which essentially differentiated them from the traditional chivalric fiction that Zhang mentioned. Third, although Xiang accomplished unprecedented popularity with his *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, he constructed his novel upon the generic assumptions that the fiction of the in-between period had put forward. Given the scarcity of extant materials, it is understandable if no quantitative answer can be given to the production question. It is, however, worth pointing out that at the beginning of the twentieth century after Liang Qichao published his famous essay advocating reforming fiction, Chinese writers were redirected to write exposé so as to reveal problems of the society

⁷³ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 357.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

and thus educate readers.⁷⁵ The writing and reading of chivalric stories may have been consequently ignored. In other words, a lack of critical attention may as well contribute to the “shrinking” of chivalric stories expressed in Zhang’s estimation.

***Immortal Knights-Errant* and the Power of “Tradition”**

Strictly speaking, it is not clear in what year exactly *Immortal Knights-Errant* was initially published, nor where it first became available. But the “preface” is dated 1901, so the novel must have been published sometime after that. Upon publication the novel was immediately a hit and soon had uncountable pirate copies.⁷⁶ As a result, the author decided to give up his copyright, changed his penname as he set aside chivalric genre, and re-focused on writing “social novel.”⁷⁷ As the title indicates, the novel includes supernatural element, combative weapon, and chivalric character – all seem to point to an exciting story. Through a combination of textual and contextual analysis, I argue, *Immortal Knights-Errant* by means of a conventional supernatural swordsman story, addresses the issue of the transmission and inheritance of tradition in an era when indigenous cultural institutions faced unprecedented challenges.⁷⁸ That is to say, written in a period when the Qing was involved in an inevitable global expansion of the western powers, the novel can be understood as an attempt to reconfigure

⁷⁵ Liang Qichao, “Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi” 論小說與群治之關係[On the Relationship Between Fiction and the Government of the People], Gek Nai Cheng trans., Kirk Denton ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, Stanford University Press, 1996, 74-81.

⁷⁶ Duan Huaiqing, *Qingmo minchu baoren-xiaoshuo jia: Haishang shushengshi yanjiu* 清末民初報人-小說家：海上漱生石研究[Late Qing and Early Republican Journalist-novelist: A Study of Haishang sushengshi] (Taipei: Independent Authors, 2013), 152.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 152.

⁷⁸ My argument was inspired by Professor John Christopher Hamm’s comments on this novel.

the cultural identity of the late Qing China from the perspective of the local rather than the global. Despite its conventionally happy ending, I contend, the story expresses—in the post-1898 context—an uncertainty and pessimistic view about the country’s future.

“Shanghai obsession with swords” 海上劍癡 to whom the novel is attributed, is recently identified by Duan Huaiqing to be Sun Yusheng’s 孫玉聲 (1862-1939) pseudonym.⁷⁹ Sun, also known as Sun Jiazhen 孫家振, “The Shanghai Recluse” 海上漱石生,⁸⁰ is regarded as “the most famous novelist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century newspaper industry.”⁸¹ A Shanghai native, Sun wrote about Shanghai, among which the novel *The Bustling Dream of Shanghai* 海上繁華夢 and the sequels (1903-06) were the bestsellers.⁸² Like most of his peer novelists, Sun received traditional education, attempted once the imperial exam before he began a journalist career at *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 (1893-1949) in 1893, worked as editor or chief editor at various local newspapers including *Shenbao* 申報, and created and presided several entertaining literary journals such as *Fanhua zazhi* 繁華雜誌 (1914-1915), *Julebu* 俱樂部 (1935), until four years before he passed away in Shanghai.⁸³ An active member of Shanghai publishing industry and a prolific writer, he published social and political commentaries as columnist and serialized novel chapters in newspapers. Sun wrote more than thirty novels, most of which were popular chivalric fiction and courtesan novels, and was also known for old-style classical prose and

⁷⁹ Duan Huaiqing, *Qingmo minchu baoren-xiaoshuojia*, 151.

⁸⁰ “漱石” is taken from the Jin 晉 dynasty literary allusion and means being reclusive from secular issues. It is also said to related to Japanese writer Soseki Natsume 夏目漱石 (1867-1916), because Sun liked Natsume’s works. Duan Haiqing, *Qingmo minchu baoren-xiaoshuojia*, 36.

⁸¹ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxueshi*, 25.

⁸² *Ibid*, 27.

⁸³ Duan Huaiqing, *Qingmo minchu baoren-xiaoshuojia*, 7

poetry. He was a prominent members of the “Mandarin duck and butterfly school” that was known for sentimental writings. His *Immortal Knights-errant* displays the same hybrid nature as his professional engagements.

Set in the Gaozong 高宗 reign (1127-1162) of the Song dynasty, the novel begins with a meeting of ten immortal swordsmen and swordswomen residing in heaven, all of whom are protagonists of the Tang (618-907) tales of martial arts and magic. Qiurang gong 虬髯公, the host of the meeting, cares about what has been going on in the human world. He is displeased to see the reputation of knight-errant is being tarnished by contemporary novels and so asks his friends to come up with solutions. The decision is that five of them will go down into the secular realm with five magical swords forged by Gongsun daniang 公孫大娘 with natural essence, searching for and training five human disciples who will take over the magical swords and re-establish the reputation of knights-errant. The story ends with the immortal masters and human disciples returning to the immortal land; but before doing so, they leave some money for a writer named Haishang jianchi to write down their story and spread the fame of knights-errant.

At first glance, the novel reads like most of the chivalric novels written before: the narrative is driven by conflicts between good and evil. The first half of the novel narrates how four out of five immortals complete their mission through confronting the evil protagonist Qin Yinglong 秦應龍. The second half shifts the focus to Flying Swallow 燕子飛, the evil-hearted disciple and tells how the immortals and their human disciples, with Gongsun daniang’s assistance, collaborate to execute Flying Swallow. The novel, nevertheless, distinguishes itself from earlier texts by means of an outstanding affinity to the long tradition of vernacular literature, and particularly chivalric literature. First and foremost, it includes an elaborate architecture of its cast. The ten fairy swordsmen and swordswomen introduced at the beginning of the novel are all

from Tang tales of martial arts and magic: Huangshan ke 黃衫客 (Yellow-Shirt Guy) is from Tang tale “Huoxiaoyu zhuan” 霍小玉傳 (Biography of Huo Xiaoyu) attributed to Jiang Fang 蔣防 (792-?). Kunlun mole 崑崙摩勒, the Kunlunnu 崑崙奴 (Kunlun Servant) is from Pei Xing’s 裴鏘 (active around 860) same-title tale. Jingjing’er 精精兒, Kongkong’er 空空兒, and Nie Yinniang 聶隱娘 all appear in Tang tale “Nie Yinniang,” which was also included in Pei Xing’s collection. Gu yaya 古押衙 is from Xue Diao’s 薛調 (830-872) “Wushuang zhuan” 無雙傳 (Biography of Wushuang). Tang dynasty poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) in his poem described Gongsun daniang 公孫大娘 and her disciples’ fantastic sword playing. The story of Jing shisanniang 荆十三娘 was first seen in Sun Guangxian’s 孫光憲 (901-968) collection of jotting notes and fictional works, *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言 (literally, Northern Dream Trivial Words) which later was also collected in the *Xianxia zhuan* 劍俠傳 (Biographies of Swordsmen) of Ming dynasty. Hongxian nü 紅線女 is the female knight-errant in Yuan Jiao’s 袁郊 (active around 853) same-title tale. Qiurang gong 虬髯公 is the protagonist in Du Guangting’s 杜光庭 (850-933) tale “Qiurang ke zhuan” 虬髯客傳 (Biography of curly bearded stranger). The stories and images of these ten immortals were well established, widely circulated, and have become signifiers of the genre.

Even the negative character Qin Yinglong 秦應龍 stands out with literary reference: he is depicted as a cousin of Qin Hui 秦檜. Qin Hui (1090-1155) was a Prime Minister of the Song dynasty (960-1276), but had been portrayed in Chinese vernacular literature as a traitor and a notoriously foul character who was responsible for the death of Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103-1142), the heroic general who led the Song forces and fought against the Jurchen-ruled Jin dynasty invading

from the north. Being Qin Hui's cousin, Qin Yinlong is consequently a "natural" evil character in the story. Both the positive and negative characters are signifiers of Chinese folklore and chivalric tales in particular. Readers that are familiar with traditional literature and culture would recognize them immediately and the moral implications they each carry. Fabricating a story by utilizing these cultural references indicates that the current story is built upon a long and old tradition. The constructing function of the "tradition" in the novel also implies the legitimacy and authority of indigenous literary legacy.

Second, the novel is marked by its heavily self-referential grounding in the literary and cultural conventions on themes related to morality and loyalty. *Immortal Knights-Errant* is essentially a story about searching for and finding the "right" human disciples who are to inherit powerful skills and weapons from the immortal masters. Morality is the sole criterion in place to evaluate potential disciples. This message is conveyed through a conventional good versus evil conflict, which not only singles out the foe – Qin Yinglong in this case – to be eradicated, but also tests the loyalty and perseverance of human disciples. On the one hand, Qin, as the negative character in the first half of the novel is facilitated by his shamelessness and his uncle's high position in the imperial court to materialize his evil desire in both political prestige and sexuality. This two-fold evil character – namely, politically corrupt and sexually aggressive – fits well in the imaging of negative characters prevalent in vernacular literature. On the other hand, with criterion of morality equally applied to them, human disciples get to be selected to learn martial magic, despite of their gender, identities and backgrounds. Yun Long 雲龍 (literally, Cloud Dragon), for instance, is a good-hearted person but with terrible temper. His problem of hot-head, however, does not undermine his chance to become the disciple; rather, he is instructed by his immortal master to overcome the problem by taking some magic pills. Another example that

highlights moral qualities of positive characters is the story of Fei Xia 飛霞 (literally, Flying Cloud). A physically weak and yet emotionally resilient prostitute, Flying Cloud is saved by her future immortal master, given magic pills to increase her body strength, and taught superb martial skills, only because she is honest and righteous. Reversely, intelligence and swiftness can never replace the requirement of morality on positive characters, as the second half of the novel – namely, the story of Flying Swallow 燕子飛 – points out.

Third, the novel displays close connections with the popularization of Daoist lore – an important part of popular tradition in since the pre-modern time till the present. Beginning with a stated purpose of “correcting the master Dao,”⁸⁴ the novel introduces to readers a heavenly world that is marked with Daoist practices and symbols – the locality where immortal swordsmen and swordswomen reside. For instance, the leader of the immortal swordsmen/women, i.e., Gongsun daniang, forges swords by utilizing a variety of natural essences she collects in nature, including morning dew on grass, petals of different flowers, wind, mist, frost, and so on. She names each sword she forges after the main flower or plant she uses; each sword consequently demonstrates the quality corresponding to the specific plant it names after. Gongsun daniang also exercises alchemy to make magic pills that improves the physique of human body. In the end of the novel, Gongsun daniang arrives in the earth and executes the evil human disciple Flying Swallow by using her newly forged “frost pill” 霜丸. Even the theme of the novel – searching and taking in disciples – is a common practice in the Daoist lore and is how the Daoist teachings and rituals are passed on generations after generations. All the elements displayed in this heavenly world spell out close association with the Daoist beliefs and practices: natural essence, sword forging,

⁸⁴ Haishang Jianchi, *Xianxia Wuhua Jian* 仙俠五花劍 [Immortal Knights-Errant and Five Flower Swords], Zhang Peiheng et al., *Zhongguo jindai xiaoshuo daxi* 中國近代小說大系 [Collection of Modern Chinese Fiction] (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1993), 2.

magic pills, alchemy, master and disciple relationship, and immortality, which builds upon the “tradition” of vernacular literature aforementioned another layer of “tradition.” In other words, “tradition” in this novel is represented as the influence and control of the past that is ultimately spiritual and moral, and it is to be carried on through the process of inheritance and transmission. “Tradition” in this sense, is therefore both substantive and transactional.

The “tradition” to be transmitted in the novel, intriguingly, is a renewed one featured with new concepts that reveal its modern nature. First, the novel discloses an unbiased attitude toward female hero and displays a fine balance between genders. There are six male immortals and four female hero and displays a fine balance between genders. There are six male immortals and four female, with Gongsun daniang being the one that forges the most powerful sword and later saves the whole group. Among the four immortals that go down to the human world and find the right disciples, two are male and two are female. Among the four disciples, two female fighters are recruited by two female masters and two male accepted by two male immortals. The stories of “Flying Cloud” 飛霞 and “Light Cloud” 素雲 – two delicate but resilient female disciples, show that even physical weakness does not hinder the path to knight-errantry. Various gender roles pertaining to both hierarchy and physicality, are therefore open to woman characters.

Second, masters and disciples form a unique while important power relationship. Despite their differences in gender, residence, and skill, masters and disciples follow a common code of values, such as truthfulness, integrity, courageousness, and empathy. These values lay the basis for behavioral guideline in the master-disciple relationship and are stressed through a controlled attitude toward violence, articulated by the Yellow-Shirt Guy repeatedly. The master-disciple relationship is a power relationship in nature, as masters set the rules and control resources, including martial arts skills and powerful weapons, while disciples pay respect to and follow masters. This is also a power hierarchy, geographically from heaven to earth, and skillfully from

Gongsun daniang to the ordinary immortals and to their human disciples. Although this power structure may be influenced by the Daoist practice, it has fundamentally departed from the “brotherhood” that traditional chivalric stories celebrated, for example, that in the sixteenth-century chivalric novel *Water Margin* and the widely circulated nineteenth-century *Three Knights-errant and Five Sworn Brothers*. *Water Margin* is also known as *All Men are Brothers* in English speaking countries – Pearl Buck’s translation, to highlight the brotherhood among the Liang Mount outlaws who are mainly male. Although there exists hierarchical relationship between the Liang Mount brothers, crystalized by the moment when they set up the ranking 排座次 among them, it originates in the brotherhood rather than a sense of absolute authority. In the *Sanxia wuyi* series, the novel as well features with celebrated brotherhood between martial heroes, as its English title “*sworn bothers*” indicates. Although Judge Bao seems to form a power relationship with the chivalries, the former is a symbol of imperial power and authority, instead of member of the knights-errant. The master-disciple relationship created in the *Immortal Knights-Errant*, therefore, captures an emerging moment of modern martial arts fiction: structure wise, the pseudo-equal brotherly bonding is replaced by a hierarchical relationship of martial masters and disciples. It is an innovated structure of inter-personal relationship among protagonists, and also a refreshing narrative structure that implies great potential for character development. Unlike the stereotype image of roaming knight-errant being individual, anarchist, and sometimes lonely portrayed in traditional chivalric tales, martial heroes and heroines in the *Immortal Knights-Errant* form an inter-connected, often-time emotion-charged world. This means what identifies them includes not only martial and magic skills they possess but also their inter-personal relationships. This change produces more subtle and complicated characters

corresponding to a better connected while swiftly changing Chinese society. It lays the fundamental for Xiang Kairan to elaborate the *jianghu* concept in his *Marvelous Knights-Errant*.

Contextualizing this novel in the post-1895 Qing when learning from the West became the mainstream intellectual current among Chinese elites, the novel appears to turn inward to the “tradition” for answer. “Tradition” in this novel is manifested not only in the form of literary conventions that the novel models after, but, more importantly, the intervening of the past with the present morally and spiritually. In the story Gongsun daniang as an “up power” (literally, from the heaven down to the earth) intervenes and resolves the problem in the human world. In reality, this story may be translated into an affirmative gesture and stance that the author took with regards to the indigenous institutions and their accountability in the prospect of nation-salvation. Considering Sun Yusheng’s involvement in journalism and his job of news commenting, the story may be read as a social commentary on the issue of reconfiguring China’s cultural identity.

Some critic believes that Sun wrote the novel because he felt dissatisfied with late Qing society, but it unfortunately is still tied to the “feudal morality of filial piety, loyalty, and such,” because it gives hope to “unrealistic immortal knights-errant to maintain the feudal order,”⁸⁵ According to Sun’s notes, he was indeed not happy with the chivalric stories circulated on market at that time, because they were mostly “shallow,” “disordered,” and “misunderstanding belligerence as the essential quality of martial artists,” he therefore created *Immortal Knights-Errant* to “correct the phenomenon” and pointed out that “to confuse robbers and thieves with

⁸⁵ Zhou Huabin, *Zhongguo guji quanlu* 中國古籍全錄[A Complete Record of Chinese Ancient Texts] (http://guji.artx.cn/article/print_23655.html), accessed on 2/13/2015.

knights-errant” – “a minimal error will lead to serious consequences.”⁸⁶ This self-stated intention also conforms to Sun’s general principle of literary writing, i.e. “to warn society” 警世, as all his other works did.⁸⁷ While the intervention of the immortals is the key to various problems, Sun’s novel itself is indeed an intervention, too. First, on the narrative level, the immortals intervene physically from heaven to the human’s world, punish the evil and help the weak, and correct reputation for knight-errantry. Second, as with his self-claimed writing intention, Sun created the story to intervene in the unsatisfactory market of chivalric tales. Third, interpreted as an allegorical reiteration of the power of “tradition” in an era when indigenous cultural and social institutions were widely criticized and denied, the novel sheds light to the power of a refreshed past and how to transmit and inherit it in the contemporary context. This triple-layered intervention from the unreal and the un-earthly into the real and the earthy, indeed, reveals a subtle and yet powerful way of reconfiguring the cultural identity of the country.

Ethics of Social Reform and Dao Yusheng’s Cause

While Sun Yusheng created a meaningful chivalric tale by utilizing indigenous tradition, imported concepts and ideas had inspired Leng Xue’s fabrication of a short story “Biography of Dao Yusheng” (1904, hereafter “Biography”). Informed by the notion of social Darwinism, the “Biography” poses acute questions of the validity of the Western introduced ideas being applied to the Chinese context and the instrumental, clear-cut mentality regarding social reform. Driven by a desire of strengthening the country, I argue, the protagonist in the “Biography,” a robber indeed, has gone far beyond the boundary of (personal) justice – the core value of indigenous

⁸⁶ Sun Yusheng (1932), quoted from Duan Huaqing, *Qingmo minchu baoren-xiaoshuo*, 152.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

chivalric tale – and aims to achieve an imagined ideal condition of social reform. His story discloses a subtle while tenacious sense of irony in-between the simplified classical languages and casts sharp critique of the clear-cut, proto-scientific mindset in designed social reforms.

Leng Xue’s real name was Chen Jinghan (陳景韓, 1877-1965), who also used the pseudonyms “Chen Cold” 陳冷, “Cold” 冷, “China Born” 華生, and “Trash of the New China” 新中國之廢物, was an active journalist, editor, translator, and writer in late Qing through mid-Republican Shanghai. Chen received traditional education in the Chinese classics before attending the Hubei Military Academy 湖北武備學堂 and then studying at Waseda University in Japan. He was a delegate to the Revive China Society 興中會 in 1901 and a journalist at the Shanghai magazine, *The Continent* 大陸 in 1902. In 1904, he joined the newly founded *Eastern Times* (時報, 1904-1939) as chief editor and in 1913 became general editor of *Shanghai News*, aka. *Shenbao*, one of the first modern Chinese newspapers. He left the journalism profession in 1929, disappointed to see newspapers losing their independence under the nationalist government and worked as manager in a mining company till he passed away. Regarded as one of the founding members of modern Chinese journalism, Chen is known for his succinct and trenchant writing style and renowned for having created the short editorial form 時評 for presenting and reviewing domestic and international news at the *Eastern Times*. He was noted as a “private and eccentric man.”⁸⁸ He cut off his queue as early as 1904, wore Western suits, smoked a pipe, rode a bicycle, and refused to attend social gatherings.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: Shibao and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 208.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

When Chen presided at the *Eastern Times*, he made the newspaper one of the first major newspapers to publish serialized fictional works. He translated and wrote a good number of fictional works mostly published in his newspaper, or serialized in the literary journals, *New New Fiction* 新新小說 (1904-1907) that he created and presided over and the *Xiaoshuo shibao* 小說時報 (1909-1917) that he co-edited with Bao Tianxiao (包天笑, 1875-1973). He was a prolific writer before he took over the *Shenbao* position in 1913 and is regarded as “one of the leading figures in the literary field during the pre-May Fourth enlightenment period,” due to his unique perspectives.⁹⁰

The “Biography” was published in 1904 under a serial titled “On Chivalry” 俠客談 in the first two issues of *New New Fiction*. Often compared to “the four late Qing literary journals” 清末四大小說期刊, *New New Fiction* is distinguished for its focus on “chivalry-ism” 俠義主義.⁹¹ In its opening remark, the editor explained that having one more “new” 新 in the title did not necessarily mean it was better than the *New Fiction* 新小說, the journal founded by Liang Qichao a year ago; rather, it reflected a hope that journals shall be newer and better than those that came before.⁹² Some scholar believes this statement implies a different approach the editor took regarding China’s future: Liang was a reformer who advocated “non-violent revolution,”

⁹⁰ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 80.

⁹¹ *New New Fiction* states that starting the third issue its focus is knight-errantry while having other content as supplements.

⁹² Xia Min, “Statements of *New New Fiction*” 新新小說敘例 (1904), Chen Pingyuan and Xia Xiaohong eds. *Er’shi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao (1897-1916)* 20世紀中國小說理論資料第1卷 (1897-1916)[Theoretical Materials of Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction (1897-1916)](Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), 124-125.

whereas Chen promoted a “revolutionary spirit” with the possibility of violence.⁹³ For Chen, “chivalry-ism” was the method of materializing the “revolutionary spirit.” The works published in the journal seem to comply with this principle. Dividing fictional works, translated and created, into political fiction, historical fiction, psychological fiction, romantic fiction, and miscellaneous, every issue includes materials about knights-errant in various countries and regions, including China, South Asia, France, and Russia. The “*xia*” that was highlighted in the journal – as a character type and a behavioral manner, on the one hand, echoes the image of indigenous Chinese knight-errantry, that is, state-less wanderers pursuing some sort of moral cause. On the other hand, it features a strong aura of anarchism that was introduced from Russia and widely acknowledged among the late Qing intellectuals.⁹⁴ Chen’s “Biography” manifests this doubled-featured “*xia*” understanding.

The “Biography” begins with a “passenger” being kidnapped by a robber, namely, Dao Yusheng (hereafter Dao), at night in the wildness and taken to a cave where Dao and his gang live. The story is then narrated by means of Socratic dialogue, that is, the scared but furious captive questions Dao’s purpose and Dao responds by showing the former around the cave and introducing his enterprise (first half of the story) and explaining how he has developed it to date (second half of the story). The cave is essentially a created setting within which Dao implements the notion of “survival of the fittest” – one of the key elements of social Darwinism – with the purpose of improving the quality of the populace and developing the strength of China. Through robbery and killing, Dao collects wealth and use it to fund modern education in the cave and

⁹³ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 81.

⁹⁴ This statement is inspired by Fan Boqun’s comment on the *xia* in Chen’s “Talking about chivalry:” “an independent power structure that disregards the government,” Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 82. Regarding the influence of anarchism in the late Qing China, see Peter Zarrow’s *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, Arif Dirlik’s *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*.

abroad. And he tries various careers before settling down as the head of an outlaw group through which he materializes his reform ideas.

Contemporary Chinese critics often focus on the cruelty of Dao's practice, in particular, the paragraph in which Dao narrates his "Murder List" 殺人譜 – namely, the list of people he kills that display a strong preference of physical strength.⁹⁵ I, however, am interested in how and why social Darwinism ends to be the "shelter" that Dao chooses after decades of experiments. How to understand Dao and his enterprise in the cave, what the author attempts to convey regarding the implementation of social Darwinism in the cave, and what this tale discloses about the late Qing intellectual discourse are the questions the following paragraphs explore.

Like old chivalric tale, the "Biography" opens with a scene of wrongdoing – the kidnapping of the captive but quickly moves on to questioning the reason of the wrongdoing instead of pursuing punishment of the evil. This twist is facilitated by the captive's double role as interlocutor for Dao and stand-in for the reader. On the one hand, the captive is the medium through which the robber demonstrates and explains his devices and theory; on the other hand, the captive "helps" the reader to investigate the intriguing situation by asking the same questions repeatedly: "Is he evil? Is he good? Who is he?"⁹⁶ As the tour continues and the captive knows more about Dao and his enterprise, his puzzlement grows. The query of Dao's true identity, or how to evaluate what he does becomes a central issue of the narrative. Dao appears to be evil because he robs and kills, but he does not do it for himself or his gang, but for abstract concepts,

⁹⁵ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxueshi*, 83. Cai Aiguo, "Xinxin xiaoshuo: xia de shiyanxing shuxie" 《新新小說》: 俠的實驗性書寫 [New New Fiction: An Experimental Writing of Chivalry], *Journal of Southwest University*, vol. 36, No.1 (2000), 43.

⁹⁶ Leng Xue, "Xiake tan," in Yu Runqi ed., *Qingmo minchu xiaoshuo shuxi: wuxia juan* 清末民初小說書系: 武俠卷 [Collections of Late Qing and Early Republican Fiction: Martial Arts Fiction] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1997), 13, 16, 18.

such as bettering the quality of the people and improving the country and its future. In other words, Dao symbolizes a whole set of ideas formulated to change the society by Chinese intellectuals.

It is not clear whether the captive approves of Dao or not. The author, nevertheless, provides some clues in the three-paragraph “Commentary” 批解 after the story. This “Commentary” appears to endorse multiple ways of interpretation and the possibility of the story being abused. It reveals the author’s concern that readers will not comprehend the true intention of his writing and that the theory of “survival of the fittest” will be manipulated to justify evil deeds. He was afraid that his creation of Dao Yusheng will be utilized as another example for people to vindicate their immorality.⁹⁷ The sense of aloofness revealed in this “Commentary” contrasts with the passionate statements that Dao makes in the story. This sense of irony is also seen in the divergence between Chen’s various pseudonyms, including “Cold,” “Cold Blood,” “Trash of the New China,” and his writings that are characterized with enthusiasm and devotion for a new China.

To explain his reasons for taking up robbery, Dao recounts to the captive numerous careers he experienced and multiple ways he tried in order to change the society before turning to banditry. The term “social Darwinism” never appears in the story, nor do the names of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), or Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), all of whom were well known to the Chinese at that time. The structure of Dao’s cave, its design theory, his reasons for his plan, however, clearly refer to this western-originated theory that was widely circulated in the late Qing. This embrace of social Darwinism leads to another issue that the “Biography” brings up: the validity of implementing imported concepts/ideas in a Chinese

⁹⁷ Leng Xue, “Xiake tan,” Yu Runqi ed., *Qingmo minchu xiaoshuo shuxi: wuxia juan*, 30.

context. Despite the seemingly well-structured cave, Dao's explanations, and his well-respected authority among robbers and the robbed, the captive never stops puzzling over how to account for Dao's deeds. That Dao has to carry out his social ideals as an outlaw, in a cave located in the wilderness, indicates the unrealistic nature of this practice. In other words, there is no possibility to conduct his ideal in a "real" environment. It is only in a dystopian setting, Dao's cave, that ideas like social Darwinism can be implemented.

The dystopian nature of Dao's cave also points to another unsettling issue in the story: a clear-cut, science-like mentality regarding social reform. None of his past careers could be sustained because Dao finds that "no matter what business, industry, or organization it is, there must be a type of *drawback* that is fatal and petrifies it (emphasis added)."⁹⁸ For example, "scholars" 讀書人 tend to be hypocritical, overly-cautious, and are usually poor; businessmen are action-oriented but mostly immoral when pursuing profits; working in the government seems to be close to power but playing politics is a necessity, etc.⁹⁹ In the end he reckons that being a robber is the only way to execute his ideals because robbery is a profession that "does not have a *drawback*" 無此牽累 (emphasis added).¹⁰⁰ In other words, every profession Dao tries before has its written and unwritten rules for people to follow, but being a robber – an out-law – means staying outside of law's reach. It does not require any commitment to regulations, nor is there any pre-existing institutional issues needing to be fixed. It trespasses social and moral boundaries, but could also be financially self-sustainable. Ironically, Dao's grand ambition can only be brought to fruition through an illicit means. While this absurdity manifests the enthusiasm and

⁹⁸ Leng Xue, "Xiake tan," in Yu Runqi ed., *Qingmo minchu xiaoshuo shuxi: wuxia jua*, 25.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 23-24.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 25.

anxiety that Chinese intellectuals carried in the post-1898 era, it also reveals a desire for the “new” and a kind of mentality that is utilitarian and instrumental with respect to social reforms.

When the Knight-errant is a Feminist Advocate

The year when the “Biography” was published also saw the publication of a chivalric novel, *A Tale of the Boudoir and Chivalry* 閨閣豪傑談, (aka, *A Flower in the Women’s Prison* 女獄花, hereafter *Boudoir and Chivalry*). As the title shows, the novel distinguishes itself from other contemporary chivalric stories, such as the two analyzed above, by its focus on women. Its advocacy of feminist ideals in the late Qing movement of improving women’s status has drawn scholarly attention in the past decades. David Wang, for instance, discusses it as one of the examples of “chivalric women turned revolutionaries,” and states that the novel “serves an unlikely source of modern revolutionary fiction.”¹⁰¹ *Boudoir and Chivalry* is one of the examples that Huang Jin-zhu selects to analyze sexual identities of four late Qing female writers by examining how they project their imaginations of female traveling onto female protagonists’ travels in their novels. What the travels demonstrate, according to Huang, is how the female writers comprehend what they are and access the challenges they face in a rapidly changing society.¹⁰² Focusing on one of the two female protagonists, the female fighter Sha Xuemei, this section scrutinizes how the theme of feminism is interwoven in martial arts fiction in the late Qing context. Locating Sha in the lineage of indigenous chivalric tales and the genealogy of female warriors, I interrogate how the idea of self is understood and represented in the *Boudoir*

¹⁰¹ David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 170, 124.

¹⁰² Huang Jin-zhu, “Wanqing nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhong de nüxing lüxing” 晚清女作家小說中的女性行旅 [Female Outgoing and Travelling in the Late Qing Female Writers’ Novels], *Wen yu zhe* 文與哲 [Literature and Philosophy], No. 22 (2013), 441-462.

and Chivalry. An advocate of feminist right herself, the author explores two different approaches to gender equality by means of Sha Xuemei 沙雪梅 and Xu Pingquan 許平權. While the latter corresponds to the contemporary female intellectual image (and Wang's self identification, most probably), what Sha Xuemei achieves as protagonist in the story and as character type of martial arts fiction marks a watershed moment between old-style female heroines such as He Jinfeng in *A Tale of Heroes and Lovers* and modern creations like Yu Jiaolong 玉嬌龍 by Wang Dulu regarding the issue of female subjectivity. Besides its resonance with the hotly debated gendered politics, it also anticipated an era when empowered female knights-errant take the central stage and become an indispensable part of the masculine martial arts literature. By examining configurations of female subjectivities expressed in the *Boudoir and Chivalry* in comparison to its precursors, I argue, the novel opened up important space for future creations of female knights-errant who are physically capable and emotionally independent. It is in this sense that the novel, together with other martial arts fiction examined here, pronounced the emergence of modern martial arts fiction.

The novel is attributed to a female writer, Wang Miaoru 王妙如.¹⁰³ It portrays a group of women who meet due to a common desire to emancipate women and fight for this agenda by various means. As David Wang has analyzed in great detail,¹⁰⁴ two protagonists, Sha Xuemei and Xu Pingquan, who indeed represent two different approaches to promoting feminist ideals. Sha

¹⁰³ Wang Maoru's dates are unknown. The novel was published posthumously in 1904 by Wang's husband who signed off as "Luo Jingren 羅景仁 from Hangzhou (泉唐)." Luo wrote commentaries at the end of each chapter and a coda for the book. In the "Coda" he states that Wang was married to him at the age of twenty-three but unfortunately passed away in less than four years. According to Luo, Wang wrote a number of books, including tales, novels, and classical poetry. She was most pleased with this novel, as it conveys her feminist ideals. Luo Jingren, "Ba" 跋 [Coda], Wang Miaoru, *Nü yuhua*, 760.

¹⁰⁴ David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 170-174.

advocates “terrorism and immediate actions,” while Xu favors “education and continued negotiation with men.”¹⁰⁵ They are alternatives to each other.¹⁰⁶ Considering Wang Miaoru’s background, Xu is most likely a projection of her personal desire for gender equality, even Xu’s given name means “equal rights.”¹⁰⁷ Compared to Xu who picks examples from foreign civilizations such as ancient Greece, Rome, Turkey, and modern West Europe for her argument and later goes abroad to study, Sha is domestic oriented. Informed with resources of ancient Chinese history and inspired by historical and fictional female personas like Ban Jieyu 班婕妤, Mulan 木蘭, and Nie Yinniang, she is a created “other” to Xu in almost every respect.¹⁰⁸

A trained martial artist since little, Sha has a dream about women being oppressed in a male-centered setting long before she is married. Intrigued by the dream, Sha could not figure out its true meaning until she comes across Herbert Spencer’s essay “The Rights of Women.” It is a critical moment for Sha’s female subjectivity: her sense of self and her feminist identity are “awakened” at that very moment, which answers to the dream she had before. It is also right after that moment that she kicks her husband in the belly and kills him.¹⁰⁹ Sha is then taken into prison where she meets other women victims of the patriarchal system. Her transformation into a

¹⁰⁵ David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 172.

¹⁰⁶ In the “Commentary” at the end of Chapter 8 where Sha Xuemei and Xu Pingquan have a disagreement and part unhappily, Luo notes that Wang Miaoru intends to present both approaches as equally important. *Zhongguo Jindai xiaoshuo daxi*, 743. David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 172.

¹⁰⁷ In “Commentaries” and the “Coda,” we learn that Wang, just like Xu, was a well-educated woman who desired women’s rights. But Wang was not as mobile as Xu due to the restraints over the women in the late nineteenth century China.

¹⁰⁸ Sha and Xu have an argument about the approach to liberate women in China upon their first meeting. The meeting ends unhappily. After that Xu leaves China to study abroad, while Sha stays and works with other feminist activists, all of whom immolate themselves when one of their actions fail.

¹⁰⁹ Her husband is a rebellious son to a pedantic attorney father while a male chauvinist to his wife. In other words, Qin is a victim of the patriarchal system under his father but a culprit to Sha.

“roaming knight-errant,” the landmark image that is prevailing in the indigenous chivalric tales, takes place when she escapes the prison – a prison of criminals and a prison of women, indeed. In other words, her consciousness of being a woman comes before her chivalric identity, despite the fact that she practices martial arts long before her moment of awakening. Her newly configured female subjectivity motivates her chivalric actions, including escaping the prison and many following feminist actions afterwards.

A paragraph immediately after she runs away from the prison describes what she sees and thinks in the wildness.¹¹⁰ The uplifting sentiment generated by freedom and individuality that Sha experiences while she walks through a peach blossom does not last long. It soon becomes uncertain when when Sha witnesses in a deserted temple several tigers submit themselves to a masculine lion that maltreats them while bullying a leopard that is friendly. Sha interprets the scene as a multi-layered allegory: the strong always bullies the weak, just like the male oppresses the female; to fight against the strong/male, the weak/female should consolidate into a strong unity. Sha’s then jumps on top of the tiger and punches its head, exactly like what Wu Song does in the *Water Margin*, but, the leopard joins in helping the tiger by attacking Sha – a vivid portrayal of the potential danger that Sha is to face as she embarks on a journey to liberate women from men’s control.

The serial of developments complicate the meaning of Sha’s transformation and highlights the feminist theme of the novel. Although the author seemed to start the story depicting Sha as a typical female knight-errant,¹¹¹ Sha’s metamorphosis from an ordinary woman

¹¹⁰ Wang Miaoru, *Nü yuhua*, 731.

¹¹¹ For instance, the second chapter’s title describes Sha as “female knight-errant” while her husband “nerd” 書呆, which resonates with the popular stereotype characters of “scholar and beauty” 才子佳人 genre in traditional vernacular literature.

to a feminist activist comes before her chivalric deeds. This sets her apart from precursor female knights-errant, who never carry such a clear feminist message. Light Cloud, for instance, is the female disciple in the *Immortal Knights-Errant*. She is born in a peasant's family, loses her parents and younger brother when the evil general forces her to be his concubine, but saved by one of the immortal swordswomen from whom she learns martial arts skills and swordplay. The drive that transforms Light Cloud from an ordinary woman to a female warrior is the conflict of good versus evil. The only detail that reveals her femininity is when her master contemplates her physical weakness as a female. Other than that, female subjectivity – a consciousness that the heroine holds about her sexual identity and agency – is never touched upon in *Immortal Knights-Errant*. In this sense Light Cloud still belongs to the stereotyped female warriors pertaining to the traditional chivalric tales.

Another example is He Yufeng in the late nineteenth-century chivalric tale *A Tale of Heroes and Lovers*. Many scholars have noticed the “incongruous” 不調和 transformation of He from a heroic female warrior to an obedient wife.¹¹² At the beginning of the tale, He is admired as a fearless female knight-errant. Her chivalric deeds are initiated by a desire to revenge her father's death – a pursuit for justice and a conflict between good and evil. After she has done the vengeance for her father, she “settles down” and becomes An Ji's 安驥 second wife, sharing a husband with Zhang Jinfeng, the woman she saves. This change is achieved through a dialogue

¹¹² Sun Kaidi, “Guanyu er' nü yingxiong zhuan” 關於兒女英雄傳 [About the *Tale of Heroes and Lovers*], *Cangzhou houji* 滄州後集 [A Sequel to Cangzhou Collection] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuji, 1985), 256. Other scholars including Hu Shi and Zheng Zhenduo have also made similar comments. Hu Shi, “Er' nü yingxiong zhuan xu” 《兒女英雄傳》 [“Preface” to *A Tale of Heroes and Lovers*, *Zhongguo wenxue shi* 中國文學史 [A History of Chinese Literature] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 1090. Zheng Zhenduo, “Fiction in the Late Qing Dynasty” 清朝末年的小說 [Late Qing Fiction], *Zheng Zhenduo shuo tongsu wenxue* 鄭振鐸說通俗文學 [On Popular Literature] (Shanghai: Guji chubashe, 2000), 109. David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 163.

not with the self. Instead, it is embedded in a process that inevitably involves other people, “either as object as need, desire, and interest, or as necessary sharers of common experience.”¹¹³

So, ironically, the moment when He becomes conscious of her sexual identity is also when she loses her individual subjectivity. She then becomes one of the women that Sha intends to emancipate.

Wang Miaoru seems to suggest that martial arts skills enable Sha to escape household oppression – the basic unit of patriarchy, which is also a first step to free a woman. Martial kills also inspire Sha and point to a way for her to achieve gender equality – namely, physical action. Despite her fugitive status, Sha connects with other women who also long to attain their own rights. They form a small cadre of female assassins, conduct assassinations, and eventually immolate themselves when their action fails. The news of their deaths is revealed through Xu’s eyes: she reads the news report while still studying abroad. Xu then decides to return and continue Sha’s cause by opening a female school and spreading feminist ideals through education. The rest of the novel, i.e. the last two chapters, focuses on Xu and her school.

By ending Sha’s persona in this abrupt way, Wang Miaoru conveys a message that physical action and radicalism may be in great need at the beginning of social reforms, but long-term development can only be achieved through progressive intellectual activities such as education. In this dichotomy of approaches that Sha and Xu each represent, Xu clearly wins out. But, imagine if Wang Miaoru were to have let Sha’s persona continue to live. What would have happened? In the “Coda” that Wang Miaoru’s husband wrote, he mentioned Wang herself was an ardent advocate of women’s rights. She was well educated, idealistic, but physically weak, and never left her hometown. That’s why the novel is titled *A Tale of the Boudoir and Chivalry*.

¹¹³ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 3.

It is indeed a tale created in Wang's boudoir. Wang may project her ideals onto Xu's persona, but Sha's is perhaps too alien for Wang to truly engage. This may explain why there is a lack of details about Sha's activities after she assumes the double identity of feminist activist and female knight-errant.

In the wave of late Qing advocacy to improve women's status, it is not surprising to see a group of pro-feminist fictional works borrowing the images, characters, and motifs from classical chivalric tales to materialize new ideas. Shao Zhenhua 邵振華, aka. Wenyu nüshi 問漁女史, another female writer and contemporary of Wang Miaoru, for example, published a 40-chapter novel, *Chivalric Beauties* 俠義佳人 in 1907.¹¹⁴ The novel portrays a group of female characters working together to promote feminist rights. Although there is "chivalric" in the title, the content has nothing to do with martial arts, swordplay, or any conventionally understood chivalric deeds. Other titles of a similar fashion include, "Female Knight-errant" 女俠客 (1906), serialized in the *New New Fiction*. This shows that indigenous chivalric tale was one of the cultural resources for writers to materialize their feminism-oriented thinking, in addition to imported stories such as those about Russian anarchists and French revolutionaries. In the late Qing context, the "chivalric" may at one point equals to be feminist.

When scholars investigate the female-focused chivalric tales, it is natural to connect "man and woman" 兒女 and "heroism" 英雄, or, "knight-errant" 俠 and "sentiment" 情 – an integration that has drawn considerable scholarly attention in studies on the revolutionary discourse in twentieth-century China.¹¹⁵ From the perspective of generic development, however, *Boudoir and Chivalry* began an era when the female fighter was integrated into martial arts

¹¹⁴ It is not clear when Shao was born and died, but she was a contemporary of Wang Miaoru.

¹¹⁵ David Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 165.

fiction as an indispensable part. Its depiction of the feminist advocate Sha Xuemei inaugurated a refreshed construction of female martial hero that combines both traditional chivalric manners and newly promoted women's rights. Sha Xuemei's outspoken and action-oriented persona conveys a notion of unbounded possibility regarding female subjectivity and influenced literary imagination and creation in the following decades.

Heroism in Emotive Terms: Exchangeable Patriarchal and Patriotic Sentiments

In the late Qing wave of experimenting and integrating various generic elements, *Traces of Hot Blood* 熱血痕 (1907) draws critics' attention for its combination of elements pertaining to historical novel and chivalric genre. It was first noted by A Ying as "an excellent piece of historical novel which in fact is also 'court-case' (fiction)," and categorized under the Chapter of "Historical and Court-case Fiction."¹¹⁶ Acknowledging this unique quality, contemporary critic Ye Hongsheng identifies the novel as a "grand finale that brings order out of chaos" to the Qing court-case/chivalric novels, due to two reasons.¹¹⁷ One, it portrays a group of heroes who are no longer followers of the state, and two, it engages with its time and by re-telling the history urges China to "eliminate humiliations and become independent" from foreign insults.¹¹⁸

Acknowledging these critics' observations, I argue, however, what distinguishes *Traces of Hot Blood* is its emphasis on emotion. Different from traditional chivalric tales which usually framed their heroes through physical acts and lens of morality, in *Traces of Hot Blood* emotion and a

¹¹⁶ A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi* 晚清小說史 [A History of Late Qing Fiction] (Beijing: Zuoqia chubanshe, 1955), 159-164.

¹¹⁷ Ye Hongsheng, *Ye Hongsheng lunjian*, 28.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi*, 159-164.

common emotional attachment form the core of self and community and drive narrative development. In other words, heroism is defined by emotive terms in this novel. Moreover, by portraying the pain of losing father and equating it with the humiliation of losing sovereignty of the kingdom, the novel speaks to the issue of patriotism and translates the sentiment of revenge – the landmark element of conventional chivalric tales – into patriotic emotion. This emphasis on emotion, while serving as an indicator of the emergence of modern martial arts fiction, generated important space for later writers to engage and elaborate.

It is not clear who wrote the novel. A Ying recorded it to be Li Liangcheng 李亮丞, but no more details.¹¹⁹ Published by the Zuoxin Press 作新社 in Shanghai, the novel begins with a lyric poem 詞 written using the rhyme of “whole river red” 滿江紅.¹²⁰ Several sentences in the poem clearly lay out the central concern of the novel:

.....

The eagle (countries) staring at us is too aggressive,

側注鷹瞵橫太甚，

It is too hard to wake up the lion that is in deep slumber.

沈酣獅睡呼難起。

¹¹⁹ A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi*, 159. In the 1987 reprint by Jilin Literature and History Press, the author is noted as “Ke Min” 克敏, but no words about the authorship either. Ye Hongsheng also notes the author as Li Liangcheng. Ye Hongsheng, 27. I follow Jinlin wenshi and identify “Ke Min” as the author, as the copy I use for textual analysis was published by Jinlin wenshi.

¹²⁰ The most well known “whole river red” 滿江紅 poem is said to be written by the Song general Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103-1142) who is best known for leading the Southern Song forces in a war against the Jurchen-ruled Jin invaders from the north. Yue Fei is seen as a patriot and national folk hero after his death. By composing a “whole river red” poem as opening lines, the novel expects to arouse patriotic sentiment among readers.

Lamenting the Duke of Luyang, (he has) no weapon to frighten the Sun (or the Japanese), so (he) bites the bullet for nothing.

歎魯陽、返日苦無戈，空切齒

.....

(I) take out the pen, sort out (my) thought, and write down an unofficial history.

且抽毫攄臆撰成野史

.....

Wishing my people sing in grief as they read and think about national humiliation.

願吾曹、一讀一悲歌，思國恥。¹²¹

Combining popular metaphors, including “sleeping lion” and “eagle invader” that were widely circulated in the late Qing,¹²² the allusion originated from ancient history,¹²³ and a conventional way of identifying fiction as “unofficial history,” these few lines immediately point out the agenda of the novel, that is, to grieve for the Qing being “invaded” by foreign countries.

¹²¹ Ke Min, *Rexue hen* 熱血痕 [Traces of Hot Blood] (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1987), 1.

¹²² John Fitzgerald, 23-66. Ishikawa Yoshihiro, “Wanqing ‘shuishi’ xingxiang tanyuan” 晚清“睡獅”形象探源 [Origin of the Late Qing “Sleeping Lion” Image], *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University* (No. 5, 2009), 87-96. Sun Zhongshan, *Sun Zhongshan quanji* 孫中山全集 [Collections of Sun Zhongshan] [Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986], vol. 1, 19. There was also a political cartoon called “The Situation in the Far East” in English and *Shiju quantu* 時局全圖 in Chinese appeared in Hong Kong in 1899, within which foreign invaders were depicted as animals such as the Russian bear, the British bulldog, the French frog, and the American eagle. The Qing China was described as a “sleeping lion” that was not aware of the pending danger. Rudolf Wagner, “China ‘Asleep’ and ‘Awakening’: A Study in Conceptualizing Asymmetry and Coping with It” (2011), <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/transcultural/article/view/7315/2916>, accessed on 7/9/2015.

¹²³ “歎魯陽、返日苦無戈” refers to the “Duke of Luyang swings his dagger-axe” 魯陽揮戈 allusion from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. In this allusion, the Duke of Luyang fights for the righteous Wu Emperor of the Zhou 周武王. He is fearless and his roar frightens the Sun while he is swinging his dagger-axe, so the Sun stays bright despite it is the setting time.

This sentiment of humiliation as the theme that weaves story-telling is immediately made clear in the following paragraphs. By citing historian Sima qian's sentence about how powerful resentment could be to motivate people, the paragraphs paint all kinds of situations within which human beings are humiliated and therefore react to take revenge:

Being humiliated while not revenging, the body cannot stand straight; it is the humiliation of the owner of the body. The family cannot (be) establish(ed); it is a humiliation of the member of the family. The country cannot stay independent; it is a humiliation of the people of that country. It is for this reason that this book is written.¹²⁴

The narrator then summarizes the second war between the Wu and the Yue kingdoms in the Spring and Autumn period, as the “origin” of the story to be unfolded.¹²⁵

Set against the backdrop of the post-Wu-Yue war, the novel narrates how the protagonist Chen Yin travels to various kingdoms, in order to save his captured father, how his love for father translates into the love for his king, and how he meets a group of heroes and forms a community based on the same sentiment. The only son of Chen Xiao 陳霄 who used to a Yue soldier and now a slave given to an arrogant and irascible Wu general after Wu wins the war,¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Ke Min, *Traces of Hot Blood*, 2.

¹²⁵ As the *Records of the Grand Historian* and other historical materials note, the Wu started a war against the Yue in 496 B.C., but was beaten by the Yue. The Wu king He Lü 闔閭 was injured and died afterwards. Two years later, the new Wu king Fu Chai 夫差 – son of He Lü – attacked the Yue and started a second war. Fu Chai won.

¹²⁶ According to what the two kingdoms negotiated, Fu Chai did not kill the Yue king Gou Jian 勾踐, instead, he keeps Gou Jian as a slave to serve him for three years, in order to humiliate Gou Jian. Gou Jian, however, never gives up his avenger. After he was sent back to the Yue, Gou Jian continued to train his army and improve the governance, eventually launched another war against the Wu and eliminated the Wu. The story of Gou Jian's revenge has become a well known cultural reference that encourages people

Chen Yin is introduced as a filial son who is also a well trained young martial artist. He is tormented by his father's whereabouts and decides to leave behind his wife and son and embark on a journey to visit him. In other words, Chen Yin's sense of self and the meaning of his action – namely, the journey he is taking on – are defined and motivated by his love for the father. This emotion for father, as the virtue of “*xiao*” 孝 (filial piety), is noted whenever Chen Yin thinks of his father.

Chen's consciousness of being a Yue does not become clear until he starts travelling and witnesses all sorts of “unfair” treatments that the Yue receives due to the loss of sovereignty. This feeling of being humiliated as a defeated people is intensified for the first time when Chen Yin spots Yue king, now a slave of the Wu king, rides the chariot for the latter driving through the street. The pain aroused in Chen feels like “a knife stabbing the heart and the oil burning the lungs.”¹²⁷ The grief for the loss of the sovereignty reaches to the peak when Chen Yin finds out that his father is beaten to death due to his secret visit. Chen Yin realizes the loss of the kingdom results in his father's slavery, which eventually leads to his death. So, to revenge, he shall not only kill the Wu general who terminates his father's life, more importantly, he should fight for the Yue to regain its sovereignty.

As Chen Yin's love for father translates to love for the kingdom, “revenge for father” 父仇 becomes “revenge for sovereign” 君仇. The recurring motif of juxtaposing being “loyal” 忠 and being “filial” 孝 motivates the narrative development from chapter six till the end of the novel (forty chapters in total). The humiliation and the revenge purpose lend Chen Yin strength

to endure hardship in order to achieve the vengeance.

¹²⁷ Ke Min, *Traces of Hot Blood*, 34.

to learn archery skills, assemble followers, and eventually die on the battlefield. As one of the characters, the mysterious master, writes:

Family vengeance and national humiliation, (you) must all the time remember, so that you won't disappoint my efforts. Remember! Remember! ¹²⁸

家仇國恥，須刻刻在心，方不負我教訓汝一片苦心。切記，切記。

While the novel seems to suggest that patriarchal sentiment and patriotic emotion are equally important, it prioritizes patriotism when the two are in conflict. The salient example is when one of the heroes finds out that the man who causes his father's death is actually a member of the army and he faces a true dilemma: fight for father, or for the kingdom? Fellow warriors feel the same predicament. At this perplexing moment, they see another note from the mysterious master:

National humiliation, patriarchal revenge, and family hatred,

國恥父仇家恨，

All are sworn to conduct but not yet achieved.

都是有志未伸。

Transforming detestation into love from now on,

從今化仇為愛，

Form into a group with vitality.

結作一團精神。

¹²⁸ Ke Min, *Traces of Hot Blood*, 239.

Men shall keep loyal and filial,
男兒當存忠孝，
Then become great men of the world.
方算世間偉人。¹²⁹

The hero with great pain eventually gives up his revenge and leaves the “past” behind as he become one of the warriors fighting for the kingdom. His choice and his new identity of being one of warriors pronounce the emotive criterion this novel employs to define heroes. In other words, Huang becomes a knight-errant not because of his particular martial arts skill or any specific fearless deeds. Rather, the pass to heroism is to conform to the agenda explained in the “whole river red” lyric poem at the beginning of the novel. It also speaks to the hierarchy of emotions that became dominant in the revolutionary discourse, that is, small “family” shall always obey the plan of the big “country,” after all, without the big “country,” nobody can truly enjoy small “family.”

Patriotic sentiment also exerts influence over the gender issue, as Wei Qian’s 衛倩 story exemplifies. The only female warrior, Wei Qian is born an innocent girl and later grows into a fearless female warrior after heartbreaking tortures happened to her and her family: the typical chivalric storyline. After she takes her revenge for family, she joins in Chen Yin’s team due the friendship and enables him to win every critical battle they fight. When the Yue king retrieves his regime, she leaves without taking any rewards. Instead, she returns to the conventional knight-errant image: a free wanderer. Among all the fighters, she is most strategic and skillful,

¹²⁹ Ke Min, *Traces of Hot Blood*, 238.

but the depiction of her deeds is so brief that it seems to suggest that without carrying a strong feeling of humiliation, she does not deserve much attention as other patriotic characters do.

As Yue regains its sovereignty and the national humiliation is being “wiped away,” heroes all reach their ends: Chen Yin dies, Wei Qian goes away, and other heroes resume their life. Even as he is dying, Chen Yin still reminds his son, Chen Jizhi 陳繼志 (the name literally means “continuing the will”), “Do not forget the national humiliation!”¹³⁰ At the end of the story, some of them get together and visit a master, only to see a note the master leaves behind:

Chen Ying is loyal and brave, giving his life to the mission.

陳音忠勇，殉難身殂。

Wei Qian disappears into the wildness as she succeeds.

衛茜功成，遁於荒墟。

Being loyal and filial for one time period, role models for ever.

一時忠孝，萬世楷模。

Taking revenge and wiping out humiliation, (they are) real heroes.

報仇雪恥，是大丈夫。¹³¹

In other words, the sentiment of humiliation and the urge to achieve the double-revenge shape Chen Yin and Wei Qian, two heroes in the novel and two role models for people to follow.

¹³⁰ Ke Min, *Traces of Hot Blood*, 322.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 334.

Charged with emotions, *Traces of Hot Blood* creates an innovative framing for heroism. Chen Yin, as an emotive hero, distinguishes himself from traditional heroic image that is mainly defined by deeds or through the value of morality. While the fervor that Chen Yin demonstrates for his pursuit corresponds with a changing concept of self, gender and community in modern China, by defining heroism in emotive terms the novel also points to the possible linkage between modern subjectivity and a rapidly changing China.¹³² As John Fitzgerald has noted, romantic fiction may have helped to “craft and popularize a model of the relationship between self and community that supplied a model for live of nation, or patriotism.”¹³³ When the Republic was founded, this emphasis on emotion resonated almost every step as the discussions of self and community continued. It also became an important dimension for modern martial arts fiction and its depiction of modern heroism.

Conclusion

The fifteen years immediately after the first Sino-Japanese war was marked with doubt, anxiety, and disillusion, as the Qing state quickly lost its control over the society. While the domestic issues that Qing faced have contributed to its failure in a serial of anti-foreigner wars since the 1860s up to 1895, an unprecedented imperial expansion conducted by the Western powers globe wide was also responsible for the difficult situation that Qing encountered. Along with its military colonization in the East, the West also caught the eye of Chinese intellectuals for its developments in science and technology, advancements in the realm of political and social thinking, and its distinctive body of literature and culture. Chinese intellectuals showed strong

¹³² Lee Haiyan, *Revolution of Hearts: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-4.

¹³³ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 95.

interest and desire in understanding and transplanting the useful (at least they thought so) western ideas into China, hoping to resolve the crisis the country was facing. While the evolutionary thinking both rendered them hope and rang the alarm with regards to China's survival in international competition, anarchism embodied by heroic figures such as Russian activist Sofia Perovskaya (1853-1881) and radical acts like political assassination, soon became part of the mainstream of modern Chinese political thought. Indigenous chivalric narrative, due to its iconoclastic implication and the emphasis on physical strength, offered a familiar and yet innovated platform upon which concerns and opinions were expressed. It is within this context four fictional works this chapter analyzed were published and circulated.

Combining contextual and textual analyses, this chapter argues that the last decade of Qing witnessed the emergence of modern martial arts fiction, which manifested the social and political anxieties of the era that ushered in the genre. Compare to roughly half a century earlier when novels like *Three Knights-Errant* and *Five Sworn Brothers* were widely read, these fictional works engaged in impressively diverse themes and displayed diverse literary devices. Built upon the popularity of late imperial chivalric and court-case fiction, they departed from the conventional good versus evil conflict and moved on discussing about a variety of topics, including the function and role of local "tradition" tackling global challenge, the ethics of social reform, the equality between men and women, and the interchangeability between patriarchal sentiment and patriotic attachment.

Moreover, all four works simultaneously exhibit an absence of the state in the matters related to social justice and chivalric deeds, which resonated the anarchist undertone of the genre and announced the launch of modern martial arts fiction. The emperor and the court – namely, embodiments of the state – do not exist, nor does the injustice originated from the legal system or

social regulation patronized by the state. The absence of the state generates a crucial vacuum of authority; knights-errant and their clans fill in the void functioning as arbiters involved in local affairs. The simultaneity of a nonexistent state and its replacement with chivalric characters and groups leads to a significant change with regards to the nature of the conflicts that dominate the genre: the homogeneity of good versus evil antagonism in chivalric tales is substituted with the heterogeneity of disagreements happening between individuals, groups, and localities. The conflicts that drive narrative development of modern martial arts fiction are no longer the solitary issue of morality. Rather, they include a wide range of issues related to individual, community, time, and locality, and identity.

The space generated for literary imagination and creation by the fictional works examined in this chapter, however, was seen diminished in the following decades when Xiang Kairan published his *Marvelous Knights-Errant* and stirred up a “martial arts craze” in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The trajectory of modern martial arts fiction afterwards, therefore, was not a tidy evolutionary one. Rather, it experienced conservative setbacks, critical reflection, and subversive re-creation. In next chapter I turn to the concept of *jianghu* constructed and elaborated in the next few decades and discuss how modern martial arts fiction underwent twists and turns, as an indicator to the issue of literature’s function in modern China.

Chapter 2:

Jianghu, a Stateless China, and the Function of Literature, the 1920s-1940s

Our imagination flies – we are its shadow on the earth.

--Vladimir Nabokov

A well-composed book is a magic carpet on which we are wafted to a world that we cannot enter in any other way.

-- Caroline Gordon

Introduction

In Ang Lee's awards-winning martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* 臥虎藏龍 (2000), one of the first questions that young Jen Yu 玉嬌龍 (hereafter Dragon) asks the female warrior Yu Xiulian 俞秀蓮 (hereafter Lotus) is, "Is it fun to walk around in the *jianghu* 江湖 (literally rivers and lakes)?"¹³⁴ The audience sees a longing in Dragon's eyes for the *jianghu* that she asks about. The same word *jianghu* later comes up time and time again in nearly all of the main characters' conversations, including Lotus's response to Dragon's inquiry that the *jianghu* is not as fun as she imagines, for there are many rules to follow,¹³⁵ the male protagonist Li Mubai's 李慕白 laments about the difficulty of withdrawing from the *jianghu*,¹³⁶ Dragon's

¹³⁴ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, DVD, directed by Ang Lee (2000, Sony Pictures Classics, 2001), 10: 22.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 10: 25.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 15:15.

teacher, Jade Fox's seduction of Dragon breaking away from her family and enjoying the "freedom" in the *jianghu*,¹³⁷ and Sir Te's 貝勒爺 advice to Dragon's father – the newly appointed Governor of the Capital 九門提督—about incorporating the force of the *jianghu* in the management of the city's security.¹³⁸ *Jianghu* appears to be *the* key term and an indispensable element to the story. Ang Lee's film was adapted from the same title novel written by Wang Dulu in the late 1930s and 1940s China. In other words, Ang Lee's film inherits the prominence of the *jianghu* concept in martial arts fiction. What is *jianghu*, then?

Generally speaking, *jianghu* refers to a mysterious and somewhat shadowy realm where wanderers, outlaws, and masters of martial and magic arts inhabit. It is mostly associated with modern martial arts genre, literature and cinema alike. While it may be a faraway term to non-native speakers of Chinese, it is a widely understood, seminal concept to readers with even some basic understandings of the martial arts sub genre or Chinese language. As a matter of fact, it has also become a cultural reference in daily life to the Chinese-speaking communities. A good example is the phrase “人在江湖, 身不由己” (literally “You have to honor the code of the *jianghu* conduct once you are in it”). It was initially coined by the Taiwanese martial arts novelist Gu Long in one of his martial arts novels and later grew into one of the most frequently quoted phrases for the Chinese to express the sentiment of having to follow the rule even when they feel reluctant to do so.

Given the prevalent presence and popularity of the *jianghu* concept in literary creation and everyday life, readers may ask: Why do characters in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* seem to have divergent views about the *jianghu*? How is the *jianghu* concept constructed in martial

¹³⁷ Ibid, 25:20.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 13:10.

arts fiction and what is its generic significance? Focusing on a group of fictional works published from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s, this chapter investigates the literary construct of the *jianghu* in modern Chinese martial arts fiction. First, it examines the *jianghu* established in Pingjiang Buxiaosheng's *Marvelous Knights-Errant* and identifies Xiang's *jianghu* as an interconnected world that highlights the lineage and hierarchy of martial artists. It points out, on the one hand, the central concern of the novel shifts from morality to interpersonal relationships within a network of knights-errant; on the other hand, Xiang's *jianghu* resonated to the on-going Warlord rule in reality and made the political crisis more acute. Second, it analyzes how the *jianghu* construct continued to grow in subtlety and sophistication in novels such as Wang Dulu's *He-tie xilie* 鶴-鐵系列 (the *Crane-Iron Serial*, 1938-1944, hereafter the *Pentalogy*) and Gong Baiyu's *Twelve Coin Darts* series, as the hierarchical structure, character portrayal, and emotional discussion expanded and diversified.

I argue, first, built upon the martial arts fiction written in the first decade of the twentieth century, Xiang continued and elaborated the stateless realm these fictional works have set up and turned it into a *jianghu* world in his novel. Although it is hard to assess whether his *jianghu* contributed to the popularity of his works, or vice versa, that his novel was well received made his *jianghu* a staple motif of the genre. In other words, it is not so much Xiang's invention as his popularity that made his *jianghu* an epoch-making concept. Second, that Xiang's *jianghu* mimicked a stateless China in the real world, from the perspective of literary autonomy, diminished the distance between fiction and reality and marked a step backward compare to the fictional works written one decade ago. On the other hand, under the pressure of market-oriented publishing industry, Xiang managed to be creative with his writing and therefore made a context – namely, the *jianghu* – for his martial arts fiction. This embedded contradiction of his works

was indeed an indicator of the complexity of the literary field during his time. The two-fold features of Xiang's *jianghu* – namely, depictions of “anomalies” 奇 combining a relevancy to reality produced a distinctive martial arts world in particular against the soaring May Fourth ideology in the 1920s that treated literature mostly as an educational tool. Third, as later writers continued to write about the *jianghu*, such as Gong Baiyu and Wang Dulu, the *jianghu*, ironically, remained an autonomous realm in the fictional works for chivalric characters but turned more regulated – namely, less space for literary imagination – as it reached what critics think of maturity.

I begin the following paragraphs with an overview of the *jianghu* term and its evolution from a geographic term to a cultural reference in the pre-modern chivalric tales, paying special attention to the classics of vernacular literature such as the Ming dynasty *Water Margin* 水滸傳 (1589) and the *Seven Knights-Errant and Five Sworn Brothers* 七俠五義 (1879) that was published only half a century before the *Marvelous Knights-Errant*. I then conduct a close textual analysis of the *jianghu* portrayed in Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*. Acknowledging the contribution of Xiang's narrative structure to the construction of his *jianghu* world, I identify Xiang's *jianghu* as an imaginary space-time within which martial arts masters, their disciples, friends and enemies form a power structure that highlights authenticity and lineage of martial arts and a common code of conduct. This combination of time and space generated an indispensable setting, background, and platform within which chivalric stories are narrated. Moreover, positioning the *jianghu* as a focal point, I explore the dynamic between literary creation and political reality in the 1920s China. A dialogue between popular writing and reading – illustrated by martial arts fiction and the *jianghu* construct – and the May Fourth literary ideology that emphasizes the instrumental usage of literature illuminates conflicting views

regarding the function and nature of literature. Despite the left-wing critique on the martial arts literature and the state issued ban on martial magic cinema, the sub-genre continued to prosper, as the *jianghu* concept was quickly adopted and elaborated by writers in the following decades, including Gong Baiyu and Wang Dulu. Their works diversified and complicated the *jianghu* formulation and pushed forward the development of the genre. I end the chapter with a concise re-assessment of the *jianghu* as a literary construct and the role of literature in the contexts of Republican-era literary field.

***Jianghu* in pre-modern Chinese Thought and Literature**

Jianghu has been a fascinating term to both scholars and readers. Everybody seems to know something about it; everybody however seems to have different understandings about it. It is not the purpose of this chapter to define what the *jianghu* exactly is; rather, it investigates the literary embodiments of the *jianghu* construct as well as its generic significations and makes sense of the gap between the two. While the *jianghu* appears to be *the* setting for martial arts fiction, its meaning and association with the genre have gone through an intriguing process of transformation. Long before it became omnipresent in martial arts fiction due to the popularity of Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, it already existed in indigenous Chinese thought and chivalric tales. A brief review of its etymological development serves as the basis to examine how it evolved and grew in the modern time distinctive from its pre-modern representation.

Initially referring to Yangzi River 長江 and Dongting Lake 洞庭湖 but soon including any river and lake, “jianghu” began as a geographic word and was seen in historical documents as early as Sima Qian's *Shiji*. It was used to describe Fan Li 范蠡 (536 - 448BCE) after assisting the King of Yue to regain his power, left the Yue court and “sailed a boat floating on the river

and lake.”¹³⁹ Considering the majority of the Chinese territory had always been land, geographically speaking, “river and lake” alludes to a terrain that is not central, but peripheral, if not marginal. Fan Li’s choice turned out to be a life-saver: many of his old fellows were killed by the King of Yue as the latter consolidated his power; “river and lake” accordingly became a term that signified as a synonymy of the perfect reclusive locality, away from the center and power. This symbolic meaning was reinforced in the “Biographies of Recluses” 隱逸傳 of the *Nanshi* 南史 (A History of the Southern Dynasties, 659) written in Tang dynasty, as it was one of the two typical localities for the recluse.¹⁴⁰ Several hundred years later Song poet and scholar Fan Zhongyan’s 范仲淹 (989-1052) in his widely circulated essay “Yueyanglou ji” 岳陽樓記 (On Yueyang Tower, 1044) juxtaposed “jianghu” with “miaotang” 廟堂 (literally temple and court) and implied that on the one hand “jianghu” is an alternative to the orthodox and official; on the other hand it is still within the same political spectrum as “miaotang.”¹⁴¹ In other words, while “jianghu” in Fan Zhongyan’s essay may have subversive potential, it followed the same political and social order presided over by the imperial authority. Considering its capacity of being part of the political system while maintaining the autonomy and Fan’s intelligentsia identity, Fan’s “jianghu” may well be interpreted as the projected ideal that Chinese intelligentsia have always yearned for in searching for a balanced state of mind between the court and the self.

¹³⁹ Sima Qian, *Shiji*, Vol. 129.

¹⁴⁰ Li Yanshou, *Nanshi* 南史 [History of the Southern Dynasties] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), Vol. 75.

¹⁴¹ Fan Zhongyan, *Yueyang lou ji* 岳陽樓記 [On Yueyang Tower] (Beijing: Shijie tushu chubanshe, 2012).

Although “jianghu” as a geographic term appeared in Chinese thought as early as Zhuangzi 莊子 (370-287BCE), it was not seen in chivalry-related works until Tang dynasty.¹⁴² Sima Qian’s “Biographies of Roaming Knights-Errant” 遊俠列傳 is commonly regarded as the origin of Chinese chivalric narrative, but Sima never used “jianghu” to locate chivalric deeds. Instead, he used words such as “knight-errant of alleys” 閭巷之俠 and “knight-errant of villages” 鄉曲之俠 to indicate the locality of chivalry. Chen Pingyuan notes that “jianghu” was first seen in Tang dynasty chivalric tales as the “background” of heroic deeds, which Chen states, essentially “set the tone for future development of the genre.”¹⁴³ In other words, “jianghu” began to be associated with chivalric stories during the period from the seventh to the tenth centuries, although neither its meaning nor the nature of its association with chivalric tales was clear. As the vernacular literature continued to grow in Song and Yuan dynasties, “jianghu” remained to be a general and yet ambiguous locality for knightly acts. It was not until the Ming vernacular classic *Water Margin* was published and widely read that the connection between knight-errantry and the “jianghu” was established and specified.

First and foremost, the Marshes of Mount Liang 梁山泊 was portrayed as the base for bonded brotherhood and an alternative society of heroes – namely, a miniature “jianghu” where the “good fellows” 好漢 gather and form their community with a common identity – the outlaw. Second, as stories of individual heroes display, “jianghu” also expands its reach to a variety of places, including the complex of inns, highways and waterways, deserted temples, bandits lairs, and so on. The locality of the “jianghu” therefore had since been established at the geographic

¹⁴² “相濡以沫不如相忘於江湖。” Zhuangzi, “Neipian” 內篇, quoted from Lin Yutang’s 林語堂 (1895-1976) translation: Rather than leave them to moisten each other with their damp and spittle it would be far better to let them forget themselves in their native rivers and lakes.

¹⁴³ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiaoke meng*, 118-119.

and moral border of the civilized, and the liminal between nature and society. Yet, the “jianghu” portrayed in the *Water Margin* is never a static existence; instead, it is closely related to the movements of the Mount Liang heroes. That is to say, while “jianghu” as a morally-charged terrain defines chivalric heroes and their acts, knights-errant in turn outline the territory and quality of “jianghu” by means of their motions from one place to another and the acts that they identify as heroic undertakings. A good example is the brief exchange between Zhang Qing 張青, Wu Song 武松, and the two guards that escort Wu Song when they stop by at the Shizi po 十字坡 (the Shizi Ridge) in Chapter Twenty-Eight of *Water Margin*:

The two (Zhang Qing and Wu Song) again spoke of the things done by good fellows in the *jianghu*, which were deeds of murder and arson. Wu Song said, “Song Jiang of Shandong, or Timely Rain as he’s called, is a loyal, generous man of magnificent courage. Due to something that happened to him, he also has to take refuge in Lord Chai’s place.” The two officers heard and became petrified with fear; they kept kowtowing. Wu Song comforted them and said, “No need to fear when we, the good fellows in the *jianghu*, talk. We will not harm good people.”¹⁴⁴

It is clear that the “jianghu” to both Zhang Qing and Wu Song is not only a locality where good fellows roam and act, but has also become an adjective of the qualities that identify knight-errantry. In this sense, “jianghu” and “good fellows” in the *Water Margin* have formed a dialectical relationship. Moreover, conducts of the heroes in the *Water Margin* make it explicit

¹⁴⁴ Shi Nai’an, *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 [Water Margin] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1990), Chapter 28.

that “jianghu” harbors an alternative to the orthodox socio-political system, whose existence is justified by divine authority as the slogan of the Mount Liang indicates, – namely, “carry out the Way on Heaven’s behalf” 替天行道. But, this alternative that “jianghu” accommodates in the *Water Margin* does not entail subverting the imperial authority; rather, it points to a space, both geographically and politically, that is still part of the current political order and yet (ideally) outside of the present social regulation – essentially a similar pursuit of the balance that Fan Zhongyan’s “jianghu” revealed but from a very different perspective, i.e., that of the outlaw’s.¹⁴⁵ The delicacy of this pursuit becomes even more evident when Song Jiang 宋江 as the head of the Mount Liang brotherhood submits himself and his brothers to the imperial court and ends the “jianghu” of the Mount Liang.

The depiction of the “jianghu” in the *Water Margin* has inspired numerous chivalric and court-case tales in the late imperial and Republican era, as much as its narrative structure, language, and characterization have done. *Shi gong’an* 施公案 (Cases of Judge Shi, 1838) is one of the pioneering followers that not only incorporates the idea of “jianghu” into its story, but also elaborates the concept of “lulin” 綠林 (literally green woods) to complicate the world of chivalry. Similar to the etymological trajectory of the “jianghu” concept, “lulin” began as a geographic term and gradually developed into a literary and cultural reference that alludes to a locality where bandits reside. It is not clear when the word first appeared, but it was seen in the fifth century historical document *Houhan shu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han, 445 AD) as the place where Wang Kuang 王匡(?-?), a minor warlord, led famine refugees to protest against the

¹⁴⁵ That heroes of the Mount Liang are called “outlaws” (落草為寇) indicates the prominence of the state. And the title of its sequel, i.e., *Dang kou zhi* 蕩寇志 [A Tale of Eliminating Bandits] written by Yu Wanchun 俞万春 (1794-1849) reinforces the dynamics between the outlaw ideals and the state’s control.

state.¹⁴⁶ At some point in Chinese history, “jianghu,” “lulin,” and “shanlin” 山林 (literally mountain and forest) were synonymies and variations to each other, all suggesting somewhat peripheral locations where people – be it scholars, hermits, or outlaws – could shun the dominant political, religious, and social order and where illicit acts could happen. But, the subtle differences among them – mostly due to the contexts within which they were coined or used – soon turned them into localities defined by subjects of various groups. “Shanlin” became largely associated with the traditional Daoist or Confucian recluse, “lulin” mainly related to bandits or “righteous protestors” 義軍, and “jianghu” generally more accommodating and ambiguous compare to the other two.¹⁴⁷ Readers were able to discern the problematic nature of “lulin” already in the Ming military romance *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms, 1522), when the heroic character Guangong 關公, aka. Guan Yunchang 關羽, advises Pei Yuanshao 裴元紹, a follower of the late “Yellow Turban” 黃巾軍 leader Zhang Jiao 張角 that “Lulin is not a place for the upright. You all later shall depart from the evil and return to the good. Do not trap yourself in it.”¹⁴⁸ Three centuries later, *Cases of Judge Shi*, a highly influential chivalric/court-case novel that was widely circulated across multiple media, including books, opera, story-telling performance, etc., differentiated “lulin” from “jianghu” and defined the former through acts like robbery and burglary, essentially a subset of the bigger “jianghu” world,

¹⁴⁶ Fan Ye, *Houhan shu* 後漢書 [Book of the Later Han] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1995), Vol. 11.

¹⁴⁷ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiaoke meng*, 120.

¹⁴⁸ Luo Guanzhong, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 [Romance of the Three Kingdoms] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2010), Chapter 28.

as Zhang Hongzhi asserts.¹⁴⁹ In other words, according to Zhang, *Cases of Judge Shi* establishes “lulin” in a negative light in terms of moral code and turns “jianghu” into an arena where groups of knights-errant and forces from the “lulin” fight for the control. This antagonism between the “chivalric force” 俠士集團 and the “lulin force 綠林集團,” Zhang argues, set up the basic pattern of clashes between the “white” 白道 and the “black” 黑道 for future portrayals of the *jianghu* world.¹⁵⁰

In the decades after the publication of *Cases of Judge Shi*, “Jianghu” continued to appear in the chivalric and court-case novels, including *Qixia wuyi* 七俠五義 (The Seven Heroes and Five Gallants, 1889). In the first decade of the twentieth century, as the previous chapter has pointed out, “jianghu” continued as the looming setting where heroes travel and conduct various deeds but with a fundamental difference established and registered – namely, the absence of the state. This remarkable establishment, however, had to wait until the 1920s when Xiang’s novel stirred up a wave of martial arts craze to gain tremendous currency in both generic development and cultural realm. One misperception that needs to be pointed out here: also due to the popularity and influence of Xiang’s works, the fundamentals of the “jianghu” that contemporary readers understand were largely perceived to be instituted in Xiang’s novels. In the following I turn to Xiang Kairan and investigate the “myth” of the *jianghu* world that he created.

A Modern *Jianghu* World in Xiang Kairan’s Novelistic Imagination

¹⁴⁹ Zhang Hongzhi, Shi gong’an *de jianghu shijie* 《施公案》的江湖世界 [The “Jianghu” World in Shi Gong’an], M.A. Thesis, National Chung Cheng University, 2003. I cannot access to the copy of this thesis, so was only able to read its summary on the NDLTD (National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations in Taiwan) website, accessed on April 6, 2016: <http://handle.ncl.edu.tw/11296/ndltd/79056417592676763782>

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

It has been a general consensus among contemporary Chinese critics that martial arts novels written since Xiang Kairan's *Marvelous Knights-Errant* onward read very different from their precursors, i.e., the late imperial and early Republican-era chivalric and court-case novels. But critics may not agree upon what exactly makes the difference. Focusing on story-telling and materials employed, Zhang Gansheng, for instance, repeatedly points to Xiang's ability of narrating the strange and unusual in a vivid and interesting way.¹⁵¹ Xu Sinian appears to have the same opinion as Zhang by noting that a distinctive attribute of the *Marvelous Knights-Errant* is being "weird and uncommon."¹⁵² Examining Xiang's novel in the context of generic development of martial arts fiction including works written by the New School martial arts fiction writer Jin Yong in the post-1949 Hong Kong, Chen Pingyuan states, "the biggest contribution of the *Marvelous Knights-Errant* is that it shifted the standpoint 立足點 (of martial arts fiction) back to the *jianghu*."¹⁵³ Moreover, Chen asserts a reciprocal relationship between martial arts fiction and real life clandestine organizations by arguing on the one hand, chivalric tales "prompted the development of Chinese secret societies;" on the other hand, clandestine organizations such as White Lotus 白蓮教 and Heaven and Earth Society 天地會 "reversely deeply influenced martial arts fiction of later generations."¹⁵⁴ While Chen acknowledges the fictive nature of fiction, he seems to confuse the line between fictional creation and real life happenings.¹⁵⁵ Given the popularity of Xiang's martial arts fiction, in particular his *jianghu*

¹⁵¹ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 119, 123.

¹⁵² Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji*, 107.

¹⁵³ Chen Pingyuan, *Qiangu wenren xiake meng*, 61.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 132.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 128.

concept, it is worthwhile to zero in on Xiang's novels and scrutinize how his *jianghu* is constructed, its literary embodiments and implications in both the literary and political contexts within which the novels were created. While the *jianghu* is an imaginary creation in nature, I argue, Xiang's *jianghu* shows abundant resemblance to the real world. Compare to the works created two decades ago, Xiang's novels diminished the distance between literature and reality – therefore, an indicator of less literary autonomy in imaginary creation.

Xiang never explained what constitutes the *jianghu* nor did he seem to concern with this question. Rather, he took a most direct way to register the concept and establish the connection between it and the genre – namely, naming his novels by juxtaposing the “jianghu” and “knights-errant,” such as *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant in the Jianghu* 江湖奇俠傳 (1923-27), *Biographies of the Strange and the Unusual in the Jianghu* 江湖怪異傳 (1923),¹⁵⁶ *Biographies of Unusual Heroes in the Jianghu* 江湖異人傳 (1924), *Biographies of Little Knights-Errant in the Jianghu* 江湖小俠傳 (1925), just to name a few. By positioning the *jianghu* and chivalric heroes side by side, Xiang clearly showed the key words to his chivalric novels and its basic components: the *jianghu* serves as the setting, the strange – either human being, or phenomenon, or both, as the subject, and biography as the format of story-telling. By creating and following this pattern of naming his novels, Xiang conveyed important message that helped readers to identify his works before even reading them: on the one hand, his novels appear to display close kinship with the narrative model generated by biographic history; on the

¹⁵⁶ Instead of biographies of human being, this book collects an array of mysterious phenomena mostly related to shaman that existed or happened in Hunan where Xiang was from. In other words, the title of the collection does not conform to its content.

other hand, they incorporate numerous hearsay and highlight the quality of being “strange” 奇 and “weird” 異.

The *jianghu* is first and foremost a geographic realm and outlined and ramified through the travels of knights-errant. The novel begins with a paragraph of geographical locations: starting at the Little Wu Gate 長沙小吳門 within Changsha city, the omnipresent narrator guides the reader to leave the inner city, walks through a mountain ridge called Kuzhu Ao 苦竹坳, and arrives at the foot of the Yinju Mount 隱居山, where the protagonist Liu Chi 柳遲 and his parents live. The Mountain is “rocky and steep,” the narrator notes, no one can reach the top without “extreme energy.”¹⁵⁷ Perhaps due to this physical feature, it is said that some Ming dynasty adherents 遺老 lived in the mountain as recluses after the Ming was overthrown – the reason why it is called the Yinju Mount (literally Recluse Mount). Liu Chi’s parents live here a life of leisure and ease and did not get to become parents until after mid-age.

Inaugurated the very beginning of the novel, this paragraph functions far more important than it appears to be. The course from the inner city to a mountain as an introduction to where the to-be-introduced protagonist Liu Chi is from explains not only the distance between Liu Chi’s home and the city, but more importantly implies the attribute of the realm within which Liu Chi and other heroes are active – namely, the area between the city and the remote, between society and nature. It is liminal and not static. The liminality of this realm reveals an important sense of fluidity relevant to the movements of the characters from one place to another and sometimes back and forth. The areas they go through therefore become part of the *jianghu*. The *jianghu*, in this sense, is inclusive and extensive. Moreover, the liminality embedded in the

¹⁵⁷ Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan* 江湖奇俠傳 [Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant in the *Jianghu*] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2009), 1.

geographical locality also indicates that characters stand across two or even more social conditions and accordingly carry multiple identities. At some point, they ought to face and confront the conflicts related to these identities. The switch of identities originated from travels between social and natural conditions and the consequent clashes between identities significantly downplay the central issue – namely, justice – that used to dominate the late imperial chivalric and court-case fiction. In other words, while immoral and evil figures remain to be the villain, the types of conflicts that motivate narrative development and seize reader's interests are now much more versatile. Liu Chi's story well exemplifies these new attributes related to the liminality of the *jianghu* in Xiang's novel.

As the first protagonist introduced to the reader right after the opening paragraph, Liu Chi is depicted as a character marked by pairs of paradoxes. Being the only son of two good-looking gentry-class parents, he often surprises his relatives with his unattractive appearance. While he demonstrates impressive memory, he is never interested in reading. Rather than playing with same-age children, he always stays by himself with a longing look on the face. No one knows what he thinks. When he finally develops some social skills he likes to spend time with aged men in his village and groups of beggars 叫花子 that travel by. He eventually follows one of the beggars into a remote temple located in a deep mountain where the beggar's real identity is revealed: he is a Daoist master of martial arts and magic. Liu Chi then realizes the Daoist teaching represented by the master's neglect of material life while focusing on martial training and self-cultivation fulfills his long-awaited pursue. This first encounter with the Master Qingxu 清虛, aka, Laughter Daoist 笑道人, grants Liu a position as the youngest disciple and yet with greatest potential in the Kunlun Clan 崑崙派, one of the two martial arts clans depicted in the

novel. The conflicts between Kunlun Clan and its competitor, Kongtong Clan 崆峒派, and how their conflicts originated and developed form the central plot of the novel.

Liu Chi's travel from hometown to the temple switches his identity from son to disciple, leading to a new conflict he is confronted: a senior master in the same clan tells how devastated his parents are after he left home.¹⁵⁸ *The Analects*, the Confucian classic that highlights virtues such as filial piety that his father taught him since he was little rings the bell. The conflict between Liu's obligation to his parents and his personal pursue of martial arts and magic leads to another movement of Liu Chi: he returns to the domestic realm and his duty of filial piety. It is during his stay with his parents that he meets another master of martial arts and magic, Golden Buddha 金羅漢, who sees his talents and takes him in as disciple. Two details are worth pointing out here: first, Golden Buddha comes to his house and illuminates him with theories of the Dao; second, Golden Buddha explains to Laughter Daoist why he took Liu Chi as his disciple despite that he was the latter's disciple already.¹⁵⁹ The first detail implies that in the trope of *baishi xueyi* that recurs this novel and novels written by other writers, meetings between masters and disciples are never one way. Disciples may meet masters in the wild, such as a remote mountain or a deserted temple; masters can feel the presence of disciples and search for them due to their special talents. In other words, the realm of the *jianghu* includes not just faraway places of wildness but also civilized social space; and the *jianghu* is not so much outlined by the geographic features of places than the acts of different players. This inclusiveness elaborated the looming stateless realm inaugurated in the martial arts fiction written ten years ago. From

¹⁵⁸ Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 18.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 26-27.

reader's perspective, its comprehensiveness may partially explain why readers found his novels relatable and fascinating, as they might have fulfilled various expectations readers had.

The second detail points out another important attribute of the *jianghu* in Xiang's novel, i.e., the power structure of master-disciple relationship that emphasizes authenticity and lineage of martial arts. It is never explicitly noted in the story, but apparently one person can have only one master – namely, being devoted is one of the key qualities that disciples are expected to have. And, this loyalty is based on distinctions between martial arts clans, which are largely differentiated from each other by means of martial arts styles. In Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, for example, the fundamental difference between Kunlun and Kongtong Clans is that the former believes in meditation 練氣 while the latter swords play and combat skills 練形. That is why Laughter Daoist appears to be surprised when finding out Liu Chi has bowed to another master.¹⁶⁰ But, once he learns that it was Golden Buddha who Liu Chi kowtows to, he immediately starts to laugh, because Golden Buddha not only possesses incredible martial arts skills and magic – he is called “the No. 1 super man” among swordsmen 劍客中的第一奇人, but more importantly, he is a senior 前輩 to Laughter Daoist.¹⁶¹ It is Liu Chi's “good fortune” 福 that he met Golden Buddha and became his student, Laughter Daoist says.¹⁶² This hierarchical connections between masters and disciples and between masters/disciples of different ranks may remind the reader of the meeting that Liu Chi eavesdrops on while staying in Laughter Daoist's temple depicted in the first chapter: coming from all sorts of places to the temple monthly,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 22. It is part of the master's unexplainable magic power to detect the change happens to his disciple after the disciple gets himself or herself another master. This kind of “magic power” without any scientific evidence partly caused harsh critique on the genre from the left-wing critics.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 22-23.

¹⁶² Ibid, 26.

disciples and masters report upon and share with the clan members with a wide range of issues: martial skill training, punishment of evil behaviors, involvements in local affairs, and so on.¹⁶³ In other words, while disciples and masters may travel on their own and engage with different affairs, they collectively belong to the same clan and share one common identity.

It is not new to see collective heroes portrayed in chivalric tales. *Water Margin* of the sixteenth century, for instance, narrates how individual heroes, due to a variety of reasons, settle down in the Liang Mount and form a community, acting as the agent of the “Heavenly Dao” and fighting against social injustice 替天行道. While this process of hero collectivization – namely, independent heroes becoming members of a chivalric group – enables heroes to give voice to their frustrations and resentment towards the state, it also reveals unequal exchanges between members, simply considering how Song Jiang, the head of the group, arranges missions among “brothers” and eventually submits the group to the court. As Xu Sinian has noted, while the ranking 排座次 of the Liang Mount heroes marks “the peak of chivalry,” it may have well been “the beginning of the crisis that chivalry entails.”¹⁶⁴ Xu does not explain what he meant by “peak of chivalry” nor “the crisis” here, but the reason and effect of heroic community are very different in *Water Margin* and *Marvelous Knights-Errant*. In the former, individual heroes form a community in the Liang Mount based on their prevailing dissatisfactions with the social and legal order: they are forced out of their social contexts and identities. The establishment of the Liang Mount as an outlaw base, therefore, reveals a gesture that challenges and denounces the imperial authority. And, this gesture may change depending on the dynamics between the court and the Liang Mount, as the ending of submission 招安 indicates.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 11-17.

¹⁶⁴ Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji*, 91-92.

Different from the mountain stronghold 山寨 founded in the Liang Mount, martial arts clans in Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-Errant* are formed based on general agreements upon certain way of practicing martial arts and commonly accepted values. They emphasize the authenticity and lineage of martial arts skills. Among clan members, the chronological order of joining in the group under the same master or martial arts lineage works largely as the criteria to rank the seniority: the earliest to join the clan and/or become the disciple, the most senior it is. Within the same clan although the junior pays respect to the senior generally speaking, they essentially follow instructions issued by their master. In reverse, the master is responsible for training his or her disciples with regards to both martial skills and ethnical virtues. This way, when a knight-errant acts, it is no more individual behavior; rather, it is often interpreted as the inclination of the clan the knight-errant is identified with. Any interaction, friendly or hostile, between two chivalric figures in this *jianghu* realm, accordingly, can be easily translated to some type of relationship between two martial arts clans that they respectively belong to. That Yang Tianchi 楊天池, disciple of Laughter Daoist in the Kunlun clan by chance assists his adopt parents during the Zhaojia Prairie 趙家坪 combat and causes the whole clan involved in the Prairie dispute against the Kongtong clan well illustrates the correlation between individuals and communities in Xiang's *jianghu* world.¹⁶⁵ In addition, conflicts between clans also have a historical dimension, as an unpleasant exchange between Dong Lutang 董祿堂 and Golden Buddha, two senior masters in the Kongtong and Kunlun clans respectively, decades before the Prairie dispute could trigger and aggravate the relationship between two clans later.¹⁶⁶ This historical perspective of conflicts makes relationships within the *jianghu* world even more

¹⁶⁵ Pingjiang Buxiao sheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 43-44, 55-56.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 24-25.

complicated: it indicates that any problem or issue between individuals and groups can be easily molded into conflict that moves the narrative forward.

The historical approach is also seen in Xiang's portrayal of multiple knights-errant in the novel. Traditional chivalric tales, as Cui Fengyuan's study shows, generally display two types of narrative structure: the "simple one," which is the majority, centers on one particular event with multiple characters involved, and the "complicated one" narrates several events simultaneously, everyone of which may have many figures involved.¹⁶⁷ That is to say, heroic characters used to be depicted through how they solve certain cases or mysteries in the novel, their images accordingly tend to be snapshots without much information about where they are from and who their masters are. Although Cui's research focuses on Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties, fictional works written afterwards, such as *Cases of Judge Shi* and the *Seven Heroes and Five Gallants*, appear to follow a similar event-based narrative pattern. Xiang, nevertheless, was inspired by the long tradition of historiographical writing, particularly Sima qian's biographical history, and employed "biography" 傳 – the title of his novel indicates – as the basic unit to conduct his story-telling.¹⁶⁸ His "biographies" are mostly composed of three stages: how the hero meets a master and becomes the disciple, the training process, and after the hero completes learning and establishes as a knight-errant in the *jianghu*. This way, heroic figures are depicted as characters that not only accomplish righteous deeds, but also "grow" like real human beings – a "genealogy" 系譜 that explains the origin and backgrounds of knight-errant and renders them

¹⁶⁷ Cui Fengyuan, *Zhongguo gudian duanpian xiayi xiaoshuo yanjiu* 中國古典短篇俠義小說研究 [Studies on the classical Chinese Short Stories of Chivalry] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1986), 124.

¹⁶⁸ The next chapter looks into details about how traditional historiographical writing and elements of historicity, fictionality have influenced Xiang's fictional works.

like people that actually lived, as Zhang Dachun's observes.¹⁶⁹ While adding background information to martial heroes increases their relatability to the reader, it also generates room for depictions of chivalric character's development, most of which include narrations similar to that of *bildung*. This *bildung* type of growth – namely, heroes are allowed to make mistakes and can correct their misconducts while growing toward adulthood and heroism – reveals a resistance of marital arts genre to stability and conformism. It also marks the multifaceted nature of martial arts genre and its capacity stemming from the social fabric of quotidian life.

The spread-out biographical narrative structure also plays an important role formulating the *jianghu* construct in Xiang's novel. Characters are introduced to the reader following no specific pattern. Rather, reasons related to their appearance can be random – very similar to the structure of the Qing novel *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (An Unofficial History of the Scholars, 1749) written by Wu jingzi 吳敬梓 (1701-1754), indeed. Even though the narrator launches the Zhaojia Prairie dispute at the beginning of the novel and identifies it as a central “event” that will eventually lead to a concluding combat between the two martial arts clans, he seems to have lost track of this line at the end, because neither the dispute nor the combat between two clans get resolved or settled.¹⁷⁰ Rather, in the end of Chapter One-hundred-and-six where Xiang stopped writing the novel, the narrator states that he does not feel happy to continue writing and so ends the novel there. Acknowledging the structural problem, the narrator notes, there are numerous unusual people and events that are unknown to the reader, and he has to wait until he regains the

¹⁶⁹ Zhang Dachun, *Xiaoshuo bailei* 小說稗類 [Fiction of Miscellaneous Kinds] (Taipei: Lianhe wenzue, 1998), 186.

¹⁷⁰ Pingjiang Buxiao sheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 29, 200.

interest before he can write more for the reader.¹⁷¹ In other words, after narrating “biographies” of sixty-four “marvelous knights-errant,” the novel ends without a real ending that follows and closes up the narrative.

This structural problem has attracted some attention among critics. Zhang Dachun contends that the flawed structure of Xiang’s novel could be partially attributed to the story-telling tradition that paid more attention to the interaction between story-teller and listeners than the coherence of narration.¹⁷² Given Xiang’s close connections with the real world of politics throughout of the first three decades of twentieth century, I suspect, he could not resist the temptation of participating in the *real* combat between warlords rather than fabricating one on paper between two imaginary martial arts clans. While the writing of the novel approached to the long-awaited climax, in reality regional governors were marching toward the capital city competing for their roles in the establishment of the state – perhaps the realistic relevancy of Xiang’s novelist invention urged him to take part in the political reality. Leaving behind the *Marvelous Knight-Errant* unfinished, Xiang Kairan returned to Hunan in early 1927 and joined the expedition troop led by the local warlord Tang Shengzhi 唐生智 (1889-1970).¹⁷³

Despite the imperfection of Xiang’s narrative structure, the *jianghu* concept he established in the early 1920s appeared to be well received among not only readers but also his peer writers. Fictional works titled with “*jianghu*” were soon seen on the popular market after Xiang’s first installment was published in the weekly popular journal the *Scarlet Magazine* 紅雜

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 200.

¹⁷² Zhang Dachun, *Xiaoshuo bailei*, 174-176, 185-193.

¹⁷³ Xu Sinian and Xiang Xiaoguang, “Xiang Kairan nianbiao” 向愷然年表[Chronology of Xiang Kairan], Zeng Pingyuan and He Linfu eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji* 平江不肖生研究專輯 [Studies on Pingjiang buxiaosheng] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2013), 339.

誌 (1922-24). These works include *Jianghu niansi xia* 江湖廿四俠 (Twenty-Four Knights-Errant in the *Jianghu*, 1928) co-authored by martial arts practitioner Jiang Xiahun 姜俠魂(?-?) and journalist Yang Chenyin 楊塵因(1889-1961), *Jianghu haoxia zhuan* 江湖豪俠傳 (Biographies of Valorous Knights-Errant in the *Jianghu*, 1929) by Yao Min'ai 姚民哀 (1893-1938), *Jianghu jianxia zhuan* 江湖劍客傳 (Biographies of Swords Players in the *Jianghu*) by Zhang Minfei 張冥飛, and *Jianghu yixia zhuan* 江湖異俠傳 (Biographies of Eccentric Knights-Errant in the *Jianghu*, 1928) by Wen Gongzhi 文公直 (1898-?), only to name a few.¹⁷⁴ Zhao Tiaokuang 趙茗狂 (1892-1953) who was the editor of the *Red Rose* 紅玫瑰 (1924-1932) magazine where Xiang serialized his *Marvelous Knights-Errant* and completed Xiang's unfinished novel after he left Shanghai for Hunan in 1927 also published a martial arts novel entitled *Jianghu guaixia* 江湖怪俠 (Strange Knights-Errant in the *Jianghu*) in 1931. *Jianghu* by the end of 1930s had become a powerful narrative mechanism that drove the writing and reading of martial arts fiction.

***Jianghu* and the Warlord Rule: Political Crisis in a Stateless Imaginary Terrain**

Recognizing the prominence of the *jianghu* construct, critics have proposed multiple approaches to interpret its significance. Contextualizing the *jianghu* in the twentieth-century martial arts fiction, including those written in post-1949 Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chen Pingyuan interprets it as a “big arena” 大擂台 upon which combats take place, in particular those between good and evil 正邪之爭.¹⁷⁵ That “good always wins over evil,” Chen critiques, becomes the

¹⁷⁴ These titles are listed in Ye Hongsheng's brief introduction to the Republican-era martial arts fiction. Ye Hongsheng, *Ye Hongsheng lunjian*, 30-31.

¹⁷⁵ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiake meng*, 131.

moral cliché which martial arts fiction easily falls into. It may also explain why martial arts fiction is called “fairy tales for adults” 成年人的童話, Chen notes.¹⁷⁶ Reading the *jianghu* as a “discursive practice,” Xu Gang traces its various “representations” and “significance” in four martial arts works written in a period from 1904 to 1955. The *jianghu*, Xu asserts, is a “stage” 舞台 where fiction and history differentiates from each other.¹⁷⁷ Interpreting the *jianghu* world as the platform for to materialize his military and political activities, I propose, Xiang’s *jianghu* mimicked the chaotic and stateless reality and by combining portrayals of anomalies it generated a reading experience that highlights sensational pleasure. While this direct relevancy to the real world may contribute to Xiang’s success, it signaled a step backward aesthetically compare to the novels written two decades ago.

In the following, I first revisit Xiang’s personal history, pay special attention to the moments that shifted his life trajectory and also corresponded to the general historical context. Although Xiang is remembered today by his martial arts fiction and other popular writings, he for many times participated in political and military movements. Given the close and yet independent relationship between Xiang and the political-military figures he followed, I surmise, writing martial arts fiction serves well as a means of living and materialize his real-life experiences. Second, I evaluate Xiang’s martial arts fiction in the 1920s as a world of anomalies that his readers could indulge. From this perspective, what Xiang’s writing contributed to the literary field is not only elaborated generic conventions, but also the recognition of an alternative function of literary creation, i.e., indulgence rather than education. Literary creation, as Xiang’s

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Xu Gang, “,” 江湖: 小說與歷史的舞台 [Jianghu: A Stage for Fiction and History], Lin Lijun ed., *Jinyong xiaoshuo yu ershi shiji zhongguo wenxue* 金庸小說與二十世紀中國文學 [Jin Yong’s Fiction and Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature] (Hong Kong: Minheshe chuban, 2000), 267-268.

success indicated, does not necessarily educate the reader. Rather, it attracts readers with great sensational appeal.

While scholars and critics have paid increasing attention to Xiang Kairan and his writings recently, their studies appear to limit to Xiang's involvement in marital arts as a type of sport and three of his fictional works – namely, *Liudong waishi* 留東外史 (An Unofficial History of Studying in Japan, 1916-1922, hereafter, *An Unofficial History*), *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, and the *Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes* 近代俠義英雄傳.¹⁷⁸ The three works are usually examined in their separate contexts rather than as components of Xiang's corpus.¹⁷⁹ I assert, however, that it is not possible to fully elucidate the significance of his *jianghu* world without understanding his political activities. By drawing attention to his engagements in political activism, I examine their possible connections with his writing. I surmise, his political and military activities played an important role in conceiving and materializing his literary imagination. His involvements in the real world of politics may have well inspired his fictional works. A combination of imagination and yet realist relevancy may partially explain why his works spoke to a wide range of readers in Republican China and have stirred up a martial arts craze cross boundaries between media.

The trajectory of Xiang's life is marked with his consistent attempts to participate in on-going political changes, which, however, did not seem to lead to the success he expected, at least in hindsight. Born into a wealthy family in Pingjiang county, Hunan province in 1890, Xiang

¹⁷⁸ An international conference dedicated to Xiang Kairan and his works took place in his hometown, Hunan, in 2010. The papers presented on that conference were published into a book in 2013. The table of content of the book reveals the interest of the conference participants was limited to these three fictional works. Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*.

¹⁷⁹ Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 1-2.

Kairan received traditional education before the Qing abolished the civil service examination and, with family support, went to the provincial capital and later to Japan for study. In the following three decades he traveled from China to Japan, and from Hunan to Shanghai, back and forth multiple times in order to attend various political or military movements, until he finally settled down in Hunan in the late 1940s. In 1946 he started a new project of writing *Zhongguo geming yeshi* 中國革命野史 (An Unofficial History of Chinese Revolution) which was seen in print in 1950 using his old pseudonym, “Pingjiang Buxiao sheng.” But, he did not get to write a sequel due to the scarcity of the volumes sold.¹⁸⁰ He was destitute in his final years, but still passionate about his new initiative of writing *A History of Chinese Martial Arts* 中國武術史話 in 1957.¹⁸¹ This plan, unfortunately, was not materialized, because he was labeled as a “rightist” 右派分子 in the beginning of anti-rightist movement.¹⁸² He died in the same year.

Xiang’s first experience of being part of a political action was when he studied in the Hunan Industrial School 湖南實業學堂 in Changsha, still a teenager. He participated in a protest against local government’s objection to the proposal of burying Chen Tianhua 陳天華(1875-1905) as a martyr. Chen Tianhua, a native to Hunan province and a radical revolutionary who wrote two widely circulated pamphlets, i.e., “A Sudden Look Back” 猛回頭 (1905) and “An Alarm to Awaken the Age” 警世鐘 (1905), committed suicide in 1905 while in Japan, hoping to

¹⁸⁰ Ye Hongsheng states that *An Unofficial History of Chinese Revolution* was published in the *Mingxing Ribao* 明星日報 in Shanghai in 1946. But, Xu Sinian – the co-compiler of “Xiang Kairan’s Chronology” 向愷然年表 questions this statement. Xu Sinian and Xiang Xiaoguang, “Xiang Kairan Nianbiao” 向愷然年表 [Chronology of Xiang Kairan], Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 349-350, 352.

¹⁸¹ Xu Sinian and Xiang Xiaoguang, “Xiang Kairan Nianbiao,” 352.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 353.

awaken his people and the country to act for changes. Xiang's first attempt in the political realm, unfortunately, ended with him being expelled from school. He then went to Japan – a popular study destination to many open-minded Chinese at that time – and enrolled in the language school where Lu Xun and Chen Tianhua had also studied just a few years ago. It was during his first stay in Japan that he reunited with the martial artist Wang Zhiqun 王治群 (aka, Wang Runsheng 王潤生, 1880-1941) whom he met while in Changsha. It re-kindled his enthusiasm for learning martial arts.¹⁸³ What and how Xiang studied in the Japanese school is not clear, but his Japan experiences lent him materials and ideas, which resulted in the writing of his first popular novel *An Unofficial History* and several best-selling sequels in the following years.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, his interactions with Wang as well as other Chinese and Japanese martial artists in Japan and later back in China, and the knowledge as well as identity he obtained as a martial artist, offered an unexpected but effective avenue for Xiang to demonstrate his literary talents, take part in the political arena, and survive several difficult periods.

The second time when Xiang took part in the political movement was right after Hunan, his home province, announced independence from the Republic that was in the control of Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859-1916).¹⁸⁵ As one of the co-founders of the “National Skill Association” 國技學會 in Changsha that taught all sorts of martial arts forms, Xiang joined in the Hunan military force fighting against Yuan Shikai's troop. Hunan force, unfortunately, lost the battle.

¹⁸³ Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang'an, “Wuxia huidang bian,” Fan Boqun ed., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 397.

¹⁸⁴ Xu Sinian and Xiang Xiaoguang, “Xiang Kairan Nianbiao,” 328.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 330.

As a result, Xiang left for Japan once again.¹⁸⁶ His anti-Yuan Shikai 反袁 (aka, 討袁) involvement continued in the next few years until 1916 when he barely survived a dangerous situation.¹⁸⁷ Starting early 1917, Xiang sojourned in Shanghai for the next ten years and wrote numerous pieces, fictional and non-fictional, serialized in local newspapers and literary journals, including the novels that made him a national name – namely, *Marvelous Knights-Errant* and the *Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes*. During his several very brief visits back in Hunan during this decade, he appeared to only engage with activities related to martial arts. Until, in early 1927 when the Hunan local warlord Tang Shengzhi formed his troop getting ready to battle for his regional rule, Xiang returned to Hunan and joined in Tang’s troop as a military secretary.¹⁸⁸ Tang’s attempt of defeating Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 (1887-1975) soon failed. Xiang left the troop in 1929 and traveled around in northern China before he returned to Shanghai in 1930. After staying in Shanghai for two more year, Xiang returned to Hunan in 1932, concentrating on teaching and promoting martial arts as “national skill” 國術 with a group of fellow martial artists, until he accepted the invitation from the general of Nationalist Party Liao Lei 廖磊 (1890-1939) in 1938, joined in Liao’s anti-Japanese troop, and stationed in Anhui province. Liao passed away unexpected one year later, but Xiang continued to stay in Anhui for the next nine years.¹⁸⁹ In 1948 Xiang returned to Hunan and became a member of the Provincial Parliament while Cheng Qian 程潛 (1882-1968) was the Hunan governor. A year later, Xiang followed Cheng Qian and

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 331-332.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 339.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 345-351.

surrendered to the troop of the Communist Party and stayed in Hunan till he passed away.¹⁹⁰ In the 1950s he was invited and met with He Long 賀龍 (1896-1969), a military leader of the newly founded People's Republic of China who asked him to write a history of Chinese martial arts. The project, however, did not happen due to Xiang's political misfortune and consequent death in 1957. Despite of his shifting focuses in life and frequent movements from one place to another, Xiang never lost his interest in writing and continued to write, either martial arts fiction or martial-arts-related essays and memoirs, for local newspapers or publications even when he traveled with military troops.¹⁹¹ In other words, while it is not clear how much financial support Xiang received from his activities in the military and political realm, it appears affirmative that writing had always been an important source of financial support in his life.

It is hard to tell without substantive evidence the exact relationships between Xiang Kairan and the military figures he attended at different historical moments, such as Tang Shengzhi, the Hunan warlord during the warlord era, Liao Lei during the anti-Japanese war, and Cheng Qian at the end of the Second World War. Xiang seemed to remain well respected by and close with them and yet maintained his independence. He, for instance, joined in Liao Lei's troop upon Liao's invitation. After Liao's death, he spent years raising money and eventually built a memorial for Liao and a cemetery for Liao's troops.¹⁹² Moreover, from Xiang's repeated efforts of taking part in anti-Yuan movements back in his home province and the anti-Japanese troop in Anhui, it is reasonable to deduce that he longed for political stability and a strong country. The domestic unrest caused by the Taiping rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century and aggravated by

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 351-352.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 340, 344, 348.

¹⁹² Ibid, 349.

foreign incursions since then had, nevertheless, badly undermined the power of the central state. “The militarized oppression of Yuan Shikai,” as Richard Edmonds notes, “spurred various segments of society to react by supporting self-government and local autonomy,” among which “warlords wanted to increase their power base, gentry were dissatisfied with the central government, and local people wanted to protect their home area.”¹⁹³ In other words, in the fifteen years after Qing was overthrown and the Republic was established, China experienced severe crisis in central state authority. The military component of political power exemplified by regional warlords like Tang Shengzhi whose troop that Xiang joined in created more obstacles to the centralized state building. Other scholars have also observed the reality of lacking a central state and the struggles between local forces in the early Republican politics.¹⁹⁴

Despite of the political disorder and his first-hand experiences, Xiang Kairan rarely wrote about military warlords and real-life politics. Rather, he created a *jianghu* world in his martial arts fiction within which the state is absent and replaced by martial arts clans that are actively involved in local affairs. In other words, there lies a noticeable similarity between the real world he experienced and the martial arts world he depicted. Also in this *jianghu* world, the core conflict between good and evil that used to dominate chivalric narrative is substituted by a variety of disputes related to inter-personal, inter-clan, and inter-locality relationships; precisely the way how regional warlord fought for control and power at that time. In this sense, the *jianghu* that Xiang created indeed diminished the distance between fiction and reality. His *jianghu*, however, is different from reality; it includes numerous unheard of martial magic and

¹⁹³ Frederic Wakeman and Richard Edmonds eds., *Reappraising Republican China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-9.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (London: Routledge, 2005), 76. Edward McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 80-118.

trick, which continued to keep readers interested. This combination of relevancy to reality and yet maintain fanciful stood distinctively in the literary field that was quickly standardized by the May Fourth ideology in the 1920s.¹⁹⁵

Within the May Fourth thought, “ideas about literature,” Theodore Hutters insightfully reminds us, “were but an important subset of a general discourse on bringing modern, universally valid ideas to China as the general remedy to a backwardness that, if not attended to, would eventually lead to the dissolution of the Chinese polity.”¹⁹⁶ This instrumental approach to and the politicized function of literature resulted partially from the close relation between literary writing and the project of westernization/modernization. It was not a creation of the May Fourth movement. Rather, the incipience of the utilitarian mentality with regards to literary creation was seen in the late imperial period when critics spotted and employed “the link between the popular appeal of the novel and the prospects for mass education that the novel represented.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, included in the reform movement in the late Qing, “fiction” 小說 was promoted to the “best of literature” 文學之最上乘 due to its great edifying potential. Liang Qichao, for instance, “popularized” the term “New Fiction” 新小說 and strongly advocated the didactic function of

¹⁹⁵ Scholars have produced a good deal of scholarship evaluating and re-evaluating the nature and impact of the May Fourth movement in modern Chinese politics, intellectual history, and literature. These works include Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), Doleželová-Velingerová, Král, and Sanders eds., *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), just to name a few.

¹⁹⁶ Theodore Hutters, “Representation, Realism, and History: Ideologies of Realism in Modern China,” Kang and Tang eds., *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 150.

¹⁹⁷ Theodore Hutters, *Bringing the World*, 103.

literature, particularly applicable to the masses.¹⁹⁸ Seen in this light, it is not surprising that martial arts fiction, in particular Xiang's novels, was the target of harsh critiques issued by left-wing intellectuals, many of whom were major forces that promoted the May Fourth discourse.

The timing of the martial arts craze that Xiang stirred up may somewhat explain the contradiction between his aesthetically conservative approach and commercial success. The peak of popularity that Xiang's novels had – namely, the last few years of the 1920s, were the years when news reports of the Nationalist Northern Expedition 北伐 against the warlords had a strong hold in the public imagination in cities, as Perry Link notes.¹⁹⁹ That is to say, a craze for Xiang's martial arts novels that depict a state-less *jianghu* world corresponded to a state-less China in reality. This correlation between literary creation and political crisis made the latter more acute. More importantly, Xiang's novels exemplified an alternative yet powerful cultural dimension that celebrated the mobility, sensation, intensity of the enjoyable, and heterogeneity of modern experience. It stood against the mainstream project of modernization that laid great stress on rationality and standardization. With the privilege of hindsight, Xiang's stance for sensational pleasure carried special meaning in the second half of the 1920s when the May Fourth ideology gradually dominated the literary field. This stance for the unorthodox and entertainment was able to continue and achieve popularity in the following decades, partially due to the political turmoil and geographic divisions caused by the war against Japan. The following section turns to Gong Baiyu and Wang Dulu and investigates how they by different means diversified and complicated the construct of the *jianghu* world.

¹⁹⁸ Theodore Hutters has a long discussion on the “New Fiction” as a critical discourse. Theodore Hutters, *Bringing the World Home*, 103-112.

¹⁹⁹ Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies*, 22.

Modern *jianghu* continued in the late 1930s and 1940s

While Xiang Kairan strove to construct a martial arts world of anomalies, Gong Baiyu approached the writing of martial arts fiction with “realist method” 寫實之法 and achieved widely acclaimed success in Tianjin during Japanese occupation.²⁰⁰ Intended to destruct the conventions that Xiang had popularized, for instance, supernatural martial magic and unbeatable martial arts master, Gong deliberately created clown characters of chivalry and told stories of martial masters being killed by insignificant figures, so as to demolish the “absurdity” 荒誕 of the preceding martial arts novels and “awaken” young readers.²⁰¹ The *jianghu* world Gong invented resulted from this explicit intention of “reforming” the genre, which however was made attractive to readers by means of literary devices such as suspense and flashback. Gong’s urge of writing “realist” literature distinguished him from his peer martial arts writers in the late 1930s China.²⁰² One critic commented that Gong was inspired by master writers, such as French writer Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870) and Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), whose novels were translated and widely circulated in China during the late imperial and Republican era.²⁰³ With regards to the uplifting effect that Gong’s novels had upon his readers, the same

²⁰⁰ Gong Baiyu, “Preface,” *Shi'er jinqian biao* (Third Edition) (Tianjin, Tianjin shuju, 1942), quoted from Fan Boqun ed., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongsu wenxue shi*, 502.

²⁰¹ Feng Yunan, *Leisa Jinqianbiao*, 144.

²⁰² Although Gong never used “*xianshi zhuyi wenxue*” 現實主義文學 – the Chinese term for “literature of realism” to describe his literary ideal, he stated repeatedly what he wrote was “real life” 現實人生. Bai Yu, *Hua Bing: Bai Yu Zizhuan* 話柄:白羽自傳 [Object of Gossip: An Autobiography of Bai Yu] (Tianjin: Zhenghua xuexiao, 1939), 115.

²⁰³ Ye Leng, “Bai Yu ji qishu” 白羽及其書 [Bai Yu and his books], Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudie pai wenxue ziliao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派文學資料 [Materials of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies Literature] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 302.

critic also compared Gong to Scottish novelist Robert Stevenson (1850-1894) whose works such as *Treasure Island* (1883) was translated and introduced to China in the early 1930s.²⁰⁴ Gong's efforts of engaging with reality by means of fictional works also win him applauses from contemporary critics who regard him as “the pathfinder of social martial arts fiction” 社會武俠小說的開拓者。²⁰⁵ In the following I first introduce the personal history and writing background of Gong Baiyu, which sheds light on his motivation of writing martial arts fiction. I then examine the *jianghu* world he portrays in the *Twelve Coin Darts* serial and elucidate how it complicates the predecessor established by Xiang Kairan before I proceed to investigate the *jianghu* society that Wang Dulu constructed in his novels.

Gong Baiyu's real name was Gong Zhuxin 宮竹心 (1899-1966). While he used different pennames such as Ju Chang 菊厂 and Gong Youxia 宮幼霞, Bai Yu 白羽 (literally, white feather) was the pseudonym he used when he serialized the martial arts novel *Shi'er jin qian biao* 十二金錢鏢 (Twelve Coin Darts, 1938-1943) in *Yongbao* 庸報 in Tianjin and rose to fame. Born in Tianjin to a military officer father who passed away when he was nineteen, Gong Baiyu had a carefree childhood that was followed by the challenges and hardships of supporting an extended family on his own from his twenties onward. He received new-style education in Beijing while maintaining great passion for traditional vernacular literature. His interest in writing can be traced back to his teenage years when he wrote opera reviews and essays in classical Chinese modeled after Lin Shu's 林紓(1852-1924) writing. They were published in local newspapers and

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 259.

popular literary magazines such as *Libai liu* 禮拜六 (Saturday, 1914-16, 1921).²⁰⁶ In 1918 he was admitted as a government-supported student 公費生 to Beijing Normal University 北京師範大學 to pursue his literature dream, he, unfortunately, had to turn down the offer due to his family responsibilities.²⁰⁷ He then took on all sorts of jobs from early 1920s to 1928 in Beijing, such as minor officer in the army, family tutor, school teacher, postman, and government clerk. These experiences, on the one hand, enabled him to gather a rich store of material and ideas for his subsequent writing, and on the other hand, transformed him into an oversensitive and somewhat cynical person that mocked the prestigious and criticized social inequality.²⁰⁸ All the feelings he sensed while working different jobs and the struggles he experienced for survival were eventually translated into his martial arts fiction.²⁰⁹

His enthusiasm for writing continued despite his financial challenges. After the 1919 May Fourth Movement, he started to write “new fiction” 新小說, influenced particularly by Zhou Zuoren’s translations.²¹⁰ If his teenage publications flattered his vanity and encouraged his vision of pursuing a writer’s career, his encounter with the Zhou brothers in the early 1920s kindled a genuine passion to pursue a writer’s path. His “first official submission” 正經投稿 appeared in the supplement to *Chenbao* 晨報 (Morning Post) in 1921. Lu Xun introduced his

²⁰⁶ Bai Yu, *Hua Bin*, 72-74. Gong’s publications in *Saturday* were seen in Issues No. 112 (June 4, 1921) and No. 113 (June 11, 1921), quoted from Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang’an, *Zhongguo Jinxindai tongshu wenxue shi*, 501.

²⁰⁷ Feng Yunan, *Leisa Jinqianbiao*, 41.

²⁰⁸ Bai Yu, *Hua Bin*, 8.

²⁰⁹ Gong seemed to be very conscious of his metamorphosis from a naïve youth to a sophisticated adult. *Ibid*, 9-12.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 74-75.

piece to be published in the supplement. In the second half of the 1920s, although his passion about writing continued, writing to him shifted from a matter of personal interest to a means of making a living, as his financial situation grew worse. The type of work he produced also gradually changed from an “art for art’s sake” motivation to writing best-selling martial arts fiction in order to survive. He wrote his first martial arts pieces in 1927, according to a recent discovery, when he worked for Zhang Henshui 張恨水 (1895-1967), the editor of the “Mingzhu Supplement” 明珠副刊 in *Shijie ribao* 世界日報 owned by Cheng Shewo 成舍我 (1898-1991). This first attempt, the first two chapters of *Qinlin Qixia* 青林七俠 (Seven Knights-Errant of the Greenwood) was serialized in *Jin wanbao* 津晚報 before appearing as a monograph.²¹¹ The novel was completed in 1931, but did not draw much attention among either readers or critics. It was the *Twelve Coin Darts* that he serialized in the *Yongbao* that brought him fame and unexpected success.

It is worth pointing out that Gong Baiyu did not start to write martial arts fiction voluntarily. And his reluctance has influenced his literary creation. In the late 1920s he was hired by Zhang Henshui to write his first martial arts fiction: Zhang had already been a famous writer by the time; Gong admired his success and felt honored to work for him.²¹² In the late 1930s after Japan occupied Tianjin and Gong lost his job, he started to write martial arts fiction due to a combination of the need to survive and his friend, Ye Leng’s persuasion.²¹³ Ye Leng 葉冷, also

²¹¹ Ni Siting, “Gong Baiyu de diyibu wuxia xiaoshuo” 宮白羽的第一部武俠小說[Gong Baiyu’s First Martial Arts Fiction], Zhang Yuanqin and Wang Zhenliang eds., *Jinmen Lunjian Lu: Minguo beipai wuxia xiaoshuo zuojia yanjiu wenji*, 216-218.

²¹² Bai Yu, *Hua Bin*, 35.

²¹³ Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao*, 156-157.

known as Guo Yunyou 郭雲岫, was a progressive and patriotic gentry who had supported Gong financially and influenced the trajectory of his writing career. By quoting Zheng Zhenduo's 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958) critique, Ye revealed to Gong the problems of martial arts fiction, including those written by Xiang Kairan, and encouraged him to write his own by adding "new" and healthy messages and make martial arts fiction "popular but not vulgar" 通俗但不庸俗.²¹⁴ When Gong spoke to his friend Zheng Zhengyin 鄭証因, also a martial arts practitioner and fiction writer, about the plan of writing martial arts fiction together, Zheng was surprised that Gong decided to live "a life of literary beggar" 文丐生活.²¹⁵ When Gong's novel *Twelve Coin Darts* became a best-seller, his old acquaintance Wu Yunxin 吳雲心 (1906-1989), a writer, painter, and journalist of Tianjin, admitted that he "felt astonished" to find out Gong was the author.²¹⁶ Wu, from the perspective of an "old friend," disclosed that he was "not satisfied with" what Gong had achieved (by writing martial arts fiction).²¹⁷ Rather, he urged readers to re-evaluate Gong's true literary talent by reading his autobiography *Hua Bin* 話柄 (Object of Gossip, 1938) which verifies, Wu stated, Gong "is *not* a writer of martial arts fiction" (emphasis added).²¹⁸

Taking into consideration the circumstances under which Gong wrote martial arts fiction, it is not surprising that he was not fulfilled by the success of *Twelve Coin Darts*. He "lamented"

²¹⁴ Zheng Zhenduo was a left-wing intellectual and literary critic who later became the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Culture in the PRC. He published an essay titled "About Martial Arts Fiction" 論武俠小說 in 1930 and criticized the genre only created illusion for readers. Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao*, 142-144, 157-158.

²¹⁵ Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao*, 160.

²¹⁶ Bai Yu, *Hua Bin*, 1.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

that he “had to write martial arts fiction,” virtually “the lowest of the low” in the hierarchy of literary sub-genres.²¹⁹ He viewed the popularity of his works, “these banal words” using his words, as “a humiliation to the literary field of Northern China.”²²⁰ In other words, to Gong and perhaps many of his peer writers, writing martial arts fiction did not count as “artistic creation” 文藝創作; it was therefore a failure of the literary field to witness martial arts fiction became so popular. Given that Gong grew up reading chivalric tales such as *Water Margin* and *Court Cases of Judge Shi* 施公案 and had dreamt of becoming a chivalric hero as depicted in these fiction, his assessment of the literary sub-genre hierarchy and the reluctance of writing martial arts fiction was telling in revealing how divided so-called “pure” literature 純文學 and “popular” literature 通俗文學 had become by the 1930s.²²¹ Gong’s regret about and struggle with the identity of being a martial arts fiction writer continued in the 1940s, as he shifted the focus to studies of inscriptions on ancient bronze and oracle bone, seemingly one way to prove his capability of excelling in something “serious.” Although it remains controversial when he began this new area of interest and what may have motivated him, Gong appeared to have written extensively on the subject.²²²

Being mindful of the ideological stance – namely, writing literature with the intention of edifying readers, Gong invented a *jianghu* world marked by troublesome coordination between

²¹⁹ Bai Yu, “Zi Xu” 自敘 [Self-Narration], *Twelve Coin Darts*, Vol. 1, quoted from Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 263. Also, Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqianbiao*, 144.

²²⁰ Bai Yu, *Hua Bin*, 1.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 46-48.

²²² Scholarly discussion about when and why he turned to the studies of oracle bones and ancient bronze inscription, see Zhang Yuanqin, “Qiantan Gong Baiyu de jinjia yanjiu” 淺談宮白羽的金甲研究 [On Gong Baiyu’s Studies of Inscriptions on Oracle Bones and Ancient Bronze], Zhang Yuanqin and Wang Zhenliang eds., *Jinmen Lunjian Lu*, 186-197.

different players and conflicts that are often triggered by the sentiment of jealousy. With the purpose of producing “spiritual food” 精神食糧 through the “form” 外殼 of chivalric story, I argue, Gong instituted the “dark side” of martial arts world, which opened up an important space for later writers.²²³ Translated from his negative perceptions of the real world that he lived in, Gong’s *jianghu* shifts its focus away from the world of “anomaly” 奇 that Xiang Kairan had painstakingly built and the altruist heroism featured in early texts. Instead, it concentrates on the intriguing and sometimes vexing inter-personal relationship and reveals a strong sense of helplessness that martial arts masters experience being only a part of the *jianghu* operation. The *jianghu*, in Gong’s novels particularly his *Twelve Coin Darts* serial, is not so much of the heroic glory that righteous warriors represent than sets of trivial procedures players have to follow. It is hard to tell whether or not Gong’s depiction of a problematic *jianghu* had facilitated his intention of educating the readers who struggled to survive during the war against Japan. This unique approach of constructing the *jianghu* world, nevertheless, stood out in the bulk of martial arts fiction written in the late 1930s China and attracted plenty of readers. The following paragraphs focus on his *Twelve Coin Darts* and *Wulin zhengxiong ji* 武林爭雄記 (Records of Martial Competition in the Wulin, 1938-1942) and sorts out the defining elements of Gong’s *jianghu*.

First and foremost, Gong’s *jianghu* is a problematic environment within which chivalric figures need to coordinate with various players in order to achieve their goals. Centering on the mystery of who raids the insured carriage 鏢銀 that Hu Menggang 胡孟剛, an armed bodyguard 鏢師 and his team escort and how to get it back, *Twelve Coin Darts* narrates the long and torturous quest that Hu and his friend/partner Yu Jianping 俞劍平 experience for the lost insured carriage. Different from its precursors, Gong’s novel concentrates on a specific group of knights-

²²³ Feng Yunan, *Leisa Jinqianbiao*, 158.

errant – namely, *biaoshi* 鏢師 (armed bodyguard) who are trained in martial arts, tend to be ethical, and live by escorting either people or property and getting paid. The nature of the *biaoshi* occupation shapes this group of characters to be generally skilled in both martial arts and interpersonal relationship, as they need to manage well the relationship with not only martial artist peers, but also officials of the localities that they travel by. Besides all the known qualities associated with martial heroes that have been established in martial arts fiction written before the 1930s, such as courage and righteousness, *biaoshi* tend to pay special attention to reputation 名 and economic interest 利, as the former facilitates their business and the latter is the business itself. In other words, martial protagonists in Gong’s novels are often motivated to balance between business, friendship, and morality.

The first few chapters of the *Twelve Coin Darts*, for instance, exemplifies the relationship between martial fighters through a meticulously painted exchange between Yu Jianping 俞劍平, a renowned but retired martial artist and old *biaoshi*, and his friend Hu Menggang 胡孟剛, a reputable *biaoshi* still active in the *jianghu*, with regards to Hu’s request of Yu lending his name and prestige to Hu’s recently acquired business.²²⁴ Hu is introduced firstly through the piles of gifts he brings to Yu, even before he “appears” personally.²²⁵ Yu, as depicted in the novel, immediately guesses Hu’s purpose of visit is to ask for some favor, even though he has not seen Hu yet.²²⁶ The conversation between the two is consequently unfolded based on Yu’s

²²⁴ Yu’s name indicates that he is known for the swords play skills. In the novel he is portrayed as a senior martial artist who is excelled at martial forms 拳術, swords play 劍, and darts 鏢, essentially an all-around character.

²²⁵ Gong Baiyu, *Shi’er jinqian biao* 十二金錢鏢 [Twelve Coin Darts] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1987), 3.

²²⁶ Gong Baiyu, *Shi’er jinqian biao*, 4.

presumption: Yu begins with complaining about Hu being out of touch for so long and teasing that Hu now looks down upon him because he retired from the *jianghu* and resides in the remote area; Hu responds with a similar complaint about Yu moving away without telling him and so postulates that Yu may feel annoyed to see him visiting; Yu then explains that he cares for Hu and asks about Hu's business; Hu shows somewhat hesitation upon answering Yu's inquiry; Yu then immediately changes the subject and invites Hu to stay longer despite of the remoteness of his residence; Hu appears to have something urgent to express but has to hold it as Yu shifts the topic; Yu seems to have sensed Hu's change of mood and asks Hu to be candid about his intention; Hu quickly admits he comes to ask for a favor; Yu responds with a long passage listing the types of assistance he is willing to put forward, including the amount of loan he offers and the number of his disciples that Hu can use, but he will not be personally involved, Yu makes it very clear.²²⁷ Hu, however, intends to include Yu as a partner in his pending business trip of escorting two hundred thousand *tael* silvers for the government from one locality to the other.

The following six pages depict another long and yet subtle conversation between Hu and Yu with regards to Hu's true request – namely, given Yu's superb martial arts skills and seasoned reputation as well as network in the *jianghu*, Yu joins in the trip as a partner, so as to ensure the smoothness of the trip.²²⁸ Everybody puts their cards on the table during this negotiation: over a decade long friendship, the pressure from the government and the unwillingness of accepting the business on Hu's side, and the determination of withdrawing himself from the *jianghu* after retirement on Yu's side. In the end Yu meets Hu halfway: Yu agrees to lend his name and status but does not join in the trip in person, instead, he sends his

²²⁷ Ibid, 4-6.

²²⁸ Ibid, 6-11

representatives: the flag sewed with his logo, i.e., his name surrounded by twelve coin darts, and his most senior disciple 大弟子 Cheng Yue 程岳 who carries the flag.²²⁹ Opening his novel with long paragraphs of discussion between Yu and Hu as analyzed above, Gong Baiyu immediately conveys a *jianghu* world very different from that portrayed beforehand: in this *jianghu*, although friendship and the readiness to help still matter, there appears to be much more calculations of risk and benefit of chivalric acts; impulsive acts of chivalry seem to be replaced by mindful management of reputation and network. Moreover, what awaits Hu after he embarks on the trip indicates that the *jianghu* is a place of hazards. Unsurprisingly, the insured silvers 鏢銀 that Hu escorts are raided by a group of unidentified fighters. Before he can materialize the plan to find the lost silvers, he is thrown in jail due to a secret letter written by the two clerks that accompany his trip who do so to shirk responsibility.²³⁰ When Yu learns the news, he has to beg for assistance from martial figures, local gentry and officials multiple times in order to bail Hu out of the jail and search for the lost silver together. The bail, nevertheless, gives them only two weeks, with Hu's family under local official's watch as precondition.²³¹

Second, what drives narrative development of Gong's novels is no more the issue of justice or conflicts between good and evil, nor the image of "marvelous knight-errant" 奇俠 that Xiang Kairan pictured. Rather, it is the dispute between characters that advances the plot. And the dispute is often triggered or caused by some petty personal grudge. For instance, the reason why "Flying Leopard" 飛豹子 and his team raid the silvers that Hu escorts is only because Hu's team carries Yu's flag, and Flying Leopard regards Yu as his enemy. In addition, the issue lies

²²⁹ Ibid, 13-14.

²³⁰ Ibid, 89-93.

²³¹ Ibid, 110-113.

behind Flying Leopard's antagonism toward Yu is jealousy: learning martial arts from the same master, Flying Leopard thinks he is better trained than Yu and believes that he will become his master's heir and marry his master's daughter, given that he is the eldest disciple. During the graduation ceremony, unexpectedly, the master arranges the marriage between his daughter and Yu. On top of that, the master designates Yu as his heir. Flying Leopard, feeling humiliated, leaves the clan and improves his martial arts skills by learning from other masters in the following decades, aiming for revenge. Even Yu, the most respected senior figure in the *jianghu* is not perfect, as his acts are in no way altruistic. Rather, he is motivated to act by a combination of friendship and an urge to protect his thoughtfully managed reputation.

Employing devices such as suspense and flashback in story-telling, Gong's *Twelve Coin Darts* serial unquestionably won him scores of readers. More importantly, with regards to generic development, Gong directed the genre to an alternative path that builds narrative centering on a series of interrelated events – namely, plot – rather than on characters. In other words, different from Xiang Kairan's biographical narrative, Gong shifts his narrative focus onto the evolvment of the story, through which martial figures are portrayed and constructed. This way, the story continues while the plot continues, and ends when the mystery is solved: Gong was hence able to produce coherent narrative with cogent logic and sound ending, and avoided the problems that biographical martial arts novel tended to have.

Contextualized in the literary field of 1930s China, Gong's efforts to narrate cogent stories deserve special attention. Marked by the re-launch of the *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (Short Story Monthly, 1910-1920, 1921-1931) in 1921 presided by Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981) – a forceful advocate of the New Culture movement, the literary field witnessed an increasing dominance of the “New Fiction” doctrine infiltrated with western imported literary ideas and

concepts. Denouncing indigenous fictional works as “backward,” Mao Dun and his New Culture peers harshly criticized domestic tradition of vernacular literature for paying too much attention on unnecessary external details while neglecting the vividness as well as depth of character portrayal. Mao Dun and his peers disavowed the value of traditional literature, particularly the popular chapter novel 章回小說. Not surprisingly, Gong, before he decided to write martial arts fiction in the 1930s, appeared to be skeptical about attracting readers by creating appealing plots.²³² Gong seemed to have reservations about the worth of plot, as highlighting a strong story line may “relegate” the “artistic value” of the literary work, he voiced.²³³ That Gong eventually wrote martial arts novels with powerful plot resolution and turned his novels into best-sellers is telling about the aesthetic capacity and novelistic appeal of indigenous vernacular literature. Gong’s success, on the one hand, once again proved the lure of the old-style vernacular literature among ordinary readers; on the other hand, demonstrated that it was practicable to refresh indigenous literary subgenre – marital arts fiction in this case – to meet new aesthetic challenges, considering Gong’s explicit ideological stance with regards to the function of literature. By painting a problematic *jianghu* and imperfect marital heroes, Gong displaced the conventional heroic qualities that previous marital arts fiction glorified and pointed out a new path to creative imagination.

Compare to Gong Baiyu, Wang Dulu started writing martial arts fiction with much less ideological concern and judgment. Driven by a similar need of supporting the family during the war, Wang accepted the invitation to create his chivalric world, which was a means of life but

²³² Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao*, 142.

²³³ *Ibid*, 142-143.

also appeared to have preoccupied him.²³⁴ His martial arts fiction, generally speaking, keeps readers interested through a combination of vernacular language and gripping portrayal of character development. Born in 1909, Beijing, in a low-income Manchurian family Wang Dulu was given the name Baoxiang 葆祥(翔) upon birth, also known as Xiaoyu 霄羽. He lost his father at the age of seven and dropped out of school at twelve due to poverty. While working as apprentice in local stores, he in spare time sat in classes in then easily accessible Peking University and read newspapers and magazines in a local library. Critics suspect these early exposures to college lectures and popular publications laid the basis for his future writing career.²³⁵ He started to submit his writings, essays and old-style poetry, to local newspapers in his teenage years and began to serialize novels in early 1930s, but did not stir up much attention among readers. In 1937 right after he moved to Qingdao with his family looking for a sustainable life with the assistance of his uncle-in-law, the war broke out and the Japanese occupied the city. The Japanese subjugated his uncle-in-law's assets and the whole family, once again, fell in poverty. Displaced and hopeless, Wang came across an old acquaintance from Beijing who invited him to write martial arts fiction in installments for a local newspaper, which became a turning point of his life. His first attempt, *Heyue youxia zhuan* 河岳遊俠傳 (Biographies of Roaming Knights-Errant in Rivers and Mountains, 1937) marked his first usage of the pseudonym “Dulu” 度盧, indicating writing martial arts fiction and sojourning in Qingdao was only a “transitional” and temporary way of living. His following publication, i.e., *Baojian jinchai*

²³⁴ Decades after Wang's death, Wang's wife recalled that while sojourning in Qingdao where Wang wrote most of his novels, he appeared to be very quiet at home and often absent-minded. All those moments were probably when Wang was immersing in his novelist world, his wife recollected. Li Danquan, “Preface” 代序, Xu Sinian, *Wang Dulu pingzhuan*, 2-3.

²³⁵ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 287.

寶劍金釵 (literally Precious Sword, Golden Pin, 1938-39), the first part of the *Pentalogy*, nevertheless, was a huge hit, followed by the four inter-related novels written from 1938 to 1944, including the prequel *Hejing kunlun* 鶴驚崑崙 (literally Crane Startled in Kunlun, 1940-41), and three sequels *Jianqi zhuguang* 劍氣珠光 (literally Sword Qi, Pearl Light, 1939-40), *Wohu canglong* 臥虎藏龍 (literally, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 1941-42), and *Tieji yinpin* 鐵騎銀瓶 (literally, Iron Cavalry, Silver Vase, 1942-44), all together formed *The Pentalogy*.²³⁶

Although Wang published other martial arts novels and novels of romance 言情小說 as well, such as *Gucheng xinyue* 古城新月 (Old City, New Moon, 1940-41) and *Haishang hongxia* 海上紅霞 (Red Clouds over the Ocean, 1941), and they were also well received among readers, it is his martial arts fiction, in particular *The Pentalogy*, that won him the fame as one of the “Four Most Prominent Martial Arts Writers in Northern Republican China” 民國武俠小說北派四大家. After the Second World War, a Shanghai local press, i.e., Lili Publisher 勵力出版社 reprinted many of his works and made him a national name. In the early 1950s he relocated in Dalian, a city in northeastern China, as a middle school teacher and stopped writing. He was purged during the Cultural Revolution and died of Parkinson’s Disease in 1977.²³⁷

In the following I focus on his *Pentalogy* and investigate how he honed the *jianghu* world by turning it into a well-regulated space. I argue, his *jianghu* is a self-sustainable space with a set of self-imposed rules pertaining to essential qualities of knight-errantry and to the nature of the *jianghu* being an inter-connected world. Unlike Xiang Kairan’s *jianghu* that is marked by an

²³⁶ All the publication dates of Wang’s works cited in this dissertation are quoted from Xu Sinian’s research. Xu Sinian, *Wang Dulu pingzhuan*, 116-117.

²³⁷ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 289.

absence of the state, Wang's *jianghu* is constructed as an important force that the state cannot ignore in its management of local affairs; instead, the *jianghu* attracts players that represent the state and eventually includes the state as part of it. Allegorically, Wang's *jianghu* may be interpreted as a stance that emphasized the role and function of the society in the midst of national crisis facing Japanese invasion and military occupation. From the perspective of generic development, Wang's *jianghu* on the one hand, refines the realm by positioning them at junctures of multiple identities and complicating inter-personal relationships; on the other hand, does not leave complete freedom for chivalric acts as it becomes well regulated. In other words, Wang's *jianghu* reduces the space for literary autonomy and imaginary creation as it reaches what critics think of maturity. In addition, by portraying the development of his protagonists throughout segments of the *Pentalogy*, Wang turned the biographical writing that Xiang primed in the 1920s into a mode of bildungsroman. By so doing, knights-errant are painted as characters that go through a series of changes and transformations, which simultaneously institutionalized new narrative pattern and limited imaginary space in later writings.

The *jianghu* in Wang Dulu's *Pentalogy*, first and foremost, is presented as an exciting realm known for challenge and opportunity, within which knights-errant, in particular the fledgling martial characters, can realize their dreams and build their names. Li Mubai, son of a late martial master and a talented young martial artist, for instance, has dreamt multiple times of wandering in the *jianghu* while facing numerous dull moments of his daily life, either in a remote village where he was raised by his uncle's family, or in the capital city while he was waiting his other uncle to help find a job:

It will be great if I can be like my father, roaming under the heavens with one sword. But now, (I can) at most write documents in the government, which will probably wear out my youth and passion! (I will) stay in Beijing for some more days. If I still cannot find a job, I will sell my horse and roam in the *jianghu* with my sword!²³⁸

The *jianghu* glows a similar glory to Yu Jiaolong 玉嬌龍 (literally Jade Exquisite Dragon, hereafter Dragon), the female protagonist of the novels *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Iron Cavalry, Silver Vase*. Born and spoiled in a prestigious official family, Dragon has everything that a young lady dreams for: wealth, prestige, beauty, youth, and even secretly trained martial arts skills. But what attracts her the most is the freedom that the *jianghu* represents. During her first meeting with Yu Xiulian 俞秀蓮 (literally Yu Pretty Lotus, hereafter Lotus), a female martial fighter, established and experienced in the *jianghu*, Dragon expresses her longing for the *jianghu* to Yu and the consequent feeling of jealousy she projects upon Yu, as Yu travels freely in the *jianghu*.²³⁹

Interestingly, to both Li and Dragon, the *jianghu* is represented as an imagined space. A descendent of a famous actor in the *jianghu*, Li's perception of and desire for this space and the prospect of being part of it is perhaps acquired through what he may have heard from his late father, martial artist peers, friends, and acquaintances, combining with his imagination. Although growing up in a distinctively different environment, Dragon's understanding of the *jianghu* has very similar origins: what her male mentor tells her, her female teacher Jade Fox's narration, the

²³⁸ Wang Dulu, *Baojian jinchai* 寶劍金釵 [Precious Sword, Golden Pin] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1984), 51.

²³⁹ Wang Dulu, *Wohu canglong* 臥虎藏龍 [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1984), 56.

martial arts manuals 秘笈 she reads, and the *jianghu* characters she meets such as Lotus. To both Li and Lotus, the *jianghu* has become a “tradition” and a legend passed on from one generation of knights-errant to another, and in Wang’s novels in particular, the *jianghu* symbolizes a pseudo-utopian space within which protagonists can materialize their ambitions – namely, fame to Li and freedom to Dragon. From the perspective of generic development, the *jianghu* construct, by the time when Wang wrote his novels, had formulated a landmark trope of martial arts fiction and what Wang created was built upon the long “tradition” of this generic trope.

Nickname and its association with player’s martial training, personality, and reputation also add another layer of fantasy to the *jianghu* world. In Chapter Nine of *Precious Sword, Golden Pin*, there describes an exchange between Li Mubai, a young and inexperienced martial artist, and two seasoned bodyguards working for the Quanxing Biaoju 全興鏢局 (literally All Prosperity Security Company). Staying in a same inn on their way to Beijing, the two bodyguards initiate a conversation with Li by asking him his name and identity 名號. Disappointed about Li’s plain answer, the two men proudly refer to themselves as “Iron Head” 鐵腦袋 and “Better than the Monkey King” 賽悟空, instead of their real names.²⁴⁰ They then move on to talk about famous heroic figures in Beijing, including their real names, nicknames, weapon or unique martial skill associated with the nickname, and origin of the nickname.²⁴¹ These embellished nicknames and the chivalric deeds related to them make Li, a first-time traveler in the *jianghu* world, very excited. Moreover, the chivalric names and deeds that “Iron Head” and “Better than the Monkey King” list implies the philosophy that underlines Wang’s *jianghu*: the necessity and consistency of identification – namely, every player in the *jianghu* has

²⁴⁰ Wang Dulu, *Baojian jinchai*, 104.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 104-107.

a way to identify themselves or to be identified, either by martial skill, personality, or unique weapon, and the nickname commonly serves as a path to decode these identities. This feature of being recognizable and well organized of Wang's *jianghu* is also revealed through a hierarchy of chivalric heroes, including established fighters, seasoned players, mediocre warriors, and newcomers, whose status are determined by their martial arts skills and chivalric qualities. Even figures of the imperial court are included in the hierarchy of the *jianghu*.

Wang's *jianghu* is also marked by sets of unwritten rules, which function as a common ground for players to roam and act. Instructing a newcomer to recognize these rules, therefore, not only leads the fledgling martial artists to the *jianghu* arena, but also draws attention to and reinforces the rules. Dragon, for example, encounters a moment of this kind after she runs away from arranged marriage and into her desired *jianghu* with the Green Destiny sword 青冥劍 that she steals from Li and her maid as well as her cat. In an inn where Dragon stays, Lu Boxiong 魯伯雄, a seasoned martial artist, stops Dragon from beating her coachman and says: "Friend! Although you look young, I believe you must travel in the *jianghu* frequently, so you must know the rules in the *jianghu*. You cannot be so self-willed and beat people only because of one small disagreement. Otherwise, you may have trouble later!"²⁴² Unsurprisingly, Dragon does not take Lu's advice; rather, she injures him with her sword only because he has the same surname as her fiancé whom she resents.²⁴³ Dragon's unruliness causes more martial fighters to come and fight with her the following days, all of whom she easily defeats. While Dragon establishes her image as untamable and irresponsible, she does become known in the *jianghu* afterwards. For seasoned *jianghu* players, such as Li Mubai and Lotus, Dragon demonstrates great potential but needs to

²⁴² Wang Dulu, *Wohu canglong*, 208.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 310.

better ruled and regulated. The conflict between an imagined *jianghu* marked with unbound freedom that she longed for and a regulated *jianghu* that Dragon experiences forms a central plot that drives narrative to move forward in both *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Iron Cavalry, Silver Vase*.

Critics have noticed the similar personal growth happening to other protagonists of Wang's novels, such as Jiang Xiaohe 江小鶴, Li Mubai, and Dragon, and interpret this pattern of bildungsroman as an allegory of the narrative about a "youthful China" 少年中國 which demarcated a departure from the past of an "old empire" 老大帝國 and a yearning for a rejuvenated China.²⁴⁴ Consciously avoiding the allegorical reading of martial arts fiction, in particular the risk of overshadowing the textual analysis with the nationalist discourse, I redirect my attention to a recurring motif of the overlapping of personal growth and character development. The process during which Dragon is "trained" and tamed from a newcomer to the *jianghu* to an experienced knight-errant also manifests her character development. Taking into account the challenges that Xiang faced regarding biographical narrative, Wang's character development offered a refreshing perspective for generic development: on the one hand, it delineates the metamorphosis of characters following a chronological timeline and to some degree resembles the biographical writing that Xiang had instituted in the genre; on the other hand, it puts forward coherent stories of chivalric figures marked with convincing logic and powerful plot resolution. The *jianghu*, in this way, becomes a space that accommodates, inculcates, and transforms martial characters generations after generations.

Conclusion

²⁴⁴ Ko Chia Cian, *Guozu yu lishi de yinyu*, 119.

The construction and meaning of the *jianghu* in martial arts fiction and Chinese culture has long been a topic that fascinates creators, scholars, and critics. Lian Kuoru 连阔如 (1903-1971), a popular performer of folk story-telling 評書, for instance, published a collection of his oral performances entitled *Jianghu congtan* 江湖叢談 (literally, Series of Talks on the *Jianghu*). It introduces various customs, practices, and expressions used in the *jianghu* world, obscures the boundary between artistic creation and reality, and makes the *jianghu* concept even more enchanting.²⁴⁵ Some scholar traces the changes of the *jianghu* terminology and argues that it embodies the projected ideals about ethics, morality, and freedom that ancient literati held over centuries.²⁴⁶ The transformation of the *jianghu*, this scholar asserts, manifests a process of “intellectualization” 知識分子化 of the concept.²⁴⁷ Another critic approaches the *jianghu* from two correlated dimensions: “geographic space” 地理空間 and “cultural time” 文化時間, and describes it as a “folk square” 民間廣場 upon which order and disorder, good and evil, right and wrong inter-play-out as a Bakhtin Carnavalesque-like fest.²⁴⁸ In this reading, the *jianghu* is interpreted as a metaphor of the chaotic and yet vibrant era – namely, the first half of the twentieth century – China as a nation and a culture experienced.²⁴⁹

Examining the *jianghu* as a literary construct and the transformations it went through, this chapter explores the function of literature viewed and practiced in the popular reading market

²⁴⁵ Lian Kuoru, *Jianghu congtan* 江湖叢談 [Series of Talks on the *Jianghu*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).

²⁴⁶ Cai Xiang, *Xia yu yi: Wuxia xiaoshuo yu zhongguo wenhua* 俠與義: 武俠小說與中國文化 [Chivalry and Righteous: Martial Arts Fiction and Chinese Culture] (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1993), 309.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ko Chia Cian, *Guozu yu lishi de yinyu*, 125.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

and the May Fourth discourse. In the 1920s, Xiang Kairan popularized the *jianghu* as an interconnected world within which interpersonal and inter-clan relationship becomes the focus. More importantly, the absence of the state in Xiang's *jianghu* resembles the non-existence of a central government in the real world; and when the "martial arts craze" swept the country, newspapers were loaded with reports of the Nationalist Northern Expedition against the warlords. This double-layered correspondence points to the diminishing distance between fiction and reality in Xiang's novels. Xiang accomplished unprecedented success and yet regressed aesthetically. Additionally, Xiang's case underscores a celebrated sensational appeal, contrasting with the edifying function of literature that the May Fourth discourse promoted. Literature may create alternative worlds that gratify its readers. The complex meaning of Xiang's *jianghu* reveals the intricacy of the literary field in modern China.

In the late 1930s and 1940s Gong Baiyu and Wang Dulu contributed to the sophistication of the *jianghu* concept by respectively proposing a problematic *jianghu* world and perfecting the idealized *jianghu* construct. Additionally, Gong integrated the powerful storyline into the writing of martial arts fiction while Wang advanced character development through an overlapping pattern of personal growth. Their successes in two different cities by different techniques indicate the great aesthetic capacity and generic appeal that martial arts fiction held among Chinese readers. The different approaches of building and complicating the *jianghu* construct that three writers offered also suggest solutions to the technology of (popular) literary invention.

To continue discussing how modern martial arts fiction transformed and delineate the trajectory of literary autonomy, in the next chapter I turn to the interplay between historicity, fictionality, and the conception of modern "wenxue" 文學 (literature) and the growing novelistic consciousness it indicated.

Chapter 3:
Historicity, Fictionality, and the Conception of “Literature” in
Modern China, the 1920s-1940s

Every novel is an ideal plane inserted into the realms of reality. Cervantes takes pleasure in confusing the objective and the subjective, the world of the reader and the world of the book.

---- Jorge Luis Borges

Readers shall know: fiction is fiction. (Then) the writer’s responsibility will be reduced.

---- Bai Yu

Introduction

In the last few decades of its rule, i.e., roughly from 1840s to 1911, facing foreign invasions and domestic upheavals, the Qing court initiated a process of westernizing its military infrastructure, which later expanded to the realms of political institutions, social structure, and cultural production. When the notion of learning from the West became the mainstream among Chinese intellectuals, the country was opened up not only to new terms and loanwords imported from the West (which sometimes involved a detour through Japan), but also to the concepts and understandings embedded in these new words. *Wenxue* 文學, equivalent to the modern concept of “literature,” was one of these neologisms.²⁵⁰ Moreover, with its newly discovered social and political function ostensibly based on the Western experience, *wenxue* bore an unprecedented expectation to educate the masses and revitalize the country, which continued to evolve into the

²⁵⁰ Theodore Hutners, *Bringing the World Home*, 76-99.

Republican era, particularly after the New Culture Movement when the Qing-sponsored “westernization” was replaced by a widely spread urge of “modernization” among the educated.²⁵¹ *Wenxue*, among other intellectual developments, was a major vehicle for introducing western ideas, reforming indigenous traditions, and rejuvenating China from the last years of Qing through the Republican period.

Corresponding to its rejuvenated role, the semantic meaning of *wenxue* also went through a series of transformations. While the term had been part of the Chinese vocabulary for over two thousand years, the equating of *wenxue* with “literature” did not take place until seventeenth-century Jesuit translations, and became widespread after the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries’ rendition and the round-trip diffusion of the Japanese term *bungaku*.²⁵² It is not in the scope of this chapter to investigate etymologically how *wenxue* evolved into being equivalent to the modern English term “literature.”²⁵³ Rather, this chapter explores the formation and exercise of the concept of modern “literature” in China by focusing on the notion of “fictionality” and its interplay with historicity as *wenxue* transformed toward its modern shape during the first half of twentieth century. Modern Chinese martial arts fiction offers an optimal site to examine this process, due to its close relation to “old style” narrative, its aesthetic appeal among a wide range of readers, and its trans-media popularity martial arts and supernatural films and the national skill movement.

²⁵¹ Uganda Kwan, *Transformation of the Idea of Xiaoshuo in Modern China (1898-1920s)* (PhD Dissertation, SOAS: University of London, 2007), 11-12.

²⁵² Federico Masini, *Xiandai Hanyu Yuhui de Xingcheng* 現代漢語語彙的形成 [The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and its Evolution toward a National Language: The Period from 1840 to 1898] (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 1997), 250.

²⁵³ See Federico Masini, *Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and Its Evolution Toward a National Language: the Period from 1840 to 1898* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993).

I begin with a brief review of Chinese narrative tradition and the implications of talking about certain aspects of writing in pre-modern China. The dominance of historiography overshadowed the writing, reading, and understanding of “literature” and resulted in blurry boundaries between history and literature, reality and fantasy. This tradition affected parameters of literary creation, such as authorial proprietorship, creative consciousness, and literary techniques, which did not draw critics’ attention until the sixteenth and seventeenth century. I then explain the dramatic changes taking place to the discourse of literature, especially fictional writing, when Chinese intellectuals prioritized reforming *wen* or *wenxue* on the agenda of rejuvenating China. A brief review of literary criticism published in the 1910s and 1920s illustrates a growing consciousness among critics and writers of the nature and features of literary creation. It needs to be pointed out, while theoretical discussion about what is literature and how to express creative imagination appeared at the turning point of the twentieth century, the application of these ideas to literary writing was not fully achieved until decades later. Moreover, in the case of martial arts fiction, the advancement of literary autonomy was never a linear evolution. Instead, it experienced a significant setback in the 1920s but was resumed in the 1930s and onward. In other words, the changing concept of “literature” was never an isolated exercise; rather, it was a process fraught with various tensions and formed an integrated part of a broader set of events taking place in Chinese society in the first half of twentieth century.

Focusing on one of the most popular narrative tropes in martial arts fiction, i.e., *baishi xueyi*, how it was mythicized and then utilized and parodied, I select fictional works written by Buxiaosheng in the 1920s, Zhang Tianyi 張天翼 (1906-1985) in the 1930s, Geng Yuxi 耿鬱溪 (?-c.1949) and Gong Baiyu in the 1940s and scrutinize how these works were written and received. A combination of contextual and textual analysis reveals a growing consciousness

among writers of writing literature creatively and of urban readers reading critically. The changing perceptions of modern “literature” throughout this period, I demonstrate, also point to the formation of modern subjectivity in readers of urban space like Shanghai and Tianjin.

***Wen*, Historiography, and Chinese Narrative Tradition**

What we today call literature was initially inseparable from history and philosophy, particularly in ancient China. *Wen* 文, the closest equivalent of today’s *wenxue* 文學 (literature), carried a variety of meanings including “pattern,” “decoration,” and “writing” and was believed to be “born together with Heaven and Earth” in Liu Xie’s 劉勰 (465-522) forceful statement.²⁵⁴ As Stephen Owen suggests in his reading of this passage, for Liu Xie “literature thus stands as the fully realized form of a universal process of manifestation. ... The writer, instead of re-presenting the outer world, is in fact only the medium of this last phase of the world’s coming-to-be.”²⁵⁵ In other words, the universal pattern existed prior to writing and writer served merely a free channel open to the flow of the Dao. Unlike the formulation of mimesis that dominated Western aesthetic discussion since Aristotle, Chinese philosophers therefore directed their attention to the affective and didactic capacities of artworks and contemplated how they could awaken in readers the range of emotions that had motivated the composition of artworks, or to reveal to readers the universal patterns that were thought to have generated both the natural and

²⁵⁴ Yang Ming, *Wenxin diaolong jingdu* 文心雕龍精讀 [A Commentated Reading of *Wenxin Diaolong*] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2007), 23.

²⁵⁵ Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 20.

social worlds.²⁵⁶ Neither writer nor reader, in this discourse, was an active agent. And *wen*, as a vehicle of the Dao, was not a tool for creation, but a medium for transmission. A salient example that corresponds to this belief is Confucius's statement as a writer, "I transmit but do not create."²⁵⁷

Without an epic tradition such as Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in ancient Greece, nor a mythmaking generator like Indian *Ramayana*, the writing of history dominated narrative tradition in China. One indicator of the prevailing rationalism through historical and didactic writing is Confucius's (551-479 BCE) influential statement "Scholars do not talk about strange phenomena, unusual feats of strength, unnatural events, or the spirit world" 子不語怪力亂神. Scholars agree whoever inquires into the nature of Chinese narrative must begin with acknowledging "the immense importance of historiography" and "in a certain sense, 'historicism' in the total aggregate of the culture."²⁵⁸ This "quasi-religious preeminence of history within the culture," led to a lack of differentiation in the relationship between historical and fictional writing.²⁵⁹ On the one hand, written records were essentially concerned with a faithful transmission of what actually happened – namely, whether the facts in question were true. On the other hand, even when what we would now consider fictional elements crept into historical writing, they were still understood as part of the historiographical discourse, for instance, constructive imagination may take place in writing but only with the purpose to fill in gaps so as

²⁵⁶ Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 13.

²⁵⁷ De Bary and Bloom eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition, From Earliest Times to 1600* (New York: Columbia University, 1999), 50.

²⁵⁸ Andrew Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," Andrew Plaks ed., *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 311.

²⁵⁹ Andrew Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," 312.

to write a coherent history. As a result, the lines between historiography and fiction are hard to draw in the early history of Chinese narrative.²⁶⁰

Serving the core model of narration, history writing provided a set of complex techniques of structuration and characterization to achieve factual accuracy. Literary creation, such as lyric poem, as Stephen Owen points out, was “considered the embodiment of moral and historical truths.”²⁶¹ This emphasis on the moral values that any written records were meant to disseminate was not limited to elite-oriented writings; it has also been the foremost function of vernacular narrative. To the seventeenth century popular writer Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) and his contemporaries, for example, it was morality that drove the world, both the social and the natural worlds. In that sense, every human act, even the writing and publishing of vernacular narrative, had a moral significance, resulting in automatic and inevitable consequences that were widely accepted by both writers and readers. This emphasis on morality demonstrated through depictions of human acts reminds us of Confucius’s statement regarding the gentlemen 君子, “He acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions.”²⁶² This pragmatic function of written records and the specific attention to the words and acts of the character see their resonance in literary writing. As Idema observes, Chinese authors characterized their heroes “by one or two essential traits, displaying little attention for individual psychology, but rather showing their nature through their actions and conversations.”²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Cyril Birch, “Foreword,” Plaks ed., *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, xi.

²⁶¹ Stephen Owen ed.&trans., “Introduction,” *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginning to 1911* (New York: Norton, 1996), xxxix

²⁶² James Legge trans. *Confucian Analects*, http://www.cnculture.net/ebook/jing/sishu/lunyu_en/02.html (accessed on March 10, 2016).

²⁶³ W.L.Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 51.

Corresponding to the edifying and affective function of written records, biographical history – namely a history of “life as role model indebted to one’s ancestors and also influential to followers” – formed an indispensable part of the Chinese narrative tradition.²⁶⁴ The standard of this genre was established by the Grand Historian Sima Qian, who had stated in his “Autobiography” 太史公自序 that he would be guilty of the greatest crime “if he should allow the labors of the meritorious ministers, the feudal families, and the worthy officials to fall into oblivion and not be told.” He then describes his enterprise as “narrating past events and putting in order the genealogies and biographies, not undertaking what one might call authorship.”²⁶⁵ While what Sima stresses here is his role of being a transmitter instead of creator of what actually happened, that he chose the form of biography – a chronologically ordered narration – had a strong impact on the way stories of individual heroes were told. To Sima, biography may be a perfect medium to convey historical lessons and an effective vehicle to connect past and present; to writers centuries later who meant to convey a sense of historical authenticity in fictional writing, character-centered biographical writing became the perfect form in its kinship with historicity. Precisely for this reason, Sima’s “Biographies of Wondering Knights-Errant” and “Biographies of Assassins” came to be regarded as the prototypical narrative model for the Chinese chivalric tale nearly two thousand years later. The double identities that Sima established as narrator/commentator in his historical narration and the writer persona whose experiences of extreme ups and downs in real life had also become part of the history he told

²⁶⁴Susan Mann, “Writing Biography in Chinese History,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol.114, No.3 (2009), 632.

²⁶⁵ Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 130. The English translation is quoted from Anthony Yu, “History, Fiction and the Reading of Chinese Narrative,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol.10, No.1/2 (1988), 3.

offered great potential for his story-teller followers to maneuver between the historical and the fictional.

The dominance of historical writing and the emphasis on factual accuracy of narration had also affected the status of fictional writing. As Y. W. Ma has remarked on the Tang writers, “the last thing Tang story writers would like to admit is that they are authors of fantasy,” and by employing all types of narrative devices, “most Tang writers want their works to be recognized as historical documents.”²⁶⁶ This dominating historiographical discourse was perhaps also partially responsible for a neglect of authorial proprietorship among works that were not part of the official history. That Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆(1608-1661), the famous sixteenth-century commentator on the novel felt free to delete the last forty chapters of *Water Margin* in order to make it conform to his commentaries is only one silent example. The disregard for authorship in pre-modern China and hence less constraint on interpreting and re-creating texts, however, also generated room for literary innovation. The case of *Water Margin* also represents a gradual accumulation of narratives, tales of individual heroes told by storytellers, performed on stage, or found in historical sources, which eventually came together as a single coherent narrative in its final novelistic form.²⁶⁷ A growing sense of ownership of fictional works among writers hence was an indicator of the increasing recognition of literary works becoming independent from the historical corpus. There are at least two aspects through which we see the submission of literary creation to historiographical discourse started to change. One was the commercial operation exercised when thirteenth century commercial publishers sought to capitalize on the popularity

²⁶⁶ Y. W. Ma, “Fact and Fantasy in Tang Tales,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 2, No. 2(1980), 178.

²⁶⁷ This process of narrative accumulation, see Ge Liangyan, *Out of the Margins: the Rise of Chinese Vernacular Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 36-49.

of storytelling and theater in great cities, the other was the theoretical discussion about the differences between “history” and “literature” by Jin Shengtān in the sixteenth century. Jin declared in his “introduction” 讀法 to the seventy-chapter version *Water Margin* that *Shiji* “uses language to transmit events” 以文運事, whereas *Water Margin* “creates events by means of language” 因文生事 – a recognition of difference between *wen* 文 and *shi* 史.²⁶⁸ Scholars may interpret Jin’s effort of distinguishing between history and literature “on the basis of contrasting a representational view of language.”²⁶⁹ It may be also argued that Jin’s statement reveals a view of writer’s role, that is, in the former *shi*, writer transcribes “whatever that previously existed like so and so” 先有事成如此如此 while in the latter *wen*, writer “follows his or her own ideas” 順着筆性去 and may “lower the high and fill up the low” 削高補低都由我.²⁷⁰ In other words, deploying different writing devices the historian concerns himself or herself with the factual accuracy of writing, while the novelist places stress upon one’s own ideas about what to writing aiming to achieve the plausibility of imagination. To Jin, the task of the *shi* writer is more trying than that of the *wen* writer, as the former is limited by what actually happened while the latter is free to treat the material at will.

Jin Shengtān’s recognition of the distinctions between *shi* and *wen* hears its echo and is advanced by Qing historian Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801). Unlike most of his peers who focused on the empirical branch of historiographical writing, i.e. *kaozheng* 考證, Zhang’s was a unique voice in his expansive definition of history as inclusive of such works as the Six Classics

²⁶⁸ Jin Shengtān, “Du Diwu caizishu fa” 讀第五才子書法, <http://www.guoxue123.com/xiaosuo/jd/jpshz/001.htm> The English translation is quoted from Anthony Yu, “History, Fiction and the Reading of Chinese Narrative,” *CLEAR*, Vol.10, No.1/2 (1988), 7.

²⁶⁹ Anthony Yu, “History, Fiction and the Reading of Chinese Narrative,” 7.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, “Du Diwu caizishu fa,” <http://www.guoxue123.com/xiaosuo/jd/jpshz/001.htm>.

六經, stated in the famous opening line of his *Wenshi tongyi* 文史通義 (1832): “The Six Classics are all histories. The ancients did not create. The ancients never abandoned events to discourse on principle. The Six Classics set political paradigm for previous statecraft.” 六經皆史也。古人未嘗離事而言理。六經皆先王之政典也。²⁷¹ Although his statement has spurred scholarly debate on its precise meaning and rationale, it is not hard to recognize his ideal stems from a long tradition from antiquity that emphasizes the didactic function and political nature of historical writing.²⁷² From the perspective of historical writing, Zhang points out, “the ancients would not employ language and rhetoric to show off their private opinions, and, therefore, the discourse of history ought not be permitted to use untruth to fabricate something else” 古人不以文辭相矜私, 史文不可以憑虛而別構。²⁷³ Due to this non-fabricated nature of historical writing, Zhang notes, “the flaw of plagiarism in the literati and the merit of creative usage in the historian may appear similar, but they are, in fact, irreconcilably different. The plagiarist fears only that people would know of his source; the creative user, that they would be ignorant of it” 文士勦襲之弊與史家運用之功相似而實相天淵。勦襲者惟恐人知其所本, 運用者惟恐人不知其所本。²⁷⁴ While Zhang uses the literary to exalt the accuracy and authenticity of the historical, which,

²⁷¹ Zhang Xuecheng, *Wenshi tongyi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 1.

²⁷² Scholars in and outside of China have published numerous discussions and interpretations of Zhang Xuecheng’s statement, such as Yu Yingshi, *Lun Daizhen yu Zhang Xuecheng: Qingdai zhongqi xueshu sixiangshi yanjiu* 論戴震與章學誠: 清代中期學術思想史研究 [On Daizhen and Zhang Xuecheng: Studies of Mid-Qing Intellectual History] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2005). A summary of studies on Zhang Xuecheng was published in late 1980s by Huang Zhaoqiang, “Liushiwu nian lai zhi Zhang Xuecheng yanjiu” 六十五年來之章學誠研究 [Studies of Zhang Xuecheng in the Past Sixty-Five Years], *Dongwu Wenshi Xuebao* 東吳文史學報 [Dongwu Journal of Literature and History] (1988), Vol. 6, 216.

²⁷³ The translation of this sentence is quoted from Anthony Yu’s essay “History, Fiction and the Reading of Chinese Narrative,” 7-8.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

as some scholar observes, “harbors a rather low opinion of what he considers to be fictive,” his statement underscores the importance of originality to the literary creation.²⁷⁵ In other words, allusions or intertextual writing strategy play very different roles in the writings of the fictive and the historical, and their usage can only be validated in literary writing by means of creativity while in historical writing they lend validity and legitimize it.

Whereas Jin Shengtan’s commentary on the *Water Margin* marked the incipience of creative consciousness among literary critics, and Zhang Xuecheng’s discussion underlines a commonsense sort of acknowledgement of the difference between the literary and the historical by alluding to the issue of originality and the consequent validity, a systematic discussion in modern terms about the nature and features of literary creation, did not come into being until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when literary writing became part of the project of rejuvenating China. The following section turns to the issues that these critics scrutinized and how they may illuminate the nature and technology employed in writing and reading literature, martial arts fiction particularly, in the following decades.

Historicity, Fictionality, and Intertextualization in Chinese Martial Arts Fiction

Growing out of historical narrative, Chinese fiction bore the kinship between history and literature through terms like “*yeshi*” 野史 (unofficial history), “*waishi*” 外史 (unofficial history), “*yanyi*” 演義 (popular elaboration), and “*zhuan*” 傳 (biography), which all point to the dynamics between the two in the world of Chinese letters, i.e., the former as the foremost and singular model while the latter as a subset. Differentiating the domains of the historical and the fictional and how the boundaries shifted, therefore, offers an effective perspective for scholars to examine

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 7.

the emergence of novelistic consciousness. Martin Huang, for example, argues that one way to look at the development of the novel in China is to see it as a process of “dehistoricization” – namely, “a movement away from historiography,” in which each of the great novels of Ming critiqued its predecessors by dealing with a less historical and more intimate subject.

Exemplified by the changing meanings of “*yi*” 義 (personal honor) in these novels, Huang notes, as the focus narrows to the individual, the settings and concerns also shift to the private.²⁷⁶ This observation corresponds to Andrew Plaks’s remark on the distinctions between historiography and fiction, i.e. the former “deals primarily with affairs of state and *public life*” while the latter “the more individualized and intimate details of the *private lives* of figures of varying roles or status.”²⁷⁷ The course of dehistoricization, Huang proposes, can also be understood from an intertextual perspective, that is, “a novel asserts its originality by subverting the basic assumption (ideological or aesthetic) in a prior text through various intertextual strategies.... including imitation, repetition, or even direct derivation.”²⁷⁸ In so doing, “novelization is achieved largely as a result of the author’s subtle playing of the elements of historiography off against those of the popular narrative.”²⁷⁹

Also contending with the dynamics between historicity and fictionaity in Chinese narrative, Sheldon Lu gives Ming and Qing scholars much more credit in recognizing “the formal, aesthetic features” of classic novels, which Lu marks as “represent(ing) the full

²⁷⁶ Martin Huang, “Dehistoricization and Intertextualization: the Anxiety of Precedents in the Evolution of the Traditional Chinese Novel,” *CLEAR*, Vol. 12 (1990), 51.

²⁷⁷ Andrew Plaks, “Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative,” 318.

²⁷⁸ Martin Huang, “Dehistoricization and Intertextualization,” 59.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

flourishing of Chinese poetics of fiction.”²⁸⁰ It is from this perspective that Lu asserts, “Chinese poetics of narrative ... has moved from a historicity based on authentic historical events to an aesthetics that focuses on the depiction of realistic human emotions and truthful principles.”²⁸¹ Lu’s argument is disputable, as Anthony Yu’s analysis of the first chapter of Qing classic *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber, 1791) well illustrates the subtlety and intricacy of how the writer consciously played with the prominence of historiography in the world of Chinese narrative while accomplishing the novelty of the fictional writing.²⁸²

While Huang’s framework sheds light on a juxtaposed dehistoricization process and intertextual writing, his study is limited to the four Ming period masterpieces, i.e. *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演繹 (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms), *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (Water Margin), *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase), and *Xi you ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West). What about the fictional works written afterwards? Do they also demonstrate a graduate departure from the historiographical prominence by means of subversive usage of long-existing indigenous narrative elements? Or, they displayed a trajectory of changing novelistic consciousness that is not evolutionary? Additionally, with much more imported ideas pouring into China since the late nineteenth century, what may be the role of imported literary concepts in a growing literary autonomy? And, Yu’s discussion of how the writer uses rhetoric in the first chapter of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* and wrestles with the dominance of history in Chinese writing looks at the question restricted to the writer’s perspective. How was the novel received among Chinese readers? As Yu Ying-shih comments on the five-decade long Red-ology 紅學 up

²⁸⁰ Sheldon Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 10.

²⁸¹ Sheldon Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality*, 11.

²⁸² Anthony Yu, “History, Fiction and the Reading of Chinese Narrative,” 14-19.

to the 1970s when Yu wrote the article, “its chief effort was devoted to the research of the historical aspect of the novel,” exemplified partly by the “autobiographical approach.”²⁸³ Among the Red-ology studies, Cai Yuanpei’s 蔡元培 (1868-1940) *Shitouji Suoyin* 石頭記索引 (Allegories of *the Story of the Stone*, 1916) serves a salient example elucidating how deep the historical reading mentality has been grounded in the reception of fiction, even in a highly accomplished scholar.²⁸⁴ Educated both in China and the West and appointed to the Hanlin Imperial Academy and as the Minister of Education in early Republican-era, Cai read the *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a political novel that allegorizes the Qing court politics and alludes to individuals actually existed in Qing history.²⁸⁵ In other words, to Cai, the novel was a historical document of the Qing dynasty in disguise.

Although the historical mindset was prevailing in the reading of fictional works as late as the 1910s, as Cai Yuanpei’s example indicates, the discussion of the nature and features of literature, in particular fiction, surged in the first few decades of twentieth century. Dušan Anđrić’s study shows that the period between 1904 and 1915 – namely, the intermission between the “revolution in fiction” 小說界革命 advocated by Liang Qichao and the New Culture Movement promoted by the May Fourth intellectuals – saw “the birth of an indigenous theory of

²⁸³ Yu Ying-shih, “The Two Worlds of ‘Hong-lou meng,’” *Renditions* (Spring, 1974), 5-6.

²⁸⁴ Cai Yuanpei wrote this piece in 1915 and started to serialize it in the popular literary magazine *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* 小說月報 in 1916, from January to June, before he published it into a book under the same title via the Commercial Press 商務印書館 in September, 1917. The book was an immediate hit among readers and had printed for 10 editions by 1930.

²⁸⁵ Cai Yuanpei, “*Shitouji suoyin jielu*” 石頭記索引節錄 [Index to the *Dream in the Red Chamber*, excerpt.], Guo Shaoyu and Wang Wensheng eds., *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan* 中國歷代文論選 [Selected Works on Chinese Literary Theory] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 499-502. For the name lists Cai lists to illustrate his argument, see Cai Yuanpei, “*Shitouji Suoyin*,” *Cai Yuanpei Quanji* 蔡元培全集 [A Complete Collection of Cai Yuanpei] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1984), 111.

fictionality.”²⁸⁶ This new development was facilitated by extra-literary factors including the modern publishing industry in Shanghai, the wide circulation of literary journals as platforms for debates, a less emotional but more vernacular language register as the medium, and the import of an alien literary tradition through translated Western fictional works. The formulation of “a new systematized poetics of fiction” encompasses critical notions such as a “recognition of imagination in the sense of creative thought,” the “existence of an autonomous ideational world... inherent to – or generated by – fictional prose,” and “invention as the most important means of authorial expression.”²⁸⁷ In other words, rather than dwelling on paired semantic expressions such as fullness and emptiness, tangibility and intangibility, and so on, in the language of Chinese poetry criticism, Chinese critics demonstrate consciousness of approaching and *understanding the fictional writing as a cognitively, and also morally, independent discourse*. Uganda Kwan, in the same line of investigation argues that “the completion of the transformation of the idea of xiaoshuo 小說 (fiction) can be clearly seen in his (Lu Xun) use and discussion of the term ‘xiaoshuo’ in *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shulüe* 中國小說史略 (A Brief History of Chinese Fiction, 1923-24).”²⁸⁸

While both Andrš and Kwan have illuminated the theoretical explorations of the features of Chinese fiction, which formed a synthesizing discussion of literature and its nature, they limit their attention mostly to critics. The following paragraphs turn the attention to writers, in particular popular writers who tended to be well grounded in traditional Chinese education and published their writings in widely circulated newspapers and literary magazines. The martial arts

²⁸⁶ Dušan Andrš, *Formulation of Fictionality: Discourse on Fiction in China between 1904-1915* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Charles University in Prague, 2000), 6.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 14-21, 98.

²⁸⁸ Uganda Kwan, *Transformation of the Idea of Xiaoshuo in Modern China*, 226.

novel offers an important vector through which to gauge the development of literary consciousness. By focusing on this particular sub-genre and its consumption, I ask, “How were these theoretical discussions and developments translated to the writing and reading of literature from the 1920s through the 1940s?” “What kinds of narrative strategies and literary techniques were employed by writers to express their creative imagination?” “How did readers, especially the urban reader, read and understand literature?” The aforementioned scholars and their studies offer important theoretical parameters for exploring these questions. Given the overwhelming volume of martial arts fiction published during the period in question, my interpretive strategy is to choose one landmark trope that had been widely written in martial arts novels, that is, the *baishi xueyi* trope and examine how it was written and re-written in four works: Xiang Kairan’s *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, Zhang Tianyi’s *Counterfeit Marvelous Knight-Errant* 洋涇浜奇俠 (1936), Gong Baiyu’s *Stealing Skills* 偷拳 (1938), and Geng Yuxi’s *Hilarious Knights-Errant* 滑稽俠客 (1940). A set of questions direct the consequent textual analysis, including “How does a work assert its creativity by subverting or mocking the basic assumptions in a prior text?” “How do these intertextual strategies show different writers’ ideas about creative imagination?” and “What do these subversive writings (and readings) tell us about the changing conception of modern “literature?”

I argue, first, that Xiang Kairan created fictional works that essentially followed the tradition of historiographical writing and therefore obscured the boundaries between the historical and the fictional, the real and the imaginary. His multiple identities of being martial arts practitioner, writer, and officer of a martial arts bureau lent credibility to his literary creations. Readers responded to his call for “*xin*” 信 (belief) by reading his fiction as something that was real. His writing, together with the on-going promotion of martial arts as “national skill”

in the early Republican era, and the popularity of martial arts and supernatural films, was responsible for a “myth” that catalyzed the 1920s martial arts craze. Second, as a parody of Xiang’s well-liked *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant*, Zhang Tianyi’s *Counterfeit Marvelous Knight-Errant* makes fun of the mentality of reading the fictional as factual. An advocate of the tenets of the New Literature, Zhang’s work illustrates a dialogue between a recognition of and advocate for literary autonomy and the return to the dominance of historical writing in indigenous narrative tradition, both linguistically and aesthetically. Third, Gong Baiyu’s *Stealing Skills* and Geng Yuxi’s *Hilarious Knights-Errant* combined to display a collective consciousness among writers and readers of differentiating the fictional from the real and reading literature as the imaginary in the 1940s. By using modern *baihua* 白話 (vernacular language) and engaging with the *baishi xueyi* trope, Geng played with the news reports/anecdotes of students dropping out of school after reading martial arts novel back in the late 1920s and early 1930s and built his story of *Hilarious Knights-Errant* entirely upon the unclear borderlines between the real and imaginary. The self-referential elements of protagonists, motifs, and plots point to the incomparable popularity of martial arts fiction and a possibility of consciously teaching the reader how to read literature. Gong, by writing a fictional work based on a true story and a real historical figure, probes in the psychological realm of his protagonist in the *Stealing Skills* and outlines a pattern of character development by means of the *baishi xueyi* trope. This shift of narrative strategy, together with his early encounter with Lu Xun (1881-1936) and an intention to write “*xieshi wenxue*” 寫實文學 (realist literature) distinguished his works from peer martial arts writers and influenced following generations. The development of modern martial arts fiction from the 1920s to 1940s, I argue, epitomizes the trajectory of how the modern “literature” concept was perceived, distorted, and implemented at the popular level. It paints a

picture of how Chinese literature transformed into its modern mode from a perspective that is mostly omitted by existing scholarship.

Xiang Kairan's Biographical Martial Arts Fiction

Xiang Kairan became known in the popular literary field of the early Republican China as a writer with multiple identities. His writing was presented as closely related to his personal experiences. His first novel, *Liudong Waishi* 留東外史 (An Unofficial History of Studying in Japan, 1916-1922, hereafter *An Unofficial History*) that established his reputation of being a popular writer was allegedly originated from his first-hand observations while studying in Japan. Years later when he sojourned in Shanghai he restated the truthfulness of *An Unofficial History* by revealing that he “offended too many people” for writing the novel and therefore “did not receive much help” with regards to find a job upon his return to China from Japan.²⁸⁹ His works since then had appeared to blur the boundary between the fictional and the factual when weaving into experiences from his multiple identities, including writer, martial arts practitioner, martial art theorist, and political activist. Martial arts formed a central site in his life, surrounding which he created a fantasy world of martial arts fiction, produced a collection of martial arts theories, and participated in various political movements. In his writing, in particular his martial arts fiction, his identities were all blended together to create an imaginary world in which the boundaries between reality and imagination, the fictional and the real, were blurred.

Martial arts first facilitated the formation of his writer identity when he sold his non-fiction *Quanshu* 拳術 (Martial Forms, ca. 1912), a book that records different forms of martial

²⁸⁹ Xiang Kairan, quoted from Fan Boqun ed., *Minguo wuxia xiaoshuo dianji ren: Pingjiang Buxiao Sheng* 民國武俠小說奠基人——平江不肖生 [Founder of Republican-Era Martial Arts Fiction: Pingjiang buxiao sheng] (Nanjing: Nanjing chubanshe, 1994), 12.

arts, to *Changsha Daily* for serialization so as to finance his second trip to Japan in 1913.²⁹⁰ It was during that stay in Japan that he started writing *An Unofficial History* – a fictional work that is regarded as “the beginning of literature by overseas student” by contemporary critics.²⁹¹ *An Unofficial History*, published in 1916, was a controversial work. On the one hand, Xiang’s peer writers acclaimed its pseudo-realistic style which fulfilled the “*jingshi*” 警世 (warn the society) function of literary writing embraced by Chinese writers since Liang Qichao’s advocacy of “new fiction” at the beginning of twentieth century, and its vivid depiction of Japanese society – an exotic world to the Chinese reader.²⁹² Fan Yanqiao 范煙橋 (1894-1967), a senior popular writer and critic therefore categorized it as a “social novel” 社會小說.²⁹³ On the other hand, due to its self-claimed intention of “revealing the bad while overlooking the good” so as to “declare war against evil” and extensive narration of Chinese students whoring in Japan, some critic labeled it as “black curtain school” 黑幕派, a form meant to expose the dark side of society, and some called it “fiction of verbal abuse” 謾罵小說, a category that stood somewhere between

²⁹⁰ Fan Boqun, “Pingjiang buxiaosheng xiaozhuan” 平江不肖生小傳[A Brief Biography of Pingjiang buxiaosheng], Fan Boqun ed., *Jianghu yiren zhuan* 江湖異人傳[Biographies of the Unusual Heroes in the Jianghu] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2009), 1.

²⁹¹ Dong Binyue, “Liudong waishi de lishi weizhi” 《留東外史》的歷史位置 [Historical Significance of *An Unofficial History of Studying in Japan*], Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 10.

²⁹² Xu Wenying, “Minguo yilai de zhanghui xiaoshuo” 民國以來的章回小說 (1941)[Republican-era Chapter-novels], Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudiepai wenxue ziliao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派文學資料 [Materials on the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School Literature](Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 138.

²⁹³ Fan Yanqiao, “Minguo jiupai xiaoshuo shilue” 民國舊派小說史略[A Brief History of Old-Style Fiction in Republican era], Wei Shaochang ed., *Yanyang hudiepai yanjiu ziliao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派研究資料 [Research Materials on the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School] (Shanghai: wenyi chubanshe, 1984), 300-301.

“reprimand fiction” 譴責 and “black curtain” 黑幕。²⁹⁴ Despite the controversy this novel stirred, it took Xiang six years to complete all of the sequels and works that derived from the novel, which brought Xiang fame and income in the following years.²⁹⁵ In the early 1920s when introducing Yu Dafu’s 郁達夫 (1896-1945) newly published *Chenlun* 沉淪 (Sinking, 1921) – a work that built upon Yu’s experiences while studying in Japan, New Literature writer Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967) compared it with Xiang’s *An Unofficial History* which apparently had become a benchmark among works of similar theme, even though a negative example to Zhou.²⁹⁶ That Xiang could write and elaborate on a novel and its sequels for nearly ten years, although intermittently, indicates his perceptiveness of providing something unique and appealing to both readers or popular literature even as it was read by supporters of the New Literature.

Even before Xiang completed his *An Unofficial History* serial, his ability to write of things that were unique while still being fascinating attracted the attention of a shrewd publisher – namely, Shen Zhifang 沈知方 (1883-1939), the owner of the newly established World Book Company 世界書局, who invited him with competitive compensation to write tales of “immortal swordsmen and chivalric heroes” when the market was full of sentimental romances.²⁹⁷ That is reportedly how Xiang started to serialize the *Marvelous Knights-Errant* in the *Scarlet Magazine*

²⁹⁴ Zhixi, “Jinri zhongguo zhi xiaoshuojie” 今日中國之小說界(1911) [The Field of Fiction in Today’s China], Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudiepai wenxue ziliao*, 647.

²⁹⁵ Dungen, “Buxiaosheng xiaoshi” 不肖生小史, Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudiepai wenxue ziliao*, 300.

²⁹⁶ Zhou Zuoren, “Chenlun” (1922), *Ziji de yuandi* 自己的園地 [In My Own Garden] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 61.

²⁹⁷ Xu Sinian and Xiang Xiaoguang, “Xiang Kairan Nianbiao” 向愷然年表 [Chronology of Xiang Kairan], Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 335. Bao Tianxiao, *Chuanyinglou huiyi lu* 劍影樓回憶錄 [A Memoir in the Chuanying Studio] (Hongkong: Dahua chubanshe, 1971), 383-384.

紅雜誌 (1922-24), a weekly literary journal that was presided over by Shanghai senior writer and editor Yan Duhe 嚴獨鶴 (1889-1968), who worked with popular writer Zhao Tiaokuang, and produced by Shen's World Book Company. When the magazine was renamed *Red Rose* 紅玫瑰 (1924-32) two years later, Xiang continued writing weekly installments until he returned to Hunan in 1927.²⁹⁸ Almost simultaneously when he was writing *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, Xiang inaugurated episodes of *Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes* 近代俠義英雄傳 (1924) in another literary journal that Shen Zhifang produced, *Detective World* 偵探世界 (1923-24) biweekly. As Xiang continued the serializations, Shen collected the installments and published them as individual volumes, usually ten chapters in each volume, which made Xiang's works accessible to readers who missed the magazines or wished to have individual copies of Xiang's fiction. These publications brought to Shen and his company considerable profits.

Xiang's sojourn in Shanghai last from 1916 to 1927, and the period between 1922 and 1927 was a most prolific period of his writing career. It was also a period when he established his "martial artist" 武術家 identity in public through writing. Besides the novelistic installments published in both magazines mentioned above, Xiang serialized a fictional work in the form of jotting notes 筆記小說, i.e. *Lieren ouji* 獵人偶記 (Random Notes of a Hunter, 1922) in the literary journal *Xingqi* 星期 (1922-23), presided over by popular writer Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973) and produced by another influential private publisher, the Dadong Bookstore 大東書局 (1916-56), which also published several sequels and supplements of his *An Unofficial*

²⁹⁸ Xiang stopped his serialization after the 88th chapter (March 5, 1927) as he returned to Hunan. What was resumed afterwards was written by someone else. Xu Sinian and Xiang Xiaoguang, "Xiang Kairan Nianbiao," Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 339.

History in the early 1920s.²⁹⁹ He was also involved in a collection of non-fictional writings on martial arts forms and skills, i.e. *Guoji Daguan* 國技大觀 (A Grand Collection of National Skills, 1924), edited by a group of martial arts practitioners and writers such as Jiang Xiahun 姜俠魂 (1884-1964). In his long essay “A note on passing on the heritage of Chinese boxing” 拳術傳薪傳 (1923) included in the collection, he recalls how he started to learn martial arts in Japan and continued after he returned to China while interweaving various regionally well-known martial forms and relevant martial arts related anecdotes. This account together with another essay he wrote for the collection, i.e. “My personal opinions on the promotion of Chinese boxing” 我個人對於提倡拳術之意見 (1923) indicates not only his wide connections with contemporary martial artist community in and outside of China, most importantly, manifests his identity as a public martial arts advocate and theorist. This set of writings he wrote for the *Guoji Daguan* collection lends accountability to stories, short and long, he published allegedly based on personal interactions with his martial artist friends, such as *Yujue Jinhuan Lu* 玉玦金環錄 (Records of Jade Thimble and Gold Hoop, later renamed *Biographies of Great Knights-Errant in the Jianghu* 江湖大俠傳 (1924-26), serialized in the *Xinwen bao* 新聞報, *Biographies of Strange Figures in the Jianghu* 江湖異人傳 (1924) and *Biographies of Small Knights-Errant in the Jianghu* 江湖小俠傳 (1925) both published by the World Book Company. Given the variety of publications in which Xiang published or serialized his works and the efforts that Shen Zhifan advertises

²⁹⁹ It is said that the *Random Notes of a Hunter* published in Bao Tianxiao's *Xingqi* drew Shen Zhifang's attention to Xiang's unique writing topic. Bao Tianxiao, *Chuanyinglou huiyi lu*, 383.

Xiang's writing, it is not hard to imagine, at least in the mid-1920s, Xiang's name and works appeared ubiquitously in nearly every major newspaper and literary journal.³⁰⁰

Xiang's martial arts fiction sparked off a martial arts craze that crossed media and regions in late 1920s and early 1930s. It was reported, "some fifty studios produced about 240 'martial arts-magic spirit' films between 1928 and 1931, comprising about sixty percent of the total film output. Eight-five of them were released in 1929 the peak year of the craze".³⁰¹ After the film *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* was released in 1928, which was adapted from chapters of Xiang's *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant*, "over eighteen sequels were produced from 1928 to 1930 by the Mingxing Film Company 明星電影公司 (1922-37) in Shanghai alone."³⁰² The genre became so popular that Nanyang 南洋 distributors rushed in to order copies, sometimes themselves producing films.³⁰³ Comic books based on the novel were soon available on the market. In an anecdote from Zheng Yimei 鄭逸梅 (1895-1992), an active player in the Republican-era popular literary field, Xiang's *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant* was in such great demand in the Oriental Library 東方圖書館 run by the Commercial Press that the

³⁰⁰ It is said that Shen later bought out Xiang's writing and the World Book Company became the only publisher authorized to publish his works. Bao Tianxiao, *Chuanyinglou huiyi lu*, 384.

³⁰¹ Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 199.

³⁰² Kong Qingdong, "Huashuo Pingjiang Buxiaosheng" 話說平江不肖生 [On Pingjiang Buxiaosheng], Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 16.

³⁰³ Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 199.

library had to purchase new copies to replace ones that had worn-out fourteen times before the library was bombed by the Japanese army in 1932.³⁰⁴

Given the popularity of Xiang's novels, in the early 1930s newspapers reported multiple times that students dropped out of school or apprentices left their work, as a result of reading Xiang's novels, because they wanted to search for masters of martial arts skills and magic who can teach them, precisely as Xiang's novels depicted. Over seven decades later with no access to the newspapers allegedly reported the news, it is very hard to tell whether what was reported actually happened or it was what would have happened after young readers read and believed in Xiang's writing – ironically, the aforementioned difference between historical and literary writings. It is, nevertheless, clear that a narrative had been formed surrounding these reports, as left-wing intellectuals, including Lu Xun, Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰, Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, and Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 from different perspectives using the reports and criticized the novel for misleading the youth to leave home and drift out of society. These critiques later became self-evident proofs of the negative influence of martial arts genre, literature and cinema alike, in scholars' discussion.³⁰⁵

Scholars then and now have been puzzled by the popularity of Xiang's work and have attempted to decipher the phenomenon. Left-wing intellectuals in the 1930s looked at it negatively and believed that Xiang's martial arts fiction offered “an illusion” for, or “fulfilled the

³⁰⁴ Zheng Yimei, “Wuxia xiaoshuo de tongbing” 武俠小說的通病 [The common problems of martial arts fiction], Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudiepai wenxue ziliao*, 135.

³⁰⁵ For instance, Pu Feng, “Wushi niandai wuxiapian jiqi xiaoshuo yuanyuan” 五十年代武俠片及其小說淵源 [Martial Arts Films in the 1950s and Their Fiction Origin], Liang Binjun, *Tongku zhong you huanle de shidai: wushi niandai xianggang wenhua* 痛苦中有歡樂的時代:五十年代香港文化 [An Era of Pain Mixed with Joy: Hong Kong Culture in the 1950s] (Hongkong: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 20.

imagination” of the urban dwellers who “daydreamt of the arrival of a savior.”³⁰⁶ One contemporary critic acknowledges its artistic achievement and states that Xiang “turned the strange and unusual into something lively and interesting.”³⁰⁷ Another scholar asserts that the value of his work lies in that it “broke away from the old conventions of the Qing chivalric and court-case novel” and had a “purely non-state stance at its core.”³⁰⁸ While scholars may have different opinions about the reason that caused the martial arts craze, they all acclaim that something about Xiang’s writing has enabled his lasting impact as a “pioneer” that “initiated the flourishing of (modern) Chinese martial arts fiction” and “pushed the transformation of Chinese vernacular fiction from the late Qing to the Republican era.”³⁰⁹ I argue, first, Xiang’s success as a martial arts writer results from his ability to obscure the boundary between the real and the fictional, hence achieving a celebrated credibility among his readers. A combination of textual devices and contextual factors were responsible for this credibility, including the narrative devices he employed, his double identity as a martial artist and a martial arts writer, and martial arts films that essentially brought his writing to life. Second, his martial arts fiction, however, shows a reversal in terms of literary autonomy as the distance between literary and reality was diminished. His popularity and dominance in the popular reading market, therefore, caused a regression and repressed the diversity of literary creation, which was addressed and rectified by Zhang Tianyi and Gong Baiyu in the following decade.

³⁰⁶ Shen Yanbing, “Fengjian de xiaoshimin wenyi”(1933), Zheng Zhenduo, “Lun wuxia xiaoshuo”(1932), Qu Qiubai, “Tangji kede de shidai”(1931), all in Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudiepai wenxue ziliao*, 767, 770, 773.

³⁰⁷ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 119.

³⁰⁸ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxueshi*, 302.

³⁰⁹ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo rongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 111.

First, Xiang clearly followed the narrative model and techniques created by Sima Qian in his biographical writing. Simply by looking at the titles of his fictional works, readers will immediately detect Xiang's efforts to identify or at least package his fictional works as "history." These titles include

An Unofficial History of Studying in Japan 留東外史(1916-26)

Biographies of the Strange and the Unusual in the Jianghu 江湖怪異傳 (1923)³¹⁰

Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant in the Jianghu 江湖奇俠傳 (1924-27)

Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes 近代俠義英雄傳 (1924-26, 1931-32)

Biographies of Unusual Heroes in the Jianghu 江湖異人傳 (1924)

Biographies of Little Knights-Errant in the Jianghu 江湖小俠傳 (1925)

Biographies of Modern Unusual Heroes 現代奇人傳 (1929)

to name just a few. As Sheldon Lu notes in his study of the historical interpretation of Chinese fiction, Chinese biography has played an important role as "generic intersection between history and fiction," which later becomes an important genre of fiction.³¹¹ What Xiang conveyed to readers by naming his works either "unofficial history" or "biography" is that his writing was part of the long tradition of historiographical writing that had presided over the domain of the actual; readers therefore could expect to read his fiction as something real and credible. In the "preface" to the *Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes*, he begins with citing Sima Qian's "Biographies of Wandering Knights-Errant" and how Sima's writing had made those knights-

³¹⁰ Instead of biographies of human being, this book collects an array of mysterious phenomena mostly related to shaman that existed or happened in Hunan where Xiang was from. In other words, the title of the collection does not conform to its content.

³¹¹ Sheldon Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality*, 7.

errant respectable heroes “even among (illiterate) women and kids.”³¹² He also talks about Shi Nai’an’s 施耐庵 (1296-1372) *Water Margin* and restates the importance of writing biographies for heroes, because they would have disappeared unknown without the “biographies” that Shi Nai’an wrote. That is to say, Xiang, at least as indicated in this “preface,” read *Water Margin* as historical biography instead of a fictional work. Xiang then ends the piece by stating what he writes is never fabricated, and readers shall be moved reading his book of these heroes – the affective capacity of writing that ancient Chinese aesthetic philosophers emphasized.³¹³

In terms of narrative structure, Sima’s biographical writing had apparently inspired Xiang’s character-centered martial arts fiction. Generally speaking, Xiang structured his writing upon individual characters that inter-connect with each other for some type of random reason – friendship or membership in the same circle of acquaintances (most of time under the same master), for example.³¹⁴ There is no central theme or event that links protagonists with each other. Instead, most of time his book displays merely a network of heroes whose stories are narrated in chronological order. The conflict focusing on a local river between two towns in Hunan described at the beginning of *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant*, for instance, serves simply as a prologue that introduces one of the protagonists and never drives the narrative development afterwards as some scholars claim.³¹⁵ While commercially driven literary

³¹² Xiang Kairan, “Xu” 序 [Preface], *Jindai xiayi yingxiong zhuan* 近代俠義英雄傳, accessed on April 1, 2016 at the “Zhongguo zhexueshu dianzihua jihua” 中國哲學書電子化計劃 Database <http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=504746&remap=gb>

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ In Sima Qian’s “Biographies” there was even no such connections between heroes at all. It is simply because they lived around the same time therefore their stories appeared in the same chapter.

³¹⁵ In his introduction to the novel, contemporary critic Ye Hongsheng states that the conflict – an actual happening in history – links the development of the story. But, the conflict is introduced in the chapters five to eight and disappears afterwards until a brief mention in chapter one hundred and seven. In other

production in 1920s Shanghai, in particular chapter-by-chapter serialization in literary journals, may have affected Xiang's writing, this sort of narrative structure may well be a result of Xiang modeling after the long existing historiographical narrative tradition. The commentator of his installments serialized in the *Scarlet Magazine*, Xiang's peer writer Shi Jiqun 施濟群 (1896-1946) repeatedly reminds readers that Xiang's novel was to "establish biographies" 立傳 for groups of knights-errant.³¹⁶ Contemporary critic Ye Hongsheng, for example, calls Xiang's *Biographies of Modern Chivalric Heroes* "late Qing biographies of wandering knights-errant" 清末遊俠列傳³¹⁷

Second, Xiang consciously utilizes the elements of a specific time and an actual location to frame his narrative. Following the model of historical writing, Xiang often opens his novels with generic indicators that are designed to convey a sense of truthfulness. These signs include an exact time, for instance, "Spring, 1913" in the *Biographies of Small Knights-Errant in the Jianghu*, a physical location that actually exists, such as the "Little Wu Gate of Changsha" 長沙小吳門 in the first line of *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant*, or a combination of both at the beginning of *Biographies of the Strange and the Unusual in the Jianghu*, all of which are meant to set up reliable time/space parameters for the narrative that follows. Although some of his peer writers, such as Zhao Huanting 趙煥亭 (1877-1951), the "northern Zhao" in the "Southern Xiang, Northern Zhao" 南向北趙 – the two most popular martial arts writers in the

words, the narration of the story has nothing to do with the conflict. Ye Hongsheng, "Xu" 序 [Preface], Ye Hongsheng ed., *Jianghu qixia zhuan* 江湖奇俠傳 [Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant in the Jianghu] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1984), 21.

³¹⁶ Shi Jiqun comm., *Jianghu qixia zhuan* Chapter 1, in *Hong zazhi* 紅雜誌 [Scarlet Magazine] (Shanghai: World Book Company, 1922), 10.

³¹⁷ Ye Hongsheng, *Ye Hongsheng Lunjian*, 114.

Republican-era – sometimes started his narrative with an obscure time reference, for instance, “in the mid-Guangxu reign” 光緒中叶, Xiang’s attention to a time/space frame is marked with an accuracy unique among his peers. For example, in Chapter Forty of his *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant*, Xiang depicts a trip that the protagonist Zhu Zhenyue takes from Xi’an to Changde by land and water.³¹⁸ The calculations of time are coordinated with the actual time it would take to complete the trip. As Timothy Wong observes, “the mention of the specific time and the actual places where the events occur clearly increases the credibility that is one of the story’s chief concerns.”³¹⁹ This emphasis on dated occurrence or an event anchored in chronological time may find numerous precedents in the historiographical tradition, as it forms an essential condition of the historical.³²⁰ It reveals Xiang’s desire to stress the truthful nature of his writings.

Third, Xiang’s utilization of a wide range of materials contributes to the credibility of his writing, including widely known unsettled historical cases (i.e. “Cima an” 刺馬案, the assassination of Ma Xinyi 馬新貽 (1821-1870), Qing jotting notes, local hearsay, and personal experiences related to martial arts practice.³²¹ Contemporary critic Xu Sinian notes, Xiang’s narrative is characterized by “an adept operation of the ‘real’ 真 and the ‘unreal’ 假, and the

³¹⁸ Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, Vol.1, 300-311. English translation of the chapter, see Timothy Wong trans., *Stories for Saturday: Twentieth-Century Chinese Popular Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 125-142.

³¹⁹ Timothy Wong trans., *Stories for Saturday: Twentieth-Century Chinese Popular Fiction*, 90.

³²⁰ Another way to look at the time/space setting in martial arts fiction may be Bakhtin’s “chronotope” concept. Chris Hamm uses to analyze Jin Yong’s martial arts fiction. Chris Hamm, “The Marshes of Mount Liang Beyond the Sea: Jin Yong’s Early Martial Arts Fiction and Postwar Hong Kong,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 11, No.1 (1999), 102-103.

³²¹ Xu Wenying points out that some of Xiang’s stories were derived from the Qing jotting notes and folk tales. Xu Wenying, “Minguo yilai de zhanghui xiaoshuo,” quoted from Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongshu xiaoshuo lungao*, 120.

dialectic between the two.”³²² By doing this, he threaded his narrative through two “combinations:” one is the combination of “absurd words” 妄言 and “evidence” 依據, and the other “the mysterious” 神秘化 and “the quotidian” 生活化. Xu believes that this style not only demonstrates Xiang’s taste but also conforms to the regional shaman culture.³²³ I argue, however, against the backdrop of a long existing historiographical tradition, Xiang’s utilization of materials, real and imaginary, mean to blur the difference between historical writing and literary creation, so as to achieve credulity among readers.

Xiang apparently was aware of the credibility issue in his writing and, through narrator’s voice, he often called for the reader’s belief in what he wrote. One example is the story of a Daoist martial artist Su Laizi 孫癩子, the protagonist from chapters ninety-two to one hundred and four in the *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant*, which spans several decades of Su’s life and includes numerous details that cannot be explained by common sense, for example, when a teenage orphan, Su is taken by a buffalo that he looks after for a local landlord to the deep mountains where he meets his master; the buffalo runs for over 300 miles in two hours from one county to the other. His master, an aged man, sits in a rocky cave every day meditating, but has an endless food supply for Sun and is able to light and warm the cave through a beam of light coming out of his head. When meditating on top of the mountain at night, the light beam from the master’s head goes through clouds, reaches the sky, bounces back and meets with the

³²²Xu Sinian, “Xiandai chuanqi huayu de shengcheng jiqi tezheng: Xiang Kairan zuopin de huwenxing kaocha” 現代傳奇話語的生成及其特徵-向愷然作品的互文性考察[The Formation and Characteristics of A Modern Legendary Discourse: A Study of Xiang Kairan Works’ Referentiality], Zeng Pingyuan eds., *Pingjiang buxiaosheng yanjiu zhuanji*, 5.

³²³ Ibid, 5-6.

moonlight.³²⁴ After Sun learns from his master for several years, he easily destroys a bronze bell hung in a temple along with the bell house simply by reciting a spell.³²⁵ Xiang prepared his reader for what he is about to write beforehand: in the introductory paragraph to Sun's story, the narrator admits that readers with some basic science knowledge will "undoubtedly rebuke it for being ridiculous." In fact, even the narrator himself thought it preposterous when he first heard the story. As the narrator gains experience, however, he realizes that Sun's story is "absolutely not ridiculous." Instead, "what is really absurd is to judge something he or she cannot see or cannot hear as insane through an extremely naïve notion of science."³²⁶ Fan Boqun criticizes Xiang for "ask(ing) the reader to believe," which Fan states has "gone beyond the realm of supernatural fiction."³²⁷ To Fan, "equating the illusory with the real has trespassed against the rule of reading supernatural fiction."³²⁸ As a renowned contemporary literary scholar, Fan apparently has a clear understanding about what fiction is and how to read it. The key here is to comprehend that Xiang's intention, however, lies in his mention of "yueli" 閱歷 (experience), which is not juxtaposed with "kexue" 科學 (science) as an acknowledgement of the on-going social movement that cried out for "Mr. Science" 賽先生, but, more importantly, his reminding the reader of the vast narrative tradition that they may not know so as to reinforce his authority as a story teller who may have had seen a lot in real life. Xiang's narrative structure may not be as coherent as writers such as Gong Baiyu, but he never forgot to emphasize that what he wrote

³²⁴ Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, Vol.2, 91-92.

³²⁵ *Ibid*, 96-97.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, 86.

³²⁷ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 296.

³²⁸ *Ibid*.

about is “qi” 奇 (unusual, marvelous) and it is only a small bit out of an enormous corpus: at the end of chapter one hundred and seven before he stopped writing the novel and returned to Hunan to participate in another political movement, the narrator tells the reader that he does not feel up to continuing, so he would like to bid goodbye, “Given the vastness of China, (there are) endless unusual people and unusual things... wait until (I) regain my enthusiasm, I perhaps will write some more to entertain readers.”³²⁹ And, he many times managed to sustain the credibility of his *qi* by referring to retribution 因果 or karma 緣法, the concepts that had been widely circulated and accepted among readers of vernacular literature for centuries.³³⁰

One narrative device that facilitated Xiang’s authority in credible narration is the first-person narrator and his conscious confusion of the narrator and his writer persona with his martial artist identity. At the beginning of his *Biographies of Unusual Heroes in the Jianghu* – a book that records all types of special abilities that are not necessarily martial arts skills, he opens with a prelude that explains the source of his stories: “two out of ten were witnessed by my own eyes and eight out of ten were told to me by honest and reliable friends.”³³¹ “I” then moves on to talk about the three regrets, all of which express the same message, but from three different perspectives: what “I” writes is real and readers shall believe it.³³² Corresponding to this statement was the memory that Xiang’s son shared about how his father wrote: after he rose to fame due to his martial arts fiction, Xiang got to meet even more martial artists, heads of secret

³²⁹ Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, Vol.2, 200.

³³⁰ Fan Boqun comments that the usage of ideas such as “karma,” “retribution,” and “fate,” is the major flaw of Xiang Kairan’s *Jianghu qixia zhuan*. Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 297.

³³¹ Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu yiren zhuan* 江湖異人傳 [Biographies of Unusual Heroes in the Jianghu] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2009), 1.

³³² Ibid.

societies, and celebrities, who told him all sorts of unusual anecdotes, and he then accumulated what he has heard and turned them into novels.³³³ Contemporary scholars agree that Xiang's martial artist identity was important to his literary creation, either because it "enabled him to invent martial arts skills in fiction that became influential in the genre,"³³⁴ or "have supplied him with ample materials."³³⁵ While all these observations are plausible, what matters most to Xiang's success is an inter-referentiality that occurred in and out of his texts. In other words, what "I" narrate in the novel was confirmed by the real-life "experiences" of the writer's persona who is also a martial artist who knows martial arts and is part of martial artist community. The martial artist identity legitimizes the writer's writing. It is through this triangular inter-referentiality that Xiang was able to confirm, validate, and reinforce the credibility of his writing.

If readers still had some remaining doubt about the martial magic and skills that Xiang depicted, they would most probably submit themselves to the veracity of his accounts after they visited movie theaters in the late 1920s and early 1930s Shanghai. Shen Yanbing in his harsh critique of Xiang's *Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant* and the movie *Burning of Red Lotus Temple* that was adapted from Xiang's novel, described how the audience cheered when Red Lady – one of the very few female knights-errant in Xiang's novel – "flies down" and "couldn't stop shouting when they saw swordsmen shoot flying swords to each other" on screen. Throughout the movie, Shen noted, the theater was filled with rounds of enthusiastic applause

³³³ Xiang Yixue, "Huiyi fuqin yisheng" 回憶父親一生 [Recalling my father's life], Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, Vol. 2, 621.

³³⁴ Kong Qingdong, "Minguo jiupai wuxia xiaoshuo jianlun" 民國舊派武俠小說簡論 [A Brief Discussion of the Republican-Era Old School Martial Arts Fiction], in the reprint of Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu xiaoxia zhuan* 江湖小俠傳 [Biographies of Small Knights-Errant in the Jianghu] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2012), 4.

³³⁵ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 295.

and cheers.³³⁶ Shen loathed the fact that, “to them (the audience), shadow opera is not ‘opera,’ but real!”³³⁷ Shen detested the audience’s lack of enlightenment and attributed the popularity of martial arts fiction and movie to their “feudal thought”, after he discovered the “materials” of Xiang’s novel were “too historical” 的 and “very dull.”³³⁸

It is worth pointing out that what Shen condemned here is perhaps not the material nor the content of Xiang’s novel, rather, the notion of representation embedded in Xiang’s writing that is history-oriented and records “accounts” of phenomenon rather than being creative in the relationship between literature and reality as “realism” does – the imported literary concept that Shen advocated.³³⁹ In other words, as close as Xiang’s novels remained its ties with historiographical writing, what Shen sees in Xiang’s novel is its inability – the problem of traditional Chinese narrative in Shen’s view – to *create* things that do not exist in reality. What Shen did not seem to take into account, however, is the “marvelousness” 奇 branded Xiang’s novels: unrealistic and ideologically conservative it may read, it narrates the phenomena that do not exist only in their extent – precisely what Shen denounced about traditional fictional narrative, “they do not know objective observation, but only know subjective fabrication and

³³⁶ Shen Yanbing, “Fengjian de xiaoshimin wenyi” 封建的小市民文藝 [The Feudal Art of the Urban Petit Bourgeoisie] (1933), Rui Heshi ed., *Yuanyang hudie pai wenxue yanjiu ziliao*, 774.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Shen Yanbing, “Ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo” 自然主義與中國現代小說 [Naturalism and Modern Chinese Fiction], Rui Heshi eds., *Yuanyang hudie pai wenxue ziliao*, 689. Ted Hutters has insightful analysis of Shen Yanbing’s view on the inability of traditional Chinese narrative to be creative and a related utopianism in understanding western-imported realism. Theodore Hutters, “Ideologies of Realism in Modern China: The Hard Imperatives of Imported Theory,” Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang eds., *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993), 159.

name it ‘this is a work of truthfulness.’”³⁴⁰ While it is not possible to decide whether Xiang invented all stories of “marvelousness” in his novels to complement the “historical” approach of narrating, that he paired them up had surely comforted while intrigued the reader in the midst of a rapidly changing society. Moreover, what the ordinary audience saw on screen may have materialized what they read in the novel – very possibly the reason the audience went crazy shouting and cheering: what they saw in the cinema reinforced the truthfulness of what they read in novel. The audience may not have been aware that the flying swords they saw on screen was only one of the visual effects produced by special techniques and the flying female knight-errant was in fact supported by a thin wire attached to her back. The fantasy world that Xiang Kairan created, in this sense, achieved credulity in readers.

Looking back at the news reports about the drop-out young students and runaway apprentices aforementioned, it now may become clear why they would have done so: “finding masters of martial arts skills and magic and learning from them,” i.e. *baishi xueyi*, is exactly the trope that recurs again and again in Xiang’s novels; and their believed in it. The trope is composed of several key elements: first, the protagonists are usually a teenager who knows nothing about martial arts and an aged master who possesses martial arts or Daoist magic; second, the location tends to be in the deep mountains, so that knights-errant may move in the unstable zone between nature and culture, society and its margins – the temple becomes a perfect site to function as a liminal space in the genre;³⁴¹ third, the conditions that enable the trope to happen include an absence of parents, unexpected encounters between disciple and master – at least from the perspective of the disciple, as he or she cannot foresee the future like the master

³⁴⁰ Shen Yanbing, “Ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo,” 689.

³⁴¹ Zhang Zhen discusses temple’s function as a liminal space in the martial arts and supernatural movies. See Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of Silver Screen*, 242.

does, and some kind of invisible talents the disciple has and only the master sees. While Xiang may not have been the first writer to inaugurate the trope, since as early as the Tang dynasty some elements of it were seen in the tale “Nie Yinniang,” but it was Xiang who turned the trope into a landmark construct of the genre.³⁴² These elements essentially form a self-sustainable narrative that highlights “unexpectedness” and “invisibility,” all could be translated into possibilities that happen to the reader in his or her daily life. It is this possibility of crossing the boundary between the text, i.e., Xiang’s novel, and the real life that fascinated the reader.

Xiang Kairan’s martial arts novels together with his real-life advocate of martial arts pose a fascinating case that is important to not only the emergence of modern Chinese martial arts fiction, more importantly, the transformation of Chinese fictional narrative in general. As analyzed in previous section, Martin Huang argues for a process of dehistoricization as “the ‘central’ line of the evolution of the traditional Chinese novel.”³⁴³ Xiang’s writing, however, displays a very different, if not an opposite, direction of narrative development from what to expect derived from Huang’s argument. In other words, unlike what Huang traces to be “a movement away from historiography,” Xiang’s novels pattern after historical writing, obscure the borderline between the actual and the fictive, and achieve credulity among readers. With hindsight, on the one hand, it becomes clear why the conservative ideological stance these novels show had ignited so much attack from the New Culture camp; on the other than, their success on market underscores the lasting appeal of traditional narrative in the 1920s China – an era crying for modernization – and challenges the evolutionary mentality of reading and analyzing traditional narrative in scholarship.

³⁴² A brief mention of Nie Yinniang story and some elements that may have inspired Xiang’s writing, see Wang Li, *Wuxia wenhua tonglun* 武俠文化通論[A Comprehensive Discussion on Martial Arts Culture](Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005), 24-26.

³⁴³ Martin Huang, “Dehistoricization and Intertextualization,” 45.

Xiang Kairan's novels were so popular that they had become a literary and cultural phenomenon and generic landmark that inspired numerous imitations, particularly the recurring *baishi xueyi* trope. Their popularity was also translated into enormous influence in the writing and reading of martial arts fiction, which was featured with a reducing distance between literary creation and the real world and a consequently weakening of literary independence. These regression of modern "literature" conception indicated in Xiang's works was questioned and rectified by later writers such as Zhang Tianyi, Gong Baiyu, and Geng Yuxi, who achieved their goals by means of intertextual strategies and techniques such as imitation, repetition, and even derivation of the existing trope. In the following paragraphs, I turn my attention to these three writers and point out that their works assert their originality by subverting or mocking the basic assumptions set up in Xiang's texts. What they collectively displayed was a resumed consciousness of writing literature critically and innovatively while teaching their readers how to read and comprehend modern "literature."

Parodic Exaggeration and Social Critique in Zhang Tianyi's Chivalric Novel

Born into a prestigious gentry family that later fell into poverty, Zhang Tianyi had no interest in pursuing a position in higher governmental and educational circles as his siblings had. Instead, he took jobs like office clerk, school teacher, newspaper reporter and stuck to his "nonconformist path," through which he also gathered "a rich store of variegated material for his fiction."³⁴⁴ As opposed to Xiang Kairan, who mingled personal experiences with literary creation, Zhang identified himself as a modern writer whose writing displayed a strong "avoidance of

³⁴⁴ C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 213.

autobiography.”³⁴⁵ Acclaimed by Lu Xun as “one of the best writers since the New Literature Movement” and by contemporary critics as “the most brilliant short-story writer” of the decade from 1928 to 1937, Zhang stood out not so much for his aesthetic achievement as for a “moral vision” that underscored his “ironic revelation of basic human abjectness and cruelty.”³⁴⁶ With the same motivation, Zhang took part in the widely circulated martial arts genre and explored its political implications from the perspective of its social dimension and its class identification.

It was at the peak moment of the martial arts craze when Zhang Tianyi published his first story “A Dreams of Three and a Half Days” 三天半的夢 (1928). Eight years later in the “Foreword” to his novel *Counterfeit Marvelous Knight-Errant*, he revisited that moment with an opening line that explicitly stated the story was written for “Mr. Big kids,” who, Zhang acknowledged, have read a lot of immortal swordsman fiction and were also the subject of news report that young readers went to the mountains after reading martial arts novels.³⁴⁷ What the young reader may not have been aware of was that, Zhang pointed out, despite their different martial skills or magic, both swordsmen and immortals were products of “illusion” that belonged to the gentry class, and that therefore they were on the side of the landlords and protective of the latter’s interest.³⁴⁸ His story is “precisely about one of these knights-errant.”³⁴⁹ This shift to the

³⁴⁵ Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 156.

³⁴⁶ Lu Xun, quoted from Zhang Tianyi, *Zhang Tianyi Fengshi xiju xiaoshuo* 張天翼諷世喜劇小說 [Zhang Tianyi’s Fiction of Parody and Comedy] (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 2000), 1. C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 212-213.

³⁴⁷ Zhang Tianyi’s *Counterfeit Marvelous Knight-Errant* was initially serialized in the literary journal *Xiandai* 現代 [Le Contemporaines, 1932-35] from May 1933 to March 1934. In 1936 Shanghai Xinzhong Shuju 新鍾書局 published the book form supplemented with a “Tiji” 題記 that Zhang Tianyi wrote for the edition. The edition I use for analysis is a 2000 reprint. Zhang Tianyi, “Tiji” 題記 [Foreword], *Zhang Tianyi Fengshi xiju xiaoshuo*, Vol. 2, 3.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

political content of the chivalric tale may look abrupt, but it reveals Zhang's intention in writing a knight-errant story: social critique. It indeed conforms to his long-term commitment to the leftist cause and the moral engagement of his literary creation. More importantly, in the genealogy of martial arts fiction, Zhang's novel also conducts a dialogue with Xiang's novel and the martial arts craze aforementioned, during which Zhang ridiculed the credulity that Xiang painstakingly established and reinforced the significance of writing literature independent of reality.

Titled *Yangjingbang qixia* 洋涇浜奇俠, the novel takes a clear stance of mimicking and mocking Xiang Kairan's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*. "Yangjingbang" 洋涇浜 was the name of a former creek in Shanghai near the Bund that had formed the border between the British and French Concessions since the mid-nineteenth century.³⁵⁰ As the Concessions developed, both banks of the creek became busy sites where local workers communicated with English-speaking foreigners coming ashore from large ships anchored mid-river in incorrect English that was mixed with local dialect, English words, and Chinese grammar. While "yangjingbang" English may have many variations, "yangjingbang" itself became a word that has the connotation of being not authentic. By naming his novel *Yangjingbang qixia*, on the one hand, Zhang followed the pattern of Xiang's title – namely, both "yangjingbang" and "jianghu" referred to physical locations and also imaginary literary spaces where the protagonist(s) reside(s), indicating the well-thought nature of Zhang's engagement with the genre; on the other hand, he explicitly challenged and even negated the assumptions that Xiang's *Jianghu qixia zhuan* had established regarding knight-errantry and other related narrative elements such as the *baishi xueyi* trope. In

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 5.

³⁵⁰ The creek was later filled and is now the eastern part of the Yan'an Road.

other words, his knight-errant was a counterfeit of Xiang's construct. And he achieved this intent by means of exaggerated parody and satire.

As Dustin Griffin notes, when satire takes over another literary structure, it “tends not just to borrow it ... but to subvert it or (in Michael Seidel's terms) to alter its ‘potential’ and (more like a body snatcher) to direct its energies toward alien ends.”³⁵¹ Opening with the chaos and confusion among Beijing residents who speculate about the impending military actions of Japan and soon flee to Shanghai in fear of war, the story is set in a completely different time and space from Xiang's novel, i.e. urban Shanghai with the soon-to-take-place military collision between China and Japan looming in the background. It contrasts the time/space parameters – namely, a mystic past, and an unstable zone between nature and culture – that Xiang Kairan had thoughtfully constructed in his works by framing the story in the center of society and media attention, i.e. pre-war Shanghai. Moreover, it also aroused in readers a strong sense of immediacy and presence, because what Zhang depicts in his novel took place just four years ago in reality, so memory was still fresh; a total war between two countries was still pending, and so was the feeling of fear and uncertainty – in hindsight, the war broke out only a year after Zhang published the novel. Writing his martial arts novel at such a tangled moment of recent past, present, and near future – all related to the concept of time and the supposedly predictable account of narration, Zhang displays a keen doubt of Xiang Kairan's “historical-biographical” model 史傳 and the credibility of fictional narrative by naming his protagonist Shi Zhaochang 史兆昌, which literally means “history augers prosperity.” Shi Zhaochang, a twenty-five year old son of a Beijing local gentry, at this opening scene is attracted to a fat, unknown passenger who sits in the same train compartment escaping from Beijing to Shanghai. The fat man is telling a

³⁵¹ Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 3.

story of Gan Fengchi 甘風池, an allegedly skillful Qing martial artist whose biography can be found in the *Draft History of the Qing* 清史稿 (1928) and in numerous jotting notes such as the *Qing Petty Matters Anthology* 清稗類抄 (1916): simply by operating his *qi* 氣, the fat man narrates, Gan Fengchi straightens a 160-foot long silk thread like a bamboo stick on top of which sits a piece of gold nugget that weighs more than 5000 pounds. The silk stick stands so firm that even 500 strong men sent by the Yongzheng Emperor cannot move it.³⁵² Shi is so fascinated by the story that he starts to talk to the fat stranger “excitedly” and argues about the differences between the weapons used by immortal swordsman and an ordinary knight-errant while everyone else is worried about the looming war.³⁵³

The absurdity and satirical undertone of the scene is multi-layered. First, the ridiculousness of Gan Fengchi story and Shi’s excitement about it indicate Shi is utterly obsessed with martial arts stories – any suspicion the reader may have regarding Shi’s problematic nature will soon be confirmed in the following pages. Second, the contrast between Shi’s obsession with trivial details of martial arts fiction and other passengers’ concerns about the war clearly shows that Shi lives in a world that has not much to do with the reality. And third, the contradiction of his name implying the quality of history predicting the prosperity of the present and his behavior – an absolute lack of interest in anything related to “history,” “accuracy,” and “credibility” convey a strong sense of irony. Even the figure Gan Fengchi is full of controversy: which account of his martial arts skills is historically factual and which exaggerated? This opening scene questions not only the recent craze for martial arts fiction, but also the core of Xiang Kairan’s appeal, i.e. its close ties with the historical writing and numerous accounts of

³⁵² Zhang Tianyi, *Zhang Tianyi Fengshi xiju xiaoshuo*, 11.

³⁵³ *Ibid*, 12.

“marvelousness.” By so doing, Zhang Tianyi makes it clear that the issue concerns him is no more factual accuracy or the credibility of his narration, but the plausibility of his literary creation – expressed by means of intertextual writing devices including imitating, repeating, distorting, and deriving the existing generic conventions. Zhang Tianyi therefore draws a crystal clear line in the first few pages of the novel by indicating his writing as “a product of creative imagination,” as Tao Youzeng 陶佑曾(1886-1927) insightfully envisaged the nature of fiction back in 1907.³⁵⁴ Subsequently, what readers expect to do is *not* to “believe,” but to laugh and ponder as Zhang makes a mockery of the martial arts genre, in particular the *baishi xueyi* trope and the image of female knight-errant. That Shi as a protagonist imitates what is portrayed in martial arts fiction to live his life and Zhang as a writer models himself after Xiang’s works to create his literary writing forms a unique double-layered self-referentiality both in and outside the text. It not only indicates the impact of Xiang Kairan’s works on later writers, more importantly, illustrates Zhang’s self-consciousness in conversing with an questioning his literary predecessors.

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Shi Zhaochang uses martial arts fiction as “manual,” together with a self-imagined knight-errant identity to guide his daily life, including how to walk, how to judge people’s action being benign or harmful, and how to understand females.³⁵⁵ He believes he can become a great knight-errant, as soon as he finds himself a great master of martial skills and magic – a prelude to the forthcoming trope of *baishi xueyi* in the following chapters. It is ironic, however, that, unlike heroes depicted in most martial arts stories who are chivalric and altruistic, all Shi desires is fame and the benefits that fame brings, such as

³⁵⁴ Dušan Andrš, *Formulation of Fictionality*, 94.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 5, 24, 47, 35.

“being worshipped by every household in China,” and “having a lover like Shisan mei 十三妹.”³⁵⁶ The weak and the poor, for example, the Little Wang 小王, his uneducated, peasant background personal servant, is constantly subjected to his abuse.

Shi’s life in Shanghai centers on the pursuit of becoming a master of martial skills and magic, interwoven with his brief but ambiguous interaction with a woman who caters to his martial arts obsession and identifies herself as “patriotic female knight-errant” 愛國女俠 in order to swindle his money. A variety of elements that compose the *baishi xueyi* trope are seen in Shi’s pursuit: a mysterious master, several senior disciples under the supervision of the same master, magical pills, supernatural weapons, and so on. These elements, nevertheless, are presented distorted and exaggerated. For example, when Shi first meets his future martial master, the aura of the master is replaced by a feeling of disgust expressed through a big pile of yellowish nasal mucus on the floor next to the master, numerous greasy stains on the master’s gown, and eye gunk at the corner of each of his eyes.³⁵⁷ These nauseating images visualize the unreliability of the “master” who is actually a scammer and the absurdity of the idea of *baishi xueyi*.

Unsurprisingly, the “master” together with his scammer “disciples,” swindles four thousand *yuan* 元 from Shi – all the money his landlord father has given to him. It is through highly emotional conversations that Zhang Tianyi narrates the plot and delineates dynamics among different groups of characters. The dialogues that he painstakingly constructs not only make the novel accessible to ordinary readers, but also add a strong sense of theatricality to the novel.

Shi may look unbelievably naïve given the shoddy nature of the tricks he believes in, but it is the exaggerated depiction of his ludicrous behavior that highlights the satirical nature of the

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 15.

³⁵⁷ Zhang Tianyi, *Zhang Tianyi Fengshi xiju xiaoshuo*, 54-55.

story. As Lu Xun defines in his essay, satire shall be expressed by means of “concise, or even somewhat overstated language – but natural and artistic, and reveals “the real face of a group of people or one thing.”³⁵⁸ In other words, subversive it can be, satire has its moral content and “criticizes social abuse without any personal malice.”³⁵⁹ Shi, for instance, is extremely impressed by the “master” for “being immortal” 不食煙火, simply because the master does not eat in Shi’s presence. Shi also believes in the “magic pills” 金丹 and a supernatural sword the master gives him, which in fact are simply fruit candies and a pen knife, just name a few.³⁶⁰ Zhang points out the reason behind Shi’s acts: Shi’s social class. Being the elder son of a shrewd landlord, Shi had been taught since little how to multiply his fortune through predatory lending and to manipulate his reputation by using money.³⁶¹ These stipulations shape his self-identification as a member of the ruling landlord class. While his ignorance of real life makes him a laughable character, his selfishness and cold-heartedness resulting from class background frames him a detestable protagonist, ideologically and politically. His obsession with knight-errantry accentuates the problematic nature of the ruling class where he is from. On the one hand, he perceives himself as a fearless knight-errant and voluntarily gives away four thousand *yuan* to his “master” in order to acquire some nonsense martial magic; on the other hand, he guards the interests of the landlord

³⁵⁸ Lu Xun, “Shenme shi ‘fengci’?” 什麼是“諷刺”?[What is “satire”?] (1935), *Qiejieting zawen erji* 且介亭雜文二集, *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [A Complete Collection of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), Vol. 6.

³⁵⁹ Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中國小說史略 [A Brief History of Chinese Fiction], in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [A Complete Collection of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), 9: 288-289, quoted from Shih Chia-ying, *The Transformation of Satire: Satirical Fiction in Wartime Chongqing (1937-1945)*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 2014, 22.

³⁶⁰ Zhang Tianyi, *Zhang Tianyi Fengshi xiju xiaoshuo*, 59, 137.

³⁶¹ *Ibid*, 93-95.

class, refusing to give a rickshaw puller a twenty-cent fare, and beats workers that participate in a strike crying for better treatment.³⁶² The discrepancy between these two identities, behaviors, and social performances discloses a strong sense of irony towards not so much the phenomenon of “obsessing with martial arts fiction” 武俠迷 that Zhang Tianyi criticizes on the surface, as the hypocritical nature of the ruling class, i.e. the landlord.

Zhang Tianyi is merciful and allows Shi to survive after he “confronts” the Japanese bombing with a penknife that his “master” gives him. There is a stream of consciousness when Shi wakes up from fainting caused by the bombing and before he is wounded by a stray bullet: he throws out his magic sword, but it does not fly back automatically as the “master” promises; he calls for his “master,” peer “disciples,” and “Shisan mei” to save him, but nobody responds. Instead, the workers whom he had previously punched take him to the hospital and the “female immortal” 玄女娘娘 who treats him in his half-consciousness turns out to be a doctor. While he stays in the hospital, his landlord father goes to the same group of scammers asking for spiritual guidance.³⁶³ This ending and the stream of consciousness conveys layers of significations: one the one hand, it distinguishes Zhang Tianyi once again by way of artistic expression from writers such as Xiang Kairan who tied to traditional narrative strategies; on the other hand, it generates a space within which illusion and reality converse with each other while simultaneously being examined. In addition, they underpin a strong sense of irony while two worlds clash – Shi’s illusion and the “reality.” And, the absurdity continues, as his father never recognizes the problem – the unredeemable nature of his father and people like him – the ruling class. It is in this sense that Zhang Tianyi’s creation of *Counterfeit Marvelous Knight-Errant*, through satire

³⁶² Ibid, 106, 84-87.

³⁶³ Ibid, 143-148.

and fictional parody, goes beyond the intertextual engagement and adds a valuable social dimension to the critique of the genre.

Success, “Humiliation,” and Gong Baiyu’s New Literature Dream

While Zhang Tianyi mocked the *baishi xueyi* trope to exemplify his ideological stance of exposing “the upper and middle classes along prescribed Communist lines,” Gong Baiyu’s re-creation of the same trope followed Xiang Kairan’s lead in tackling the precarious line between the fictional and historical, but with an explicitly expressed agenda of guiding readers to the differences between fiction and reality.³⁶⁴ This urge of writing “realist” literature and its materialization distinguish Gong from his peer martial arts writers.³⁶⁵ His efforts of engaging with reality by means of fictional works also win him applauses from contemporary critics, such as “the pathfinder of social martial arts fiction.”³⁶⁶

Besides Gong’s life experiences which largely shaped his perceptions of interpersonal relationship and social life in the turbulent Republican era, his brief interaction with Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren in the early 1920s also played an important role in forming his understanding of writing and reading literature. Gong was then a mailman, he found the Zhous’ address and met with both of them several times, borrowing books, asking for advice on writing, translating, and how to become a writer.³⁶⁷ Lu Xun appeared to be generous with his time and insights. He

³⁶⁴ C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 213.

³⁶⁵ Although Gong never used “*xianshi zhuyi wenxue*” 現實主義文學 – the Chinese term for “literature of realism” to describe his literary ideal, he stated repeatedly what he wrote was “real life” 現實人生. This was what he meant by “realist literature.” Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 115.

³⁶⁶ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 259.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 75-80.

commented on Gong and his sister's writings and translation, answered Gong's inquiries about how to write well, and recommended their works for publication.³⁶⁸ This short interaction with Lu Xun was influential on Gong's future development not only in the way he responded to readers who wrote him when he became famous, more importantly, in his understanding of what to write, how to write, and "literary ideas" 文藝論 in general. Lu Xun taught him to differentiate himself from other writers by means of using unique perspectives and literary devices even while writing on similar topics.³⁶⁹

One edit Lu Xun makes to his short story "Li Juan ju" 釐捐局 (Tax Bureau, 1921) that describes an old egg-seller exploited by a tax officer is to replace the adjective "pathetic" 可憐的 with "then" 只是, because, Lu Xun points out, "pathetic" sounds like "a lament."³⁷⁰ The story was later published in the *Chenbao*. Gong acknowledged Lu Xun's serious attitude to literary creation and the rule of "no commenting while narrating" reflected in the edit. What is embedded in Lu Xun's edit, however, is far more sophisticated in terms of understanding a writer's role and the significations of "literature" in the context of New Culture Movement.³⁷¹ The first and foremost indication is the narrator's function and writers' identity. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, narrator played an indispensable role in traditional Chinese narrative, in particular vernacular chapter-novels, by engaging with the audience emotionally and guiding the

³⁶⁸ The interaction between Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, and Gong Baiyu was recorded in Lu Xun's diary, from July 30, 1921 to May 27, 1926. The majority of the exchanges happened in 1921, 21 times in total, once in 1922, and once in 1926. Lu Xun, *Lu Xun Riji* 魯迅日記 [Lu Xun's Diary] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 14, 424, 600.

³⁶⁹ Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 81.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 81-82.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 82.

direction of narrative development. This full-fledged function of narrator is partly influenced by oral performance tradition, and partly the commentated historical writing. And, the common sense sort of edifying and affective purpose of *wen* and a consequently passive role of readers may be responsible for this function of narrator as well. By suggesting the change, Lu Xun implies that the role of writer shall limit to representing so allow readers to respond to the writing on their own. In other words, readers do not need to be told the old man is “pathetic” in this case. Instead, readers are expected to figure it out by themselves – that is, readers’ autonomous engagement with the writing. Moreover, the change of wording indicates the distance and emotional detachment that Lu Xun believes a writer should maintain with respect to his or her writing. Related to this edit, Lu Xun shares with Gong Baiyu that among all his works, he was most pleased with “Kong Yiji” 孔乙己 (1919) because it is “relatively calm.”³⁷² Lu Xun’s view on writing literature revealed in this edit appears to echo Shen Yanbing’s advocate for fictional works of “objective observation” instead of “subjective fabrication.”³⁷³ The notion of representation that both Lu Xun and Shen Yanbing promote is “objective description” – the essence and the appeal of the imported literary realism.³⁷⁴ In Shen’s view, unable to depict “objectively” is the fundamental problem of literary technique seen in the “new-style” Chinese fiction.

Although Gong’s interaction with Lu Xun was brief, contemporary critics believe that Lu Xun inspired the future development of Gong’s writing. Some scholar states that a similar comedown from middle-class to poverty and the feeling of frustration have motivated Gong to

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Shen Yanbing, “Ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo,” 689.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

depict the dark side of society, just like Lu Xun.³⁷⁵ Some notes that due to Lu Xun's introduction to New Literature, Gong brings in the martial arts fiction ideas of "new literary thought."³⁷⁶ The exchange with Lu Xun, however, did not last long. In 1928 Gong moved to Tianjin from Beijing searching for a better job and worked as news reporter, government clerk, and newspaper editor. In roughly ten years from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s, he managed to materialize his dream of "artistic creation" 文藝創作 and published collections of new-style prose, essays, and short stories, including a collection of short stories titled *Pian Yu* 片羽 (Pieces of Feathers), an autobiographical novel entitled *Xin Ji* 心蹟 (Heart Traces), a memoir *Hua Bing* 話柄 (Object of Gossip), two collections of prose 小品文 titled *Diaochong Xiaocao* 雕蟲小草 (Insignificant Pieces) and *Dengxia Xianshu* 燈下閒書 (Leisure Writing under Lamplight), a historical novel *Sanguo Huaben* 三國話本 (A Vernacular Three Kingdoms), and a couple of collections of comic stories and social novels.³⁷⁷

The way that Gong rose to fame as a martial arts writer and his perception of this success illuminate the detour trajectory of the conception of modern "literature" in the realm of indigenous vernacular literature, in particular with regards to avoiding autobiography in narrative and a conscious emphasis on the plausibility of creative imagination. Gong began writing *Twelve Coin Darts* with his friend Zheng Zhengyin 鄭証因 (1900-1960), simply because he knew nothing about martial arts while Zheng was a martial arts practitioner and allegedly

³⁷⁵ Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang'an, in Fan Boqun ed., *Zhongguo Jinxindai tongsu wenxue shi*, 498, 500.

³⁷⁶ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxue shi*, 477.

³⁷⁷ Ye Leng, "Bai Yu ji Qishu," Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 123-126. I have been searching for these books in the past few years, but never seen any of them, except for his memoir *Hua Bin*, nor do I know when exactly they were published.

knowledgeable about martial artists community.³⁷⁸ Zheng himself was also a prolific martial arts writer and very popular in the 1940s, known for his portrayals of masculine martial arts fights. The collaboration between Gong and Zheng happened only for the first two chapters, because Zheng found another opportunity to support his family and left the project. The novel was being serialized in *Yongbao*, so Gong had to continue it. He was not confident with depicting martial skills and fight scenes, he later admitted, so he “paused” the fight planned to take place in the story, “fabricated” a pair of clownish characters, and introduced a father and a daughter characters initially designed for later chapters, to start a new narrative line.³⁷⁹ This abrupt structural change appears as a flaw to critics, but unexpectedly won readers’ applause, due to Gong’s vivid description of the *qing* 情 (sentiment) between the female knights-errant and her male partner.³⁸⁰ The two shifts that Gong experienced – namely, from writing with the assistance of a martial arts practitioner to writing on his own, and the spontaneous adjustment of the narrative – reveal the transitioning of the mentality and skills of writing and reading martial arts fiction in late 1930s. As discussed in previous sections, the first generation writers labeled as modern martial arts writers largely followed a historiographical narrative model and tended to have strong self-involvement in their writing one way or another. Their works were often claimed to have originated from their personal experiences, such as Yao Min’ai’s 姚民哀 (1893-1938) fiction of secret society 黨會小說, said to have originated in his connections with various

³⁷⁸ Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 116. In the “Postscript”後記 to the book print (first edition) of *Twelve Coin Darts*, Gong also thanked his “old friend Zheng Zhengyin who masters martial arts and is good at writing” for working with him together on the novel. Baiyu, “Houji” 後記 [Postscript], *Shi'er jinqian biao* 十二金錢鏢 [Twelve Coin Darts] (Tianjin: Zhenghua shuju, 1938), 35.

³⁷⁹ Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 114-115.

³⁸⁰ Chapter Four discusses the theme of *qing* 情 in modern martial arts fiction. For critique on the flawed structure, see Fan Boqun, 481. For readers’ approval, see Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 116.

underground triads, and Xiang Kairan's biographical martial arts fiction that benefitted from his acquaintance with martial artists in the early Republican era, as stated in advertisements for their work. Personal involvement was a key element that legitimized and provided resources for their writing. Readers were expected to connect what they read with what they learned about the writer. That Gong succeeded as a martial arts writer in late 1930s without pre-existing knowledge about or connections with martial arts indicated a new development in the production and consumption of this sub-genre in particular and of modern literature in general. That is to say, while writers such as Zheng Zhengyin appealed to readers by means of hands-on robust fight scenes, creators like Gong Baiyu won out with skillful narration and unique plotting. The diversity of generic styles not only revealed the flexibility of literary creation, but also generated important aesthetic space for the genre to continue its development. That writers as well as readers were concerned about plausibility instead of credibility of narration, as Gong's case illustrates, also illuminated an ultimate departure and independence of literary discourse from the dominance of historiography.

In Gong's view, writing martial arts fiction was consequent on a combination of reasons including the pressure to survive, limitation of job opportunities, and censorship under the Japanese occupation. Never giving up his literary ideals, Gong translated his reluctance to write martial arts fiction into all of his writings by intentionally mocking and de-constructing the assumptions that Xiang Kairan had established in prior texts, including satirizing images of super-powerful martial masters and de-mythicizing martial arts learning. By so doing, he intended ideologically to awaken readers to the absurdity of their "martial arts obsession" 武俠迷 and the misleading messages conveyed through martial arts fiction in general. Pedagogically, he was perhaps wishing to guide and teach his readers the nature of fiction and the importance of

differentiating fiction from reality. He achieved this educational purpose through a variety of intertextual strategies, especially imitation, distortion, and subversion of proto-characters and typical storylines that had been set up in earlier texts. More importantly, he resumed and reinforced the literary autonomy that writers established as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. Besides the *Twelve Coin Darts*, *Stealing Skills* is a salient example that elucidates his fictional parody of the *baishi xueyi* trope.

Stealing Skills was first published in Tianjin, 1938, and was reprinted by several publishers under different titles.³⁸¹ It is one of the shortest among Gong's martial arts novels, but highly regarded by critics due to its neatly designed narrative structure and unique plotting.³⁸² The novel was based on a true story of an actual historical figure, i.e. Yang Luchan 楊露蟬 (1799-1872), the founder of Yang-style Taichi 楊氏太極 and had been widely circulated, so much so that it has become part of the narrative about how Yang-style taichi came about. It is not the intention of this chapter to differentiate how truthful Gong's writing is compare to Yang's personal history. Rather, by examining the novel from the perspective of intertextualization, the following paragraphs outline Gong's consciousness of literary creation, the challenges involved and his solutions, as well as the literary devices he employed and the aesthetic effect that he successfully accomplished through re-writing the *baishi xueyi* trope.

³⁸¹ The first edition was published by Tianjin Zhenghua Publisher 正華出版部. It was also serialized in *Osaka Daily (Chinese)* 華文大阪每日—a Japanese literary magazine (in Chinese) published in Japan but distributed in Japan-occupied China in 1943. After WWII Shanghai Lili Publisher 勵力出版社 reprinted it under the title *Jingchan Daoji* 驚蟬盜技 [Startled Cicada Stealing Skills]. It was reprinted in Hong Kong again in 1950s titled *Taijiyang Sheming Touquan* 太極楊捨命偷拳 [Taichi Yang Stealing Skills Risking his Life]. A movie titled *Shengai* 神丐 (Super Panhandler, dir. Gao Tianhong) was adapted from the novel in 1987.

³⁸² Ye Hongsheng, “Baiyu fenjuan shuoming” 白羽分卷說明 [Words on the Volume of Baiyu], Baiyu, *Touquan* [Stealing Skills] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1984), 94; Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 272.

Gong appeared to be aware of the boundary between historical writing and literary creation. In the “Epilogue” 後記 of the novel, he explains he never wanted to write “factual records” 紀實之作, because it did not entail the freedom of invention that “fictional works” do. As a matter of fact, he notes, his previous “martial arts fiction was all fictional,” except for the only two “*zhuan*” 傳 (biographies) – namely, *Stealing Skills* and *Ziwu Yuanyangyue* 子午鴛鴦鉞 (Ziwu Mandarin Halberd) which was a result of four-year-long constant requests from a friend.³⁸³ Gong includes a two-page long “record” of what his friend told him about the “history” of Yang Luchan at the end of his over 250-page novel. The juxtaposition of two versions of Yang Luchan’s story, i.e. the supposedly historical account and the deliberately elaborated fiction, in a quite straightforward manner shows the difference between factual narrative and imaginary creation. It also directly speaks to the “two worlds” theory, i.e. “the world of reality” and “the world of ideas” depicted in literature that literary critics had discussed back in the mid-1910s. In other words, by the time when Gong composed *Stealing Skills* in late 1930s, distinguishing the two worlds and understanding the virtue of literary creation for its imaginary features was no longer a question to writers like Gong. This public acknowledgement of the difference between the fictional and the factual also made it possible for the reader to occupy the lofty position of one who speculates on the action and temporarily indulges in imaginative play.

Stealing Skills tells the story of Yang Luchan, after being rejected by the taichi master Chen Qingping multiple times, disguises himself as a mute servant working in Chen’s household, secretly learns Chen’s skills and eventually becomes a master himself. It is a typical *baishi xueyi* story, but does not include any supernatural element as Xiang’s does. Instead, it negates and subverts the fundamentals that constitute Xiang’s *baishi xueyi* establishment. First and foremost,

³⁸³ Baiyu, *Touquan*, 253.

by deconstructing the key elements of unexpectedness and inexplicability that underscores Xiang's convention, *Stealing Skills* is marked by its logical storyline based in specifics. For example, instead of meeting a mysterious immortal master by accident, Yang is introduced to martial arts by his father who hires a martial teacher to instruct him, hoping it may strengthen Yang's physical body. Later, Yang embarks on the journey of searching for a (better) master on his second teacher's advice. The setting of the story, unlike Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-errant*, is a secular and peaceful social environment, i.e. the village where Master Chen lives and Chen's household, instead of some unstable zone between nature and society, or a liminal and marginal space like a deserted temple. Second, related to the negation of the "qi" 奇 (unusual) meaning, Gong conveys a strong sense of logic and rationality in his story. Every progress that Yang makes in martial arts learning from Master Chen is explained or clarified. Rather than arranging some deus ex machina device to create mythical figures or reasons that facilitate Yang's advancement, Gong narrates a series of events that contribute to Yang's eventual achievement. How Yang handles interpersonal relationships with his master, peer disciples, and peer servants forms a central site for character development.

It is worth pointing out that Gong managed to keep his readers curious about the story by deploying the device of suspense. In other words, his "realist" remodeling of martial arts fiction did not harm nor reduce the appeal of his novel. The first five chapters narrate the origin and reason behind Yang's determination of asking Master Chen to teach him taichi. The twist of narration takes place when Master Chen rudely rejects him upon his first visit. He extends his stay and waits for another chance to talk to Master Chen, hoping Chen would change his mind, unfortunately, he receives nothing but hostile rejections. He later realizes the episode happens on the way to meet Master Chen is the reason: he confronts a young man who knocks off a vendor

on the street but refuses to either apologize or compensate. His intervention irritates the young man who turns out to be Master Chen's favorite disciple and bad-mouths him before he even meets the master. This revelation essentially breaks down all the expectations readers might have related to the trope: the master does not have the supernatural ability to see through his potential, rather, the master is blinded and misjudges him based on nonsense; the challenge of searching for a master lies not in his "invisible talent" 慧根, rather, some nuance interpersonal relationship. Chapter Five ends with Yang's determination charged with anger and frustration before he leaves Chen village: "Master Chen, do not look down on me! I will find a good master for myself. ... I will return in ten years!"³⁸⁴ The following chapter, however, does not begin with Yang's return. Instead, Gong skips to five years later and introduces a deaf and dumb young beggar, who sleeps under Chen's roof at night and sweeps Chen's front yard in the morning. Nobody knows his background. Master Chen eventually takes him in as a worker; partly touched by his voluntary hard work, partly due to sympathy. Readers may ponder over this beggar's true identity for a moment, but are soon drawn to the misfortunes happen to Master Chen one after another: slander, sickness, assassination, and arson, plotted by his enemy. The beggar remains loyal and saves Chen again and again. The mystery of beggar's identity continues until nearly the end of the novel when he can't help shouting out applause while peeping at Chen's martial arts performance. The revelation that the beggar is Yang Luchan in disguise for so many years in order to learn martial arts is crucial and fundamentally subversive to the *baishi xueyi* trope. It derides nearly every element included in the trope and creates a sustainable narrative climax that wins readers' involvement and curiosity while also materializing a sense of poetic justice that

³⁸⁴ Baiyu, *Touquan*, 55.

Yang, as a positive character, is eventually taught and treated by Master Chen in a way that he deserves.

All aforementioned narrative subversions are manifestations of Gong's intention of "breaking up the prior conventions" and writing fictional characters "just like people in real life." His ultimate goal is to teach Chinese readers, "readers shall know: fiction is fiction. The writer's responsibility is thus reduced."³⁸⁵ It is hard to know how individual readers responded to Gong's writing and how much they appreciated his intention, as a matter of fact, his works were very well received and people even wrote couplets about it for Chinese New Year.³⁸⁶ From the reader's perspective, reading a novel hence does not involve the continuous activity of negating its objective correspondence to reality. Rather, this awareness conducts the reader to a greater responsiveness to and involvement in the text that concerned itself not so much the "reality" of the story as the plausibility of the narration.

Stealing Skills stirred up another wave of "Bai Yu Fever" 白羽熱 in Beijing and Tianjin after the publication of *Twelve Coin Darts*. Peer popular writers such as Zheng Zhengyin and Liu Yunruo 劉雲若 (1903-1950) wrote to Gong and congratulated him on "creating something new in the somewhat dull martial arts genre."³⁸⁷ Although Gong himself did not value his success as a martial arts writer, his awareness of writing the fictional independent of real life while employing devices such as suspense and flashback makes his works much more conceivable to readers. His novels also offered a salient example that crossed the man-made "great divide" between "pure" literature advocated by New Culture intellectuals such as Lu Xun and "popular"

³⁸⁵ Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 114-117.

³⁸⁶ Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao*, 8.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 201.

literature practiced by Xiang Kairan and other writers – exactly what Zhang Henshui desired but was not able to achieve.³⁸⁸

Hilarious Knights-Errant and a Farcical Re-Imagination of Martial Arts Obsession

The last fictional work this chapter analyzes is Geng Xiaodi's 耿小的 novel *Huaji Xiake* 滑稽俠客 (Hilarious Knights-Errant, 1940), a farcical re-writing of the *baishi xueyi* trope that is built entirely upon the news reports in the late 1920s and early 1930s about students dropping out of school and looking for masters of martial arts and magic.³⁸⁹ Unlike Zhang Tianyi and Gong Baiyua who explicitly stated their critique of and dissatisfaction with the “martial arts obsession” phenomenon, Geng is implicit with regards to his attitude toward the genre and the phenomenon. His imagination of what happens when young students drop out of school and looks for martial masters – essentially what the story is about – materializes the news report/anecdote, and his farcical treatment of the story not only overturns the generic assumptions that Xiang's novel has established, but also achieves highly comic effect. More importantly, given the wide currency of these news reports among critics, writers, and readers, Geng's employment of such a hearsay about the consumption of literature and its impact generated an imaginary space that, on the one hand invited readers' participation in joint creation while allowing readers to temporarily indulge in imaginative play on the other. In this sense, the author was free of the responsibility of dealing

³⁸⁸ Zhang Henshui, “Wuxia xiaoshuo de wojian” 武俠小說的我見 (1949) [My Views on Martial Arts Fiction], Zhang Henshui, *Xiezuozhengyayihuiyi* 寫作生涯回憶 [Recollections of My Writing Career] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1981), 55-70.

³⁸⁹ I have no information about how the novel was published and received. The copy of the novel that I use for textual analysis is the 1986 reprint by Baihua wenyi chubanshe under the same title as part of the publisher's serial of “Materials for Modern Popular Fiction Studies” 現代通俗小說研究資料. Geng Xiaodi, *Huaji Xiake* 滑稽俠客 [Hilarious Knights-Errant] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1986).

with the ambivalence between fiction and reality, and the reader was dissuaded from believing the literal truth of the literary presentation and instead led to admire its verisimilitude and to extend credit to buy into the inventive game. Such a “flexible” mental state is “the sine qua non of modern subjectivity,” as one scholar has insightfully pointed out.³⁹⁰

Geng Xiaodi’s real name is Geng Yuxi 耿鬱溪 (1907?-ca. 1949). He was a prolific writer whose works were widely circulated in the late 1930s through the late 1940s northern China in popular journals such as weekly pictorial *Liyan huakan* 立言畫刊 (Liyan Pictorial, 1938-1945) and the Japanese presided literary journal *Qilin* 麒麟 (1941-1945). He published numerous humorous pieces and was compared to Lao She 老舍 (1899-1966) and Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895-1976).³⁹¹ His works unfortunately soon became marginalized and eventually neglected after the political and ideological changeover after 1949. Knowledge about him and his works therefore is limited, and little is known of him except that he was a graduate of what is now called Beijing Normal University, good at traditional painting and calligraphy, active in the popular literary field in Japanese occupied north China, Beijing in particular, and known for comic writings that concerned social life. Among the few works attributed to Geng is *Hilarious Knights-Errant*, a four-chapter story that narrates a series of farcical experiences of two Beijing college students who drop out of school due to their admiration of knight-errantry and embark on a journey looking for a master of martial arts and magic.

The two protagonists are introduced to the reader as two clown characters at the beginning of the story. Hua Muxia 華慕俠, whose name literally means China Admiring Knight-

³⁹⁰ Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” Franco Moretti ed., *The Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Vol. 1, 346.

³⁹¹ Wo Die 我蝶, “Xiaodi zhen zouyun” 小的真走運 [Xiaodi is truly lucky], *Liyan huakan* 立言畫刊 [Liyan Pictorial] (Beijing), 1938, 1.

Errantry is a college student that likes reading martial arts fiction and acts like a marital fight daily. Zhao Bangjie 趙邦傑 (literally, Zhao Kingdom Hero), Hua's classmate, shorter than Hua and less sophisticated, is also obsessed with tales of the *jianghu* and forms a brotherhood with Hua as "erdi" 二弟 (younger brother), essentially a follower of Hua. Although they are both college students, Hua and Zhao demonstrate their ignorance of real life in a debate with their classmates about whether or not immortal swordsmen actually exist and a discussion they have planning to runaway and *baishi xueyi*. It is this ignorance that causes a series of ludicrous stories. Geng makes it clear at the onset that this novel has nothing to do with factual accuracy.

The first issue involved in the imaginary *baishi xueyi* journey is the finance, which leads to several absurd yet logical events that happen to the protagonists. Two students without any specific skills or physical strength can only cheat or steal to feed themselves if they feel too proud to beg. And this is precisely where their fantasy clashes with "reality:" Hua Muxia fails to "challenge" an acrobat who is well trained with various physical skills and, as a result, loses his jacket. He then loses another jacket after an unsuccessful attempt at robbing a passer-by who turns out to be a local hooligan.³⁹² Geng, however, does not stop with the particular events that he imposes upon the protagonists. Rather, he goes further to explore how humanity is tested and fails the test facing hardship by delineating how his protagonists gradually turn themselves into cheaters and bullies for the purposes of survival, despite the premise of their trip – to become knights-errant.³⁹³ As Leslie Smith writes about the nature of farce, "what often fuels the laughter is the capacity farce has for acting out and giving expression to our wilder and more anarchic

³⁹² Geng Xiaodi, *Huaji Xiake*, 11-16, 18-23.

³⁹³ *Ibid*, 27-30.

imaginings and impulses.”³⁹⁴ While the novel serves as a stage for the protagonists to act out their martial arts dream and displays how much they have been “mised” by the novel, it also turns the focus over to them and how much harm they have done to other people when they pretend to be shamans, lie to all sorts of people, and waste money on prostitutes, and so on.³⁹⁵ The victim becomes the culprit, and that is the irony of the story.

The climax of the *baishi xueyi* trope takes place when Hua and Zhao confront two peasants who transport them to an open field in the wild that they imagine the immortal master will show up. It is a double-layered reference: on the one hand, the protagonists expect the appearance of martial/magic master based on the martial arts fiction they have read: at night, in the wild, and a mysterious master; on the other hand, the two peasants suspect that Hua Muxia and his partner are supernatural masters, based on the local operas and story-telling they have seen and heard: at night, in the wild, and a master traveling between nature and society – Hua Muxia grows long hair and wears an old monk’s robe after he loses his jacket; his awkward look fits the peasants’ imagination of immoral swordsman.³⁹⁶ Geng Xiaodi depicts a most hilarious scene when both sides, excited and scared, kneel down and pray to each other, begging for forgiveness and magic.³⁹⁷ But soon Hua Muxia discovers the truth and attempts to extort money from the peasants, which leads to a fight between both sides and ends with Hua and Zhao being beaten. By this point, the fantasy of *baishi xueyi* has turned into a burlesque that mocks not only the reader who reads fiction as something factual, but more importantly, the unreliable and

³⁹⁴ Leslie Smith, *Modern British Farce: A Selective Study of British Farce from Pinero to the Present Day* (London: Palgrave, 1989), 7.

³⁹⁵ Geng Xiaodi, *Huaji xiake*, 31-60, 65-69, 79-85.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 95-100.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 98.

intriguing relationship between fiction and reality, representation and interpretation. By means of farcical imagination, Geng Xiaodi successfully asserts his originality in re-creating the *baishi xueyi* trope canonized by Xiang Kairan in the 1920s, which reinforces martial arts fiction as a self-sustainable literary subgenre.

Conclusion

During the first half of the twentieth century, although China was in constant turmoil since the beginning, it witnessed a great deal of literary creation, among which martial arts fiction was without question the most popular. Scholars and critics have attempted to decipher its popularity in relation to both the swiftly changing society and a changing understanding of “literature” concept. One critic stated that the reason why the genre appealed to ordinary readers who were also the oppressed majority in the society lied in the illusion the fiction fulfilled: some super-human knight-errant will appear and eradicate the unfair.³⁹⁸ Another scholar remarks that readers could escape from a turbulent reality and find entertainment.³⁹⁹ And, some other critic notes it is due to its “psychological compensation facing foreign imperialism, warlordism, and an ineffectual government.”⁴⁰⁰ I argue, martial arts fiction written in the Republican era fostered and nurtured a mentality of writing literature independently and facilitated its transformation from history-oriented preference to autonomy of literary creation.

As this chapter has delineated, the writing and reading of martial arts fiction during the two decades illustrates an increasing presence of fictionality as the key component of the novel.

³⁹⁸ Zheng Zhenduo, “Lun wuxia xiaoshuo” 論武俠小說 [On Martial Arts Fiction, 1932], Rui Heshi eds., *Yanyang hudie pai wenxue ziliao*, 770.

³⁹⁹ Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies*, 22.

⁴⁰⁰ Cao Zhengwen, *Xia wenhua* 俠文化 [Chivalric Culture] (Taipei: Yunlong chubanshe, 1997), 99-100.

Xiang Kairan in the early 1920s clung to the close connections between historical writing and literary narrative and built his martial arts enterprise by obscuring the boundaries between the two. His writer persona and martial artist identity merges in the narrator of his novels and together produces a fascinating *jianghu* world that blurs the limits of reality and fantasy. The generic assumptions, in particular the *baishi xueyi* trope, established by Xiang Kairan, however, was ridiculed and reversed by Zhang Tianyi in his *Counterfeit Knight-Errant*, a fictional parody of Xiang's work. Zhang's commitment to literary realism and his ideological stance of exposing the flaws of the middle-and-upper class adds a valuable social dimension and a highly theatrical quality to his critique. Gong Baiyu, while bringing the New Literature doctrines into his writing managed to maintain the attraction of his works by means of literary device such as suspense and flashback. By de-constructing prior generic assumptions, Gong established his own literary style among martial arts writers that was marked by an independence of imagination and the possibility of fiction conversing with life, and vice versa. This line of literary creation continued in Geng Xiaodi's farcical treatment of the *baishi xueyi* trope in his *Hilarious Knights-Errant*. By explaining that his characters are not to be taken for actual people, Geng dispensed with the requirement that readers believe the story. Instead, he actively discouraged this credibility by building the story entirely upon the late 1920s news report. Belief in the factuality of Geng's writing, therefore, was replaced with the notion of the plausibility of literary imagination.

The formation of a sense of fictionality in mid-1910s that "established fictional narrative as a self-contained entity freed from the responsibility to actuality," as *Dušan Andrš* points out, indicated the gradual birth of a modern society in China.⁴⁰¹ While the late Qing and early Republican defense of individuality and creativity in the critical discourse on fiction may have

⁴⁰¹ Dušan Andrš, *Formulation of Fictionality*, 137.

nurtured an incipient sense of fictionality, it was in the following decades when the concept was brought to fruition in the writing and reading of literary works. Martial arts fiction, due to its close connections with traditional narrative and trans-media popularity offers an optimal site to examine this process. More importantly, given the exercise of intertextual strategies and readers' familiarity with recurring motifs and tropes, the sanctioning of the fictional imagination also spoke to the transformation of Chinese society from a communal and traditional to a modern one, as individual readers – the basic units of the society – comprehended and appreciated the discourse of literature as a cognitively independence one. This rise of individual autonomy was precisely what Ian Watt suggests paved the way for the development of modern fiction and modernity in the West.⁴⁰² In next chapter I turn to images of female knights-errant and continue to explore how modern Chinese martial arts fiction manifested the modern from the perspective of gender and sexuality.

⁴⁰² Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 177.

Chapter 4:

Woman Fighters, Sentiment, and Female Subjectivity in Chinese Martial Arts Fiction, the 1920s-1940s

Don't tell me women are not stuff of heroes.

– Qiu Jin

I am ... the invincible Sword Goddess

with the Green Destiny that has no equal

Be it Li or Southern Eagle

Lower your head and ask for mercy

I am the dragon from the desert

with no trace to be discovered in my wake

Today I fly over E-Mei Mountain

tomorrow I will uproot the last dregs of Wudang!

– Jen in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000)

Introduction

In his early 1930s essay criticizing a widely spread craze among ordinary audience for martial arts fiction and films, Mao Dun specifically condemned the enthusiasm the audience expressed when Hong Gu 紅姑 (Red Lady), the female protagonist of the film *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* adapted from Buxiaosheng's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*) appeared on the screen. “They cheered loudly while Red Lady flew down, not because it was played by the actress Hu Die 胡蝶 (aka, Butterfly Wu, 1908-1989),” Mao Dun loathed, “but because Red Lady is a

swordswoman 女劍俠 (emphasis added), the central character of *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*.⁴⁰³ Red Lady's gender – namely, female – and her presence in the supposedly masculine martial arts world apparently fascinated the audience. Despite of Mao Dun's detestation, with the privilege of hindsight, we know that Red Lady and her popularity on screen as well as in print announced only the beginning of an unceasing charm of *nüxia* 女俠 (female knight-errant) characters in martial arts genre. More female martial heroes were created in the following decades.

What was it about female knights-errant that made them so appealing among Chinese audience? How were they portrayed and positioned in an imaginary world – namely, the *jianghu* – that was supposedly marked by its masculine quality? Was it their femininity – the opposite to the masculinity of male heroes – that made them so distinctive and popular, or, being situated in a male-centered setting has facilitated and rationalized a transgression of female knight-errant that diffused gender tensions and hence fascinated the reader? Or, a combination of both? Moreover, what happened when male knight-errant's courtship of his female counterpart became a generic formula and a decisive element defining female knight-errantry? In other words, how did the issue of *qing* 情 (sentiment) intertwine with the imaging of female knight-errant as the latter took the stage and became an indispensable part of the *jianghu* world? Within the context of late imperial and Republican China during which woman, as a modern subject, had drawn unprecedented attention in both real life debates and artistic imaginations, what did creations of female knights-errant and its soaring popularity tell us about the genre, the literary field, and the gender politics of the time? These questions point to the direction to and map out the plan of the following discussion.

⁴⁰³ Mao Dun, "Fengjian de xiaoshimin wenyi," Rui Heshi eds. *Yuanyang hudie pai wenxue ziliao*, 774.

Before I proceed, it is worth explaining what I mean by “female knight-errant,” that is, the subject of this chapter and the terminology related to it. Recorded initially in historical documents such as Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*, images of knight-errant had long been categorized using criteria such as social group, personal background, and motivation. Literary creations were brief and essentially male-centered. The category of knight-errant divided by gender, i.e., female knight-errant, did not stand out until Tang dynasty when tales of woman fighters flourished. It is debatable what may have led to this development, female players since then had become a natural part of chivalric literature. This chapter focuses only on the female characters created in the chivalric stories, pre-modern and modern, how they are portrayed and what changes their presence have brought to the genre. Other female figures that are also trained in combat skills and have been widely circulated in Chinese folklore including cross-dresser female soldier Hua Mulan 花木蘭, female generals Mu Guiying 穆桂英 and Qin Liangyu 秦良玉 are not the subject of this chapter. In addition, terms such as “female knight-errant,” “woman fighter,” “woman warrior,” and “female fighter,” are interchangeable in the discussion.

Because of the rich tradition of chivalric literature in pre-modern China and voluminous productions of martial arts fiction in the first half of twentieth century, a comprehensive study of female knights-errant and its significance is beyond the scope of this chapter. I ground my examination at two inter-related levels and illustrate the “birth” and growth of modern female knight-errant in Chinese martial arts fiction. On the one hand, I investigate the images of well-received female knights-errant created from the early 1920s to the late 1940s and analyze what generic conventions were established and how new elements were introduced, therefore identifying the characteristics of the woman warrior. A genealogy of female knights-errant

depicted during this period grants us a basic sense of how this character type has developed over the decades and lays the foundation for further understanding. On the other hand, I bring in the question of romance and examine the relationship between female and male warriors and how the issue of sentiment has affected the defining of female heroes. Unlike their predecessors in early texts such as Tang tale and the nineteenth-century classic *A Tale of Heroers and Lovers* (1878), the female knight-errant invented in this period, I point out, is positioned within a complicated nexus of feelings as well as social and ideological obligations, including but not limited to family and filial piety, morality and personal freedom, free of love and social responsibility, etc. Identifying the female desire in the works to be analyzed not only as a usurpation of male power and authority but also a path to female subjectivity, I discuss how it acquires validity, thereby being accepted and appreciated by the reader and influencing later generations of writers. Discussions at both levels are informed with both generic precursors from early texts and real-life gender politics, as the backdrop against which I elucidate the implications of female knight-errant imaging to the popular imagination in the first half of twentieth century.

In the following I start with a brief review of the recent scholarship on gender studies, in particular women's studies, in the China field, highlighting how social and political changes during the period in question have affected women's status in family, marriage, and socio-political life. Studies of female images such as female talents (*cainü* 才女), female students, prostitutes, female revolutionaries and activists in an era when women became more and more noticeable in cultural policy and political debates not only indicate the complexity of the terrain related to the female issue, but also spell out the discourse that I engage with and contribute to. Unlike these carefully examined female groups in recent scholarship, the female knight-errant is

a literary creation and has been widely consumed by readers for generations. More than simply adding one more “character” to the existing “pantheon,” this chapter scrutinizes how female knights-errant are represented in various texts and probes into questions like what made them as a character type in martial arts genre and what made them so fascinating – namely, the generic conventions that made them popular textually and the socio-cultural setting that facilitated their popularity contextually. Reading the images of female knight-errant as projected popular imagination, I draw attention to the long neglected potential and capacity of popular literature to speak out on important social and cultural issues.

Second, I introduce the female knight-errant characters that have been widely circulated and generically influential, including Nie Yinniang in the Tang tale and Shisanmei, aka, He Jinfeng in the late nineteenth-century *A Tale of Heroes and Lovers*. By highlighting how these characters were situated at the juncture between institutions such as family and marriage and projected ideals like traveling to take revenge, I point out the generic fundamentals essential to defining them. These generic elements also served a point of departure for their modern successors to emerge and develop.

Third, focusing on the images of a series of female heroes of martial arts created from the early 1920s to 1940s, I delineate how the character was represented through a fusion of physicality and sensibility and how they grew sophisticated and multifaceted over the decades. It indicates an increasing awareness among writers of the subtlety of the gender issue in popular imagination. Moreover, the trans-media popularity of female heroines coincided with “a complex process of transformation” of “the idea of sentiment” in the first half of the twentieth century, thereby requiring to be examined at the intersection of gender politics and emotional studies.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁴ Lee Haiyan, *Revolution of the Heart*, 4.

Interpreting the writing and reading of female knight-errant as a response from the perspective of market-oriented popular literary creation to the discussion of the woman issue that have been highly politicized, I argue, the creation of these martial heroines demonstrates a strong desire for female subjectivity, in spite of a sweeping wave of nationalization in nearly every cultural realm, in particular in late 1930s and 1940s as Japan progressed its military invasion. Moreover, the metamorphosis of female knight-errant images during the second half of the Republican era paralleled the emergence and growth of literary autonomy that I have examined in the previous chapters. The image of female knight-errant grew more real, as time went on. In other words, the growth of the notion of the literary generated a space for writers to explore the female image in an imaginary martial arts world. It enabled the female knight-errant to take the stage and complicate the meanings of knight-errantry.

For the purpose of textual analysis, I divide my examination into three stages based on the chronological order. The first stage looks at the female heroines created in the mid-1920s by the two most popular martial art writers, including Red Lady in Buxiaosheng's *Marvelous Knights-Errant* and Lan Yuanhua 藍沅華, aka, the Lantian Nüxia 藍田女俠 (the Female Knight-Errant from Lantian, early Republican period) in the same-titled novel written by Zhao Huanting. I analyze, while the depiction of these woman warriors tends to be brief, sometimes understated and even demonized, it approaches the female character in a refreshing light that highlights female agency and independence. The second stage examines a variety of female characters created in the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as Fang Yuqin 方玉琴 aka, the female knight-errant from Huangjiang from the same-titled novel by Gu Mingdao and Hong kuzi 紅褲子 (literally Red Pants) in Xu Zhuodai's 徐卓呆 (1881-1958) *Nüxia hongkuzi* 女俠紅褲子 (The Female Knight-Errant Red Pants, 1930, hereafter, *Red Pants*). As the woman warrior took the

stage and became the central character of each novel, a generic archetype of “knight-errant couple” was also popularized and influenced writings in the following decades. The romantic relationship between female fighter and her male partner – namely, the “knight-errant couple” – also spelled out a prominent motif in modern martial arts fiction, i.e., the issue of sentiment, which formed a defining element of woman warrior and revealed an important side of female heroism. The third stage scrutinizes the works of late 1930s and 1940s, for example, Liu Yanqing 柳研青 in the *Twelve Coin Darts* written by Gong Baiyu and the martial heroines in the *He-Tie wubuqu* 鶴-鐵五步曲 (The Crane-Iron Series, hereafter *The Pentalogy*, 1938-1944) by Wang Dulu, in particular Lotus and Dragon. Sophisticated and torn by various social and ethical forces, these images of woman warriors, I argue, display the challenges that the woman faces in the process of growing into an independent individual with sensibility. While this growing image of female knight-errant can be interpreted as an allusion to the anxiety and tensions that Chinese women experienced in a swiftly changing society, it is indeed a female bildung written in the frame of the martial arts fiction.

Reading martial art fiction produced and consumed in Republican China, I ask: Does the female knight-errant figure pronounce the empowerment of women? If yes, in what sense? Or, to borrow Laura Mulvey’s widely cited critique on Hollywood cinema, is the invention of martial heroines “a voyeuristic activity producing erotic pleasure,” and does the pleasure in writing and reading occurs, as in real life, “between the active/male and the passive/female?”⁴⁰⁵ In other words, does the female warrior take on an exhibitionist role as a display, a spectacle, and a sign

⁴⁰⁵ In spite of my efforts to search for martial arts works written by female writers, all the writers found and discussed in this dissertation were exclusively male. From this perspective, the female warriors to be analyzed are projections of male’s imagination and well fit in Mulvey’s critique. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen*, 16, No. 3 (1975), 11.

of sexual difference “coded for strong ... erotic impact?”⁴⁰⁶ Or, even the writer was not sure how to invent the female knight-errant figure for the reader in the midst of a fast changing society therefore turned the literary creation into a site of experimentation? The strategy of accentuating the generic specificities of female knight-errant in the first half of twentieth century and subjecting the martial imagination to close scrutiny will, I hope, call our attention to the long neglected gender significations in popular writing and reading and the great capacity of popular literature engaging in important social and cultural issues.

Chinese Women in the Late Imperial and Republican Era

Although studies of modern Chinese literature as a field was established as early as the 1960s, the examination of gender and in particular feminism did not appear until the beginning of the 1990s, first in the form of research articles published in the journal then called *Modern Chinese Literature* and then an edited volume titled *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism* (1993). The interests in the question of Chinese woman and her changing status as China was modernized since the late imperial period until the present – roughly the twentieth century – soon developed and harvested rich and vibrant studies spanning historical periods and disciplinary backgrounds, as volumes and monographs were published over the past two decades, including *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (1991), *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (1994), *Women and Writing in Modern China* (1998), *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (2004), *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* (2005), *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (2011), *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in*

⁴⁰⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 11.

Transnational Theory (2013), to name a few.⁴⁰⁷ In these writings of late imperial and early Republican Chinese women, raising the status of women and strengthening the nation were often presented as inseparable projects. After the two political parties, first the Nationalist and then the Communist took power, they also painted women status as equal citizens as a marker of China's arrival to modernity, even though neither of them kept the promise. In other words, the discourse of the woman issue had been highly politicized since the very beginning.

Following the new round of western feminist scholarship in the 1980s, scholars on China explored the complex ways that women were caught up in relations of power. In other words, they viewed institutions such as patriarchal relations no longer static, ahistorical configurations but instead as contingent social arrangements that were always being contested and in turn, required a great deal of cultural and political force to keep in place. As part of the efforts to decode this process, studies of Chinese women grew specific-oriented and localized, with a variety of female figures were examined through literary and cultural studies, for instance, the figure of the New Woman as a signpost of Chinese modernity at the turning point of twentieth century by Hu Ying, the “public flower and the media star” – namely, courtesan – and the entertainment industry in late imperial Shanghai by Catherine Yeh, “the talented women” 才女 in southern China during the transition from empire to nation by Susan Mann, and the female writers of the late imperial and early Republican era and their projected travels by Huang Jinzhu, to name a few.⁴⁰⁸ As these studies demonstrate, while family, kinship, and marriage are the

⁴⁰⁷ For a comprehensive summary on this topic, see Hershatler's nearly 70-page paper, Gail Hershatler, “State of the Field: Women in China's Long Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Nov. 2004), 991-1065.

⁴⁰⁸ Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1898-1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), Huang Jinzhu, *Qingmo minchu*

venues within which female figures were conventionally situated and identified, alternative social and cultural networks also existed through which they revealed the other side of self and redefined the relations between self and community. Although the images of woman warriors this chapter examines are literary creations, their emergence and development well corresponded to the changing conceptualization of sexual identity. Due to the long tradition of indigenous chivalric literature and its close collaboration with the market-oriented publishing strategies, martial arts fiction offered a fertile ground and a unique channel through which writers could speak to the mass reader and explore ways of defining and redefining the boundaries between gender, emotion, and power.

Traversing historical documentation and literary imagination, the female revolutionary and activist in the late imperial and early Republican China deserves special attention in the relation to the current chapter. As Hu Ying points out in her study of the emerging New Woman image from 1899 to 1918 – a liminal moment in history, foreign female revolutionary figures such as the Russian anarchist Sophia Perovskaia were introduced to Chinese readers through processes of production, circulation, and appropriation. Chinese indigenous chivalric culture, highlighted through the character of female fighter, was one of the elements that were incorporated into the re-envisioning of the new woman.⁴⁰⁹ In the case of the translation and transmission from Sophia to Su Feiya 蘇菲亞 – namely, the rendering of a foreign historical figure to a literary creation then to a role model for Chinese New Woman, Hu Ying notes,

nüzuojia xiaoshuo yanjiu: nüxing shuxie de duoyuan chengxian 清末民初女作家小說研究：女性書寫的多元呈現[A Study of the Fiction by Late Qing and Early Republican-Era Female Writers: Multi-Faceted Representations of Female Writing] (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2014).

⁴⁰⁹ Other elements that worked as “the other” in the construction of new woman image include images of *cainü*, or “women writers from elite backgrounds, gained unprecedented visibility as female poetry societies flourished and large numbers of their anthologies were published.” Hu Ying, 5; 111-115.

displays not just the female fighter type of “iconoclastically unconventional behavior” but also the “highlighted female virtues,” filial piety in this case, that were “typically exaggerated” in the depiction of female knight-errant.⁴¹⁰ The juxtaposition of unconventional behavior and exaggerated femininity, Hu Ying states, resulted from “the fertile ground” that the tradition of biography created by Sima Qian offered and the “potential” of Sima’s “approbation of the *xia*’s altruistic self-sacrifice.”⁴¹¹ Hu Ying’s observation with regards to how indigenous chivalric resources was employed in the promotion of New Woman project resonates with Qiu Jin’s widely circulated self imaging as “the Female Knight-Errant of Jianhu” wearing the sword and Shi Jianqiao’s self-identification as *nüxia* 女俠 that avenged the murder of her father before she proceeded to assassinate the old warlord Sun Chuanfang 孫傳芳 (1885-1935).⁴¹² In other words, there are numerous examples of how the female chivalric character in literary imagination was appropriated to justify or promote iconoclastically unconventional behavior in the period in question, which in turn altered the meaning of knight-errantry in a rapidly changing society, and its gender significations in particular.

The creation of female knight-errant and reconfiguration of female subjectivity also coincided with the surge of emotions in the first half of twentieth century. Although his focus is the motif of “national awakening” in the first three decades of twentieth century, John Fitzgerald acknowledges and emphasizes “affinity between romantic love and nationalism,” as “the extensive, varied, and finely nuanced treatment of romantic love in fiction, helped to craft and popularize a model of the relationship between self and community that supplied a model for

⁴¹⁰ Hu Ying, 112-113.

⁴¹¹ Ibid,

⁴¹² Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions*, 35-42.

love of nation, or patriotism.”⁴¹³ In other words, to ordinary people national love grew not so much from political and ideological propaganda as reading popular fiction that guided them through the meaning and the method of emotional investment. Building upon Fitzgerald’s observation, Haiyan Lee foregrounds “the centrality of sentiment in the transformation of (Chinese) modernity,” problematizes “love as a discursive technology for constructing individual and collective identity,” and states that “the modern subject is first and foremost a sentimental subject” and romantic fiction invents the individual as “self-centered, self-coherent, and ethically autonomous monad.”⁴¹⁴ Being one of the most popular literary subgenres that fascinated Chinese readers, martial arts fiction witnessed a similar “infiltration” of the sentiment issue through the imaging of woman warrior and the archetype of “knight-errant couple.” Although woman warrior figure existed long before the genre became modernized, the vibrant and sophisticated treatment of her feelings and the romance with her male counterpart did not flourish until the Republican period. That said, this process of inventing and crafting female knight-errant as the central character and incorporating the issue of sentiment into the portrayal of chivalric heroism was marked with negotiation, regression, and accommodation of various cultural and ideological forces, far more discursive and slower compare to other subgenres, such as romantic fiction, and the real-life debates on the woman issue. It is precisely from this perspective of popular imagination and its literary projection that this study contributes to and deepens our understanding of how “the woman question” and the issue of emotion were perceived and explored at the level of ordinary readers – namely, how vernacular literature commented on and took part in the ferment that has brought new visions of female subjectivity into existence.

⁴¹³ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 95.

⁴¹⁴ Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 7-8.

Female Warriors in Early Texts and the Existing Scholarship

Female warriors have been part of the Chinese chivalric literary tradition since ancient time. As James Liu cites, the maiden of Yue – the instructor of the king’s troops in *Wuyue chuanqiu* 吳越春秋 (the Annals of the Kingdom of Wu and Yue) by Zhao Ye 趙曄 (first century AD) was a forerunner of the heroic women.⁴¹⁵ Although this mysterious maiden was not recorded in historical document such as Sima Qian’s *Records of a Grand Historian*, which is regarded as the origin of Chinese chivalric literature, it was later seen in all sorts of fictional works, in the form of martial arts skill, or central motif.⁴¹⁶ The commonly accepted images of martial heroines in literature began to appear in Tang tales, exemplified by characters like Nie Yinniang and Hong Xian 紅線 (Red Thread) which have been widely read and re-written. While female knights-errant continued to be visible as vernacular writing flourished in dynasties such as Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, the quantity was much less and the depiction tended to be brief compare to those of male heroes. Generally speaking, Tang tales stand out for its liberal treatment of female images, while later centuries grew more conservative with regards to issues such as chastity, free roaming, chivalric motivation, and so on, with Ming dynasty being the most strict.⁴¹⁷

Despite of the long presence of female fighters in chivalric tales, their interaction with the male counterpart, in particular that involves love, did not surface until the Qing. James Liu

⁴¹⁵ James Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, 85-86.

⁴¹⁶ The former, for instance, Zhao Huanting, *Lantian nüxia* 藍田女俠, Chapter 5, and the latter, such as the tale of *Sansui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳 by Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 (1330-1400).

⁴¹⁷ Cui Fengyuan, *Zhongguo gudian duanpian xiayi xiaoshuo yanjiu*, 177, 185.

identifies *Haoqiu zhuan* 好逑傳 (The Happy Union, aka. 俠義風月傳, A Tale of Chivalrous Love, early Qing) as an early example of “romance combining chivalry with love.”⁴¹⁸ Chen Pingyuan expresses a similar opinion by noticing that *The Happy Union* “to some degree blends chivalry and sentiment” and “anticipates the infiltration of romantic tale into chivalric genre.”⁴¹⁹ Although *The Happy Union* demonstrates both chivalric and romantic elements, the heroine, Shui Bingxin 水冰心 is a well-educated beauty from a prestigious official family who knows nothing about martial arts, let alone free traveling for the purpose of righting the wrong. Most importantly, a strong sense of Confucian social convention and the female chastity is woven into the narration – essentially the ideology and practices that indigenous chivalric tales stood against. I therefore identify this work as a scholar-beauty romance 才子佳人小說 instead of a chivalric tale.

An early case that treats the romance between female and male knights-errant appeared in the early nineteenth century when *Lü mudan* 綠牡丹 (Green Peony, aka. Hongbi yuan 宏碧緣, 1831, hereafter *Green Peony*) was published. It narrates episodes of how Hua Bilian 花碧蓮, a woman warrior and the female protagonist, falls for the young martial artist Luo Hongxun 駱宏勛 and eventually marries him while interweaving with the story of Hua Zhenfang 花振芳, Hua Bilian’s father and a Shandong bandit, with his friends defeating evil and being honored by the imperial court. As Margaret Wan points out, the combination of love story and chivalric genre in the novel emerged from the juncture of previous popular fiction, “the scholar-beauty romance,

⁴¹⁸ James Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, 121-124.

⁴¹⁹ Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiaoke meng*, 51.

the historical novel, and court-case fiction.”⁴²⁰ In other words, *Green Peony*, both the novel and numerous ballads, displays transitional traces resulting from inter-influencing among popular genres. Margaret Wan in fact uses it to argue for the rise of martial arts fiction.⁴²¹ For the purpose of this chapter – namely, the female knight-errant figure and her romantic relationship with the male fighter, Hua Bilian, however, is not much involved in chivalric deeds even though she is trained in martial arts and travels with her father who is altruistic and active in the cause of social justice. In this sense, the novel reads more like a romantic fiction decorated with chivalric characters and combat scenes.

Another example that focuses on female knight-errant and the issue of sentiment is Wen Kang’s 文康 (*fl.* 1821-60) *A Tale of Heroes and Lovers*. As the title indicates, both elements of “romance” and “hero” are included in the story, but, they are not juxtaposed to identify the female protagonist. In other words, female chivalry does not seem to be compatible with romantic sentiment, so resulting in a fundamental inconsistency in character development. He Yufeng, the female protagonist is a much admired knight-errant whose character fits in the conventional imaging of chivalry: she protects the vulnerable, i.e., the young scholar An Ji, saves the weak, i.e., Zhang Jinfeng, lives to avenge the evil who causes her father’s death, and takes care of her aged mother. While it is debatable whether it is feasible for He Yufeng to transform from a free roaming woman warrior to a Confucian guided housewife, it is clear that her two identities, – namely, the female knight-errant and An Ji’s wife can not co-exist.⁴²² In other words,

⁴²⁰ Margaret Wan, *Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel*, 10.

⁴²¹ *Ibid*, 18.

⁴²² Scholars have different opinions about He Jinfeng’s transformation, for example, Wang Xin states that Yufeng’s change is reasonable. See Wang Xin, “Lun *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* de xianü xingxiang jiqi yiyi,” *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* (Jan., 2010), accessed on Feb. 22, 2016 at <http://www.literature.org.cn/Article.aspx?id=58988>; both Hu Shi and Sun Kaidi express that the character

she loses her chivalric identity when she enters the romantic relationship and the domestic realm with An Ji.

Romance between female and male heroes had never been the focus of chivalric tales before the eighteenth century. On the contrary, any romantic connections with female figures were conventionally painted as dangerous and so forbidden to heroism, due to a variety of reasons. For instance, it would “hinder chivalric deeds,” as some scholar contemplates, so male heroes need to control their emotions.⁴²³ Or, from the perspective of physical strength that is regarded as one of the fundamentals of knight-errantry, any emotional or sexual contact with woman would be detrimental, because of the notion that wu 武 (physicality) will be harmed by yu 欲 (desire).⁴²⁴ Corresponding to this attitude, Cai Xiang observes, female figures tend to be colored in two lights: the *nüxia* 女俠, i.e., the woman fighter that is normal and safe, as brave and upright as her male counterpart, and the *nümo* 女魔, i.e., the female demon that often possesses both deadly martial skills and charm.⁴²⁵ While the former can be good-looking, it is the latter that is deadly attractive. In fact, the latter’s beauty is routinely regarded as a fatal “weapon” against the male. Cai believes, the widely spread motto in pre-modern China, i.e. “Lust is the root of all sins” 萬惡淫為首 was responsible for this differentiation between the woman fighter

development is abrupt and inconvincing. Hu Shi, “Ernü yingxiongzhuan xu,” *Zhongguo wenxue shi*, 1090; Sun Kaidi, “Guanyu Ernü yingxiong zhuan,” *Cangzhou houji*, 256.

⁴²³ Liu Ruoyu, Zhou Qinglin and Tang Farao trans. *Zhongguo zhi xia* 中國之俠 [Chinese Knight-Errantry] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1991), 203. Similar observation is also seen in Ma Youyuan, “Huaben xiaoshuo li de xia,” 話本小說裡的俠 [Knight-Errant in Vernacular Fiction], *Zhongguo xiaoshuoshi jilun* 中國小說史集論 [Essays on the History of Chinese Fiction] (Taipei: Shibao wenhua, 1987), 132.

⁴²⁴ Cai Xiang, *Xia yu yi*, 207.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid*, 262-265.

and the female demon, even though the presence of the female demon admittedly makes the novel more fun to read.⁴²⁶

Whereas hostility seemed to underline the general treatment of female characters in the pre-modern chivalric tale, fictional works written in different periods displayed divergent stances on the issue of male-female relationship.⁴²⁷ As Cui Fengyuan observes, Tang tale tends to be liberal by not emphasizing issues such as female chastity. Song stories saw more restrictions on the male part dealing with desire but remained unchanged regarding women warrior's chastity. Ming writers were explicitly against any contact between male and female fighters and identified chastity as one of the most important criteria of female chivalry.⁴²⁸ Cui explains that these literary works resonated the social and cultural settings within which they were created.⁴²⁹ Also consulting the historical context of the literary invention, Lin Baochun, one of the pioneering scholars in the study of Chinese martial arts genre, however, reaches a starkly different conclusion. Since historically knight-errantry was a male domain, and the social conditions of patriarchy “actually would not have allowed the female knight-errant to emerge,” Lin refuses to attribute to woman warrior any gender-historical, nor gender utopian, significance.⁴³⁰ Instead, Lin develops two categories to divide martial heroines that were invented after Tang: the “mysterious” 神秘性 and the “secular” 人間性.⁴³¹ The former “inherits the Tang dynasty

⁴²⁶ Ibid, 262-265.

⁴²⁷ The “male-female relationship” noted here does not have to be between knights-errant.

⁴²⁸ Cui Fengyuan, *Zhongguo gudian duanpian xiayi xiaoshuo yanjiu*, 173-183.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 177, 180, 183.

⁴³⁰ Lin Baochun, “Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo zhong de ‘nüxia’ xingxiang” 中國古典小說中的[女俠]形象, *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 (1997), 37.

⁴³¹ Lin Baochun, “Ernü qingchang ru jianghu: gudian xiaoshuo zhong de ‘nüxia’ xingxiang,” 兒女長情入

swordsman tradition and is marked by secretive voyages, unconventional behaviors, and magical martial skills,” while the latter is “essentially modeled after the conventional, orthodox female image” so her chivalric quality is “more about morality than combat training.”⁴³² Tang creations, such as Nie Yinniang and Red Thread are the “mysterious” while those produced in later dynasties are more of the “secular” type.⁴³³ Using Lin’s division, Guo Lianqian claims that more “secular” images were created after the medieval China, particularly in the Ming, when the vernacular writing was oriented to morally guide the reader.⁴³⁴ Some female characters were identified as “*xia*” 俠 (knight-errant), Guo states, solely due to their virtues – Guo calls them “*zhenjie lienüxia*” 節貞烈女俠 (the virtuous and chaste female knight-errant).⁴³⁵ With regards to the female figures in early texts, Guo contends, the distinction between them and male knights-errant lies in gender only.⁴³⁶

While Chinese critics’ explanations are impaired by a tendency of generality, western scholars take a much more specific approach elucidating the gender significations of female knights-errant related to the dominating cultural and social ideology. Louise Edwards in her study of women warriors in *Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣 (Flowers in the Mirror, 1800) and *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber, 1791), for instance, explores the “complex and

江湖-古典小說中的”女俠”形象, *Gudian xiaoshuo zhong de leixing renwu* 古典小說中的類型人物 [The Archetypal Characters in Classical Fiction](Taipei: Liren shuju, 2003), 168.

⁴³² Ibid, 168, 175.

⁴³³ Ibid, 175.

⁴³⁴ Guo Lianqian, “Mingmo qingchu huaben xiaoshuo zhong de nüxia” 明末清初話本小說中的女俠, *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* 中國文學研究 [Studies of Chinese Literature], Vol. 19 (Dec. 2004), 185.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 181.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, 185.

ambiguous signifying systems of sexual ideology” in mid Ming Chinese culture and draws the conclusion that they maintain a much more complex discursive position than one of simple opposition or support of patriarchal society.⁴³⁷ Deploying two sets of bipolar notions as the basic frame, i.e. *nei/wai*, *yin/yang* indicated in the title of his book, i.e., *The Sword or the Needle*, Roland Altenburger conducts a “general inquiry into the subversive significance of images of gender-bending strong female characters in the Chinese narrative tradition.”⁴³⁸ By looking through female knight-errant images transmitted in every major dynasty since the beginning of Chinese civilization till the 1930s, he asserts that “female gender and knight-errantry are incompatible and the *nüxia* therefore is an abnormality.” And, “this basic tension is likely to have been the primary source of the theme’s strong appeal to readers.”⁴³⁹ Although the needle and the sword are juxtaposed by Altenburger as two contrasting ends of female identity in pre-modern China, the two symbols could also well combine to define an alternative social identity of a woman, with the “needle lady” 綉針女 depicted in the Tang chivalric tale “Pan Jiangjun” 潘將軍 (General Pan) being a salient example.⁴⁴⁰

Interpreting the female knight-errant imagined in the martial arts fiction written in the first half of the twentieth century as an alternative way to define womanhood, I locate woman characters to be analyzed at the nexus between the conventional/Confucian sexual ideology, the

⁴³⁷ Louise Edwards, *Men & Women in Qing China: Gender in The Red Chamber Dream* (Brill, 1994), 87.

⁴³⁸ Roland Altenburger, *The Sword or the Needle: the Female Knight-Errant (Xia) in Traditional Chinese Narrative* (Peter Lang, 2009), 10.

⁴³⁹ Altenburger, *The Sword or the Needle*, 54.

⁴⁴⁰ The tale portrays the female protagonist Renzhen nü 綉針女 who excels at needlework with her mother during the day while flying over the rooftop as an altruistic knight-errant at night. It was first collected by Kang Pin 康頻 of the Tang in *Jutan lu* 劇談錄 and later included into the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 of the Song and the *Jianxia zhuan* 劍俠傳 of the Ming.

highly politicized modern discourse of the woman question, and the market-oriented popular writing and reading. I ask what defines female knight-errant and explore how the external influence, such as the nationalist narrative, and the internal development, i.e., the sentimental and sensuous self, shaped the images of modern martial heroines. Acknowledging the social anxiety indicated in the flourishing constructions of female knights-errant characters in the genre, I argue, these characters spell out a variety of ways that corresponded to and formulated the desirable modern Chinese women in a swiftly modernized society.

Before I proceed with the textual analysis, it is worth listing some of the fundamentals included in the composition of the Tang tale “Nie Yinniang,” given the important archetypal function it has played in the reading and re-writing of woman warrior characters in later literature. In other words, in the long tradition and exercise of intertextuality in Chinese vernacular writing, Nie Yinniang has become a prototype for recreations of female knight-errant. It is therefore important to remember the critical components of the story, which inspired numerous writers to imagine woman fighters. First and foremost, Nie Yinniang’s relationship with her family in general and her father in particular – namely, the symbol of Confucian patriarchal ideology. Born in a general’s family, Nie is taken away by a mysterious nun when she is ten and spends five years in the wild learning martial skills and kills under her master’s order before she returns home. She remains aloof from her family by roaming at night and appointing a husband for herself. Second, unlike knight-errant figures recorded in historical documents like *Shiji* with qualities which later became benchmark traits of knight-errantry, including altruism, sense of justice, individual freedom, loyalty, and so on, Nie does not seem to follow much of

them, except for her friendship with Liu Changyi 劉昌裔 whose death she cries for.⁴⁴¹ In other words, it is not clear what motivates Nie Yinniang's acts and morality is not the central concern of the story. Third, Nie is trained by her nun master to be detached from her acts from the time when she was very young, which perhaps also affects her personal life. She shows little emotional attachment to people around her, even the husband she chooses, so “emotion-less-ness” to some degree has become her label. Good at both martial magic and combat skills, she roams freely and mysteriously.

Martial Heroines of the 1920s

In the pioneering *jianghu* world that Buxiao Sheng created in his novel *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, there are few female actors, less than a handful perhaps within the sixty-four “biographies” he portrays, each of them brief and yet striking. Red Lady is one of them, taking up essentially two chapters only in the one hundred and six chapters Xiang Kairan wrote. It is not clear how many people had read Xiang Kairan's novel before they went to the theatre and watched *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* film series adapted from the novel. Unlike the film which focuses on the story of the burning of the Red Lotus Temple – namely, the section depicted in the novel from Chapters Seventy-three to One Hundred and Six, Red Lady appears in Chapter Two of the book, when the Kunlun Clan – one of the two martial arts clans depicted in the novel – is introduced to the reader for the first time. Her appearance is rendered through Liu Chi's eyes – one of the future “marvelous knights-errant,” no less a spectacle than the cinematic presentation:

⁴⁴¹ One of the widely cited generalizations of these traits is James Liu's list of eight traits shared by Chinese knight-errant. James Liu, *The Chinese Knight Errant*, 4-7.

While Liu Chi crouched by the window and eavesdropped on the conversation between his master and unidentified visitors, he suddenly felt a breeze passing by. Both his eyes were shined by red light. It was so bright as if the room was on fire. Stunned by surprise, he heard people in the room cheering together: “Red Lady is here!” He looked again (into the room): his master has got off the bed and a dozen of people that were sitting on both sides all rose with hands down. A lady in red stood in the middle of the room. Her apparel was very unique: (she was covered in) the fire-like red color from head to toe. (He) had no idea about the fabric, but he was dazzled by that redness! Both her head and face were covered in the red, showing only the eyes and the nose. Over two to three hundred ribbons were all over her body, long and short. The sleeves and dress trailed along the ground, covering her hands and feet. On her face – which was prettier than the pomegranate blossom – two black eyes, like two stars, were sparkling. Her pearly teeth shined through her cherry-like lips. Liu Chi was just about to hear what this red lady would say, unexpectedly, he was nearly frightened out of his wits the moment she opened her mouth! Red Lady said: “You are all so careless. Don’t you know someone is eavesdropping outside the window?”⁴⁴²

Liu Chi was embarrassed to be pointed out by the Red Lady but had to enter the room upon his master’s call and met all his future seniors and peers. This introduction to Red Lady’s debut is undoubtedly sensuous, in particular visual: Liu Chi feels her presence through all kinds of senses, including sight, hearing, and even touch. What is the most striking and stunning to the reader is perhaps her outlook, marked by a combination of the mysterious, i.e., the covered face except for

⁴⁴² Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 13-14.

her eyes and mouth, and the bold that is conveyed through the color – the fire-like red color and her manner, sharp and straightforward. Even in a private reading setting, the reader can still easily visualize how outstanding she looks among a group of Daoist monks who, mainly male, most probably dress in plain Daoist gowns. Her youth, her color, her outlook, and most importantly her gender all together make her the center of attention, just as the location where she stands: “in the middle of the room.” But this is not yet all of the Red Lady. Before Liu Chi is caught eavesdropped outside the window, he has already heard Red Lady’s name being frequently mentioned in the conversation as sources of good judgment and witty advice.⁴⁴³ After Liu Chi sits down in the room, he witnesses that Red Lady is not only a well respected master figure in the Clan despite of her young age, but also an approachable female character with whom other masters can freely make jokes.⁴⁴⁴

This snapshot of the Red Lady character is soon supplemented with some more information about her background in Chapter Eleven, marked by a momentous yet coherent transformation from a conventional wife and mother to an unorthodox swordswoman who remains a beloved mother. Her master, a Daoist nun Shen Xixia 沈棲霞, also a upright roaming heroine saves her and her son from robbers before taking her in as a disciple. While the enigmatic image of Shen Xixia may ring a bell to the reader who is familiar with chivalric tales, in particular the story of Nie Yingniang from the Tang dynasty, Red Lady is essentially different from Nie Yinniag: first and foremost, Red Lady is represented in a much more emotional and sociable light compare to Nie. She is defined by multiple identities co-existing simultaneously, including being a female fighter, a mother to a son, a widow that loves red but loyal to her late

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 12-13.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 16.

husband, a master to several disciples, and an aunt to a long missing nephew. In other words, Red Lady as a female knight-errant is defined not simply by her martial skills but also by diverse social identities. Second, Red Lady demonstrates a strong sense of female agency since the beginning of her path to knight-errantry. Unlike Nie Yinniang who is taken by the mysterious nun due to some invisible talent and told who to kill and how to kill, Red Lady decides to learn martial arts from Shen Xixia due to the difficult situation she was facing: young widow with a little son, bullied by the extended family who schemes to kill them so as to take their wealth. Five years later – exactly the same length of the time that Nie Yinniang spends learning her skills, Red Lady has gained incredible ability from Shen Xixia and starts to instruct her son and turns him into a skilled martial artist. Her identity as “Red Lady” is given by the actors in the *jianghu* due to her love of the red color. Third, as a middle figure that links the Daoist nun Shen Xixia and her newly admitted female disciple Gan Lianzhu 甘聯珠, Red Lady forms a short yet meaningful lineage of female knights-errant manifesting independence and self-respect. Gan Lianzhu, daughter of a notorious bandit family, runs away with her husband through a series of harsh martial combats with her family members who attempt to prevent her “betrayal.” That Gan Lianzhu fights against her grandmother, mother, and aunt – essential protectors of her father’s bandit enterprise – has symbolic meaning contextualized in a long male-centered martial arts imaginary world and a generally patriarchal Chinese society. The female agency indicated in her acts is in the same line with Red Lady’s determination to choose her own life after her husband passes away. Although sketchy, Xiang Kairan’s female fighters have displayed some characteristics that are fundamentally different from their precursors.

Compared to Xiang Kairan, Zhao Huanting, commonly regarded as Xiang’s counterpart in northern China seemed to demonstrate more interest in including female knights-errant in his

martial arts world.⁴⁴⁵ Born to a Qing official father who governed a Shandong local county Yutai 魚台, Zhao had a carefree childhood and received old-style education aiming to reach officialdom through civil service examination, as most imperial scholars did.⁴⁴⁶ His plan, unfortunately, was disrupted when the Boxers Movement developed and spread in the late nineteenth century. It is not clear when exactly he started to write for a living, but his writing started to be seen in popular publications such as *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (1910-1931) soon after his parents passed away in 1911, which marked the beginning of his writing career – the only job he might have been able to find given his trained writing skills for the civil service exam, some critic suspects.⁴⁴⁷ Although Zhao’s peers juxtaposed him with Xiang Kairan as the “Northern Zhao” 北趙 versus the “Southern Xiang” 南向 due to their martial arts fiction, Zhao’s works were actually published both in northern newspapers such as the *Yishi bao* 益世報 (1915-1949) in Beijing and Tianjin and by southern publishers including Chunming shuju 春明書局 in Shanghai.⁴⁴⁸ From his few remaining early pieces, including essays, classical poetry, and fiction, he was very good at old-style poetry and belonged to the “ya” 雅 (elitist) category of literary writing in early Republican era.⁴⁴⁹ Although he wrote for nearly thirty years, he is remembered today mainly for his martial arts fiction, and, strictly speaking, his novel *Qixia jingzhong zhuan*

⁴⁴⁵ Scholars have different ideas about when Zhao was born. Literary scholar Zhang Gansheng says 1878 while martial arts fiction critic Ye Hongsheng notes 1877, but they both hold that Zhao died in the beginning of 1950s. Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongshu xiaoshuo lungao*, 184; Ye Hongsheng, *Ye Hongsheng Lunjian*, 26.

⁴⁴⁶ Fan Boqun et al., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 448.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, 450. Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongshu xiaoshuo lungao*, 184.

⁴⁴⁸ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongshu xiaoshuo lungao*, 186.

⁴⁴⁹ Fan Boqun et al., *Zhongguo jinxiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 456.

奇俠精忠傳 (Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant with Absolute Devotion, 1923-25, 1926-27, hereafter *Marvelous Knights-Errant with Absolute Devotion*).⁴⁵⁰

Working in the highly competitive early Republican publishing industry, Zhao knew very well as a professional writer his survival relied on readers' purchase of his books.⁴⁵¹ He employed in his martial arts novels a variety of motifs, techniques, and literary devices that had been widely employed in traditional vernacular literature. Due to his writing strategy, he is labeled by some contemporary critics as “a writer of a transitional period” that “continued the late Qing chivalric/court-case (fiction).”⁴⁵² In other words, compare to Xiang Kairan who “initiated the Republican-era martial arts fiction,” Zhao is noted to have carried on the style of late Qing chivalric/court-case fiction.⁴⁵³ Aware of the charm of female characters in vernacular story-telling, Zhao specifically included female protagonists into his world of martial arts, in order to increase the circulation of his books.⁴⁵⁴ By investigating the female warrior images that he created in the *Marvelous Knights-Errant with Absolute Devotion* and *Lantian nüxia* (The Female Knight-Errant of Lantian), however, I argue that Zhao's writing demonstrates a growing consciousness of the importance of gender issue in martial arts writing and demonstrates some

⁴⁵⁰ Zhao published the novel (8 volumes) from 1923 to 1925 and the sequel, another eight volumes, from 1926 to 1927, exactly the same duration, i.e. 1923-1927, when Xiang Kairan published his Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant. Zhang Gansheng, 186.

⁴⁵¹ Zhao Huanting, *Qixia jingzhong zhuan* 奇俠精忠傳 [Biographies of Marvelous Knights-Errant with Absolute Devotion] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1986), Chapter 1.

⁴⁵² Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongshu xiaoshuo lungao*, 186. Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 303.

⁴⁵³ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 303.

⁴⁵⁴ Zhao in the voice of the narrator, “the author” 著者, pointed out the importance of writing books that are fun to read so readers would buy more. Zhao Huanting, *Qixia jingzhong zhuan*, Chapter 1 and Chapter 68. Regarding his inclusion of female characters, see Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 305.

critical transitional elements pertaining to the conventions of female knight-errant imaging for later writers.

In the *Marvelous Knights-Errant with Absolute Devotion* he uses twenty-three chapters to introduce the background of a negative female protagonist – namely, Tian Hongying 田紅英 – whose function, he later admits in the narrator’s voice, is to maintain ambiguity so as to keep readers interested.⁴⁵⁵ Tian Hongying, however, is not so much a female knight-errant who rights the wrongs as a desirable yet demonized female figure that manipulates her martial arts skills as well as sexual attraction for the purpose of cultivating her position in the White Lotus clan and eventually reaches the height of her power. The real female knight-errant that is well trained with martial arts while having a sense of justice is “the female knight-errant from Lantian.”

It is not clear how *the Female Knight-Errant of Lantian* was received among readers in the early Republican era when it was written, but artistically speaking, it is not a successful work due to several reasons.⁴⁵⁶ First and foremost, there is a discrepancy between the designated title and the story. Although it is titled “the Female Knight-Errant of Lantian,” Lan Yuanhua 藍沅華, the female protagonist appears in only about half of the total eighteen chapters and is the focus of no more than four chapters. While the chapter numbers may not be proportional to the prominence of the character, the portrayal of Lan Yuanhua is sketchy and incoherent. This fundamental problem leads to the second issue embedded in the story, that is, the narration is impaired by some structural imperfection, which results in a problematic narrative logic. Narrative segments and development therefore read disjointed. Third, the mixed language of

⁴⁵⁵ Zhao Huanting, *Qixia jingzhong zhuan*, Chapter 137.

⁴⁵⁶ Wei Shaochang dates the writing of the novel in “early Republican period.” Wei Shaochang, “Preface,” *Lin Yutang Waishu: Lantian nüxia/ Huatian jinyu yuan* 林語堂外書:藍田女俠/花田金玉緣 [Lin Yutang’s Favorites: The Female Knight-Errant of Lantian/The Tale of Gold and Jade from Huatian] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1992), 2.

partially classical, partially vernacular, and somewhat colloquial adds a sense of discordance to the story. All these may well explain why this work has only been listed but never studied by critics.

Despite of all aforementioned imperfections, nevertheless, it is worth investigating how the image of “the female knight-errant from Lantian” is established – namely, what kind of female fighter she is, and what it tells us about the author’s comprehension of the female knight-errant character. I read the novel as an experimentation on the female knight-errant imaging that remarks on the issues that were generically transitional and contributed to the formulation of modern female knight-errant image in later writers’ creations. In other words, the problems very possibly result from the author’s efforts to renovate the portrayal of female fighter. In the following I focus on three phases of the character development: before the birth of the female warrior, the process of training and self-identifying, and after she becomes a hero while discussing the defining elements of female hero and the basis it lays for future creations.

Told by a friend of the narrator in flashbacks, the story begins with an explicit intent to correct a long misperceived understanding: the achievements of managing the flood and cultivating the fertile land should be credited to Lan Yuanhua, i.e., the female knight-errant of Lantian, instead of her brother Lan Li 藍理. Born the eldest daughter in a local gentry family, Yuanhua learns the basics of martial arts with her younger brothers from their tutor without knowing its nature. The realization of her power, both physical and intellectual – a strong sense of justice in this case, takes place during a pilgrim trip with her father when she blinds a robber at night while he attempts to offend the female inn owner. The father is shocked and frightened by what she has done, but the female inn owner sees her potential and points out the path to excel, that is, she should become the disciple of the nun inhabiting in a nearby monastery. The

“awakening” of her female knight-errant self-consciousness does not happen, however, until her fiancé’s family is murdered by a group of bandits: she is urged by the need of revenge and leaves home seeking the nun for instruction – a critical step towards her knight-errant identity, indeed. It also signals the start of the conventional *baishi xueyi* trope. Although the death of her fiancé’s family reads as being abrupt, compare to the proto-tale of Nie Yinniang who is taken away by a mysterious nun at a young age, Yuanhua’s story is marked by a much more explicit sense of female agency up to this point: she demonstrates curiosity and interest in martial arts skills, registers her capability through some inaugural chivalric act, and decides to embark on the path to knight-errantry for the purpose of righting the wrongs. The next six chapters – supposedly to cover how Yuanhua is trained and grows into a real warrior – shift to the unfortunate catastrophe happens to her family: the father dies in jail due to a terrible frame-up, the rest of the family struggles in poverty, and her eldest younger brother Lan Li faces the danger of fighting against a bandit group on his own. The author appears not sure of how to write about Yuanhua’s growth and only briefly highlights several points of her training that are stamped by absurdity: the nun master shoots a beam of white light from her finger, i.e., her weapon, and kills a river monster which is transformed from a piece of hawser, and Yuanhua encounters and later befriends with a mountain spirit 山姑 in the mountain where she and her master reside and practice martial arts and magic. Two symbolic moments of her knight-errant identity take place during this section: first, she experiences and overcomes various horrifying illusions in her initial meditation, each of which stands for a type of temptations – family, marriage, fame, and fear; second, she successfully executes a notorious rapist as her testing mission before she completes the training with her master.

Ten years later when Yuanhua returns home as a trained female fighter, however, her enemy has been eliminated by her brother. Losing her initial intention of revenge, Yuanhua takes on the responsibilities of looking after her aged mother and raising and training her two younger brothers. This anti-climactic ending, nevertheless, is somewhat atoned for by a few moments when she displays her martial arts skills, including when she assists Lan Li to join the royal troop, fight for the court, and succeed in the battlefield. Although her female knight-errant identity is not cancelled due to the completion of the revenge, she has since carried out heroic acts in disguise: either by wearing male apparel or by covering her face. In other words, she conceals her female and knight-errant identities after she finally attains them after a decade's hard training. Her brother Lan Li, as a result, is credited with all of the accomplishments and eventually promoted to a prestigious position. The story ends with the Lan family being awarded by the court and all the male descendants in good positions while Yuanhua disappears after the celebration.

Although Xiang Kairan and Zhao Huanting took two different approaches constructing their martial arts worlds, one focusing on the element of *qi* 奇 (marvelous) and its credulity while the other the virtues of dedication and loyalty in the frame of vernacular chivalric tales, they seemed to have experienced some similar questions when formulating the female knight-errant image: “What differentiates the female knight-errant from her male counterpart?” “How to identify the differences?” and “How to blend these differences in their constructs of the *jianghu*?” In addition, from the examples of Red Lady and Lan Yuanhua, it appears to be relatively easier for both writers to address the birth of the female knight-errant, i.e., what motivates them to become knights-errant, than the deeds of woman warriors, i.e., what establishes and sustains their identity in the *jianghu* world. By creating Red Lady, Xiang Kairan is apparently aware of the

femininity of the female knight-errant: the widow background, the red color and its association with a sense of independence and self-respect, and grants her a noticeable space – both the visual and the authorial – in the male-centered *jianghu*. Zhao Huanting’s mind, comparatively, appears to be much more conservative and yet subtle: inspired by the classic Nie Yinniang tale, his “female knight-errant of Lantian,” on the one hand, acknowledges the importance of female knight-errant character in the surging 1920s martial arts wave, on the other hand, discloses a strong sense of uncertainty and hence anxiety by disguising and eventually vanishing her in the last few chapters. All these generic potential and questions together offered a crucial space for the writers to continue their explorations in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Female Knights-Errant Centered the Stage: the Turning Point of the 1930s

Gu Mingdao was not a new name to the reader when he started to write martial arts fiction in the late 1920s; he had been active in Shanghai popular literary field for over a decade as a romance writer before he embarked on the writing of *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang* in 1929, which brought him to the peak of success. Born in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, Gu lost his father at the age of eight and became disabled when he was a teenager. A graduate of a local Christian middle school, Gu taught at his alma mater while writing in his spare time. In the early 1930s he moved to Shanghai due to the war and continued writing and teaching simultaneously in order to support the family. He died of disease in poverty at forty-eight years old.

When assessing Gu’s literary works, Chinese critics usually highlight three inter-related aspects of his life so as to explain his literary style: his physical condition, emotional state of mind, and literary creation. Most critics believe Gu’s disability limited his mobility and shaped

his sentimental expression, which were translated into his works in the form of romantic fiction and a noticeable undertone of melancholy.⁴⁵⁷ Although it is disputable how much a writer's life experiences may influence or be reflected in his or her writing, Gu started his writing career in the early 1910s when sentimental works such as Xu Zhenya's 徐枕亞 (1889-1937) *Yuli hun* 玉梨魂 (Jade Pear Spirit, 1912) and Wu Shuangre' 吳雙熱(?-1934) *Nieyuan jing* 孽冤鏡 (A Mirror for a Doomed Romance, 1914) were serialized in the *Minquan bao* 民權報 (1912-1914) and dominated the popular literary field. Gu's first piece, a romantic short story, was published in the woman's magazine *Meiyu* 眉語 (1914-1916), followed by over two dozens of romantic fictional works. Established as a writer of romantic pieces, Gu became familiar with the Shanghai-centered modern publishing industry and was friend with senior figures in the field of literature and culture, such as Fan Yanqiao 范煙橋 (1894-1967) and Yan Duhe, both of whom were members of Xingshe 星社, a regional literary society that Gu participated in while in Suzhou. In the late 1920s when the wave of martial arts genre surged in both popular literature and film industry, Gu was invited to contribute a piece for serialization in the literary supplement "Kuaihuo lin" 快活林 of the *Xinwen bao* where Yan Duhe was the chief editor. This martial arts fiction turned out to be *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang*.

In spite of its structural flaws and the weakness in the depiction of martial arts fight scenes, Gu's *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang* for the first time created an archetype of the players active in the *jianghu* world, i.e., the "knight-errant couple" – namely, Fang Yuqin and her male partner Yue Jianqiu 岳劍秋 who is also a righteous martial artist. This image of fighter couple has since influenced numerous fictional works. Given his previous strength in

⁴⁵⁷ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongshu xiaoshuo lungao*, 146-147. Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxue shi*, 320-321. Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji*, 110-111.

writing romantic fiction, it is not surprising to see Gu wove the issue of sentiment, in particular the romantic relationship of the couple, into his portrayal of the chivalric adventures. In terms of his linguistic style, Gu seemed to be good at refreshing his writing by employing the trendy Europeanized vernacular language, i.e., “the tone of new literary language” 新文藝腔, as some critics notice.⁴⁵⁸ Corresponding to this renovated linguistic feature, he narrates the story by means of third person point of view instead of the conventional story-teller being the narrator. All these elements may explain why Gu’s novel immediately topped the bestseller and was immediately adapted into multiple media, including film, regional operas, and comic books. Acknowledging his invention and contribution to the generic development, I point out, his female protagonist, i.e., Fang Yuqin, is not so much a revolutionary female knight-errant as a decorative character that reinforces the male-centered power structure in the *jianghu*. In the following I briefly outline the qualities of Yuqin, followed by an examination of the dynamics between Yuqin and Jianqiu. I argue, although Yuqin seems to be controlling during her chivalric adventures with Jianqiu, it is Jianqiu who forms the core of the relationship.

Modeling after the Tang tale Nie Yinniang, Yuqin’s path to knight-errantry is initiated by the murder of her father, assisted by a mysterious monk who sees her talent and takes her back to a remote mountain for martial arts training, and facilitated by her male partner Jianqiu who saves her in her first appearance in the novel and happens to be a disciple of the same master. Due to this same-clan connection and Jianqiu’s instinct for justice, he regards Yuqin’s revenge as his and accompanies her through numerous fights searching for her enemy. In the adventures that Gu Mingdao depicts, Yuqin is certainly no lack of courage. Rather, she is fearless facing evil and always the first to jump in and fight, which unfortunately creates risky or dangerous situations

⁴⁵⁸ Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji*, 110. Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 324.

for herself. Jianqiu, as her partner, never fails to show up at the critical moments, saves her, and punishes the villain. Compare to Yuqin who is frequently driven by abstract concepts such as “justice” and “altruism” but rarely plans out her actions carefully, Jianqiu demonstrates much better understandings of the complexity of humanity and better judgment whenever they need to take actions to right the wrongs. In other words, while Yuqin seems to lead the acts and the relationship, she has to depend upon Jianqiu to both survive and succeed. Lin Baochun in his study of the female knight-errant image in Chinese classical fiction once points out that the invention of the female knight-errant image in classical Chinese fiction is to “add glamor” upon the male fighters, instead of “developing the female as an independent character.”⁴⁵⁹ “Except for the supernatural swordswoman,” Lin states, “the final resolution of the female knight-errant is always man!”⁴⁶⁰ It is in this sense that Yuqin as a female knight-errant does not offer much new elements to the character construction.

Xu Zhuodai 徐卓呆 (1881-1958) is another modern Chinese writer who took part in the flourishing martial arts fiction writing in the late 1920s. Contemporary scholars rarely associate Xu Zhuodai with martial arts fiction, although he was one of the most active players in the cultural realm of Republican China. Born in Suzhou, studied modern gymnastics in Japan, and founded the first gymnastic school in China, Xu Zhuodai is often regarded as “one of the founders of modern Chinese physical education.”⁴⁶¹ He was enthusiastic about stage drama 文明新戲, advocated reforming the drama and personally involved in stage performance. His interest in performance also extended to the emerging modern film industry and established his own film

⁴⁵⁹ Lin Baochun, *Gudian xiaoshuo zhong de leixing renwu*, 190.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, 190.

⁴⁶¹ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 359.

company with friends. When the stage drama as a new genre “declined,” Xu turned his focus to fictional works and wrote mostly short pieces.⁴⁶² Within all the genres and media he was involved and experimented, he never missed an opportunity to promote his style of “*huaji*” 滑稽 (farce) and was therefore given the title of “*xiaojiang*” 笑匠 (literally, Craftsman of Laughter) by his peers.⁴⁶³ Given his wide interests and keen observations of cultural trends, it is not surprising that he also participated in the writing of martial arts fiction. His participation is seen in a twenty-five chapter long novel, with an unusual title, *The Female Knight-Errant Red Pants* (1930).

Xu’s novel was published at the “right” moment addressing the “right” topic: martial arts fiction as a modern literary genre had been popular in the past few years as Xiang Kairan’s *Marvelous Knights-Errant* started the “fire” on the literary market. The “fire” later expanded to the film industry, exemplified by the Mingxing Film Company’s 明星電影公司 on-going film series of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1928-1931) which made Red Lady a household name in Shanghai and other cities. The image of female knight-errant was also seen in Zhang Henshui’s new novel *Tixiao yinyuan* 啼笑因緣 (Fate in Tears and Laughter) when he started to serialize it in March, 1930, in Shanghai local newspaper *Xinwen bao*. *Fate in Tears and Laughter* soon topped the bestseller list and was adapted into drama, film, local operas, and comic books, and made Guan Xiugu 關秀姑, a chivalric figure but also one of the three female protagonists, another household name in the 1930s China besides the Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang. Published only a couple of months after the *Fate in Tears and Laughter*, the *Female Knight-Errant Red Pants* in its title highlights several key elements: on the one hand, “female

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 56.

knight-errant” and “red” resonate with the existing stock image of female fighter and the on-going fervent trend of martial arts fiction; on the other hand, “red pants” discloses a touch that is very different from its precursors – modern, playful, and even a hint of eroticism, because “pants” used to be man’s attire and did not become woman’s daily clothing until the modern time and “red pants” reveals somewhat erotic connotation.

Unlike the fictional works discussed thus far, Xu’s novel is set in a modern urban society and the imaging of the female knight-errant, i.e., Red Pants, is mediated through newspaper. Some scholar therefore states that Red Pants “basically fits the traditional mold (of female knight-errant)... with a purposely modern touch.”⁴⁶⁴ Contextualized in 1930 Shanghai, it “highlights the analogy drawn between the modern girl and the traditional swordswoman.”⁴⁶⁵ Acknowledging its modern setting, I read the novel as nothing but a well-designed and thought-provoking addition to the genre and to the archetype of female fighter. What it brings into the generic convention, I contend, is not so much a parallel “between the modern girl and the traditional swordswoman” as a consequential exploration of a set of questions. These questions include, how to comprehend the implications of tradition-inspired chivalric deeds in a urban environment, how the female knight-errant image, particularly its gender significations, is reconfigured in a modern era, and what it may tell us about the time when it was invented. Focusing on the elements that define Red Pants’ knight-errant identity, I argue, first, beneath the surface of its modern package the novel reinforces the behavioral credential of knight-errantry; and second, its imagined modern setting, especially modern medium such as newspaper, on the one hand, makes the story more relatable to its reader, on the other hand, it offers a valuable platform through which Red Pants is able to perform and carry out her female knight-errant

⁴⁶⁴ Roland Altenburger, *The Sword or the Needle*, 348.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 351.

identity on her own, without dependence on a male counterpart or any element like that. It is precisely the combination of newspaper-mediated self-identification, self-representation and its theatrical nature that enables Red Pants to take the stage.

Categorized as “*huaqi qiqing wuxia xiaoshuo*” 滑稽奇情武俠小說 (fiction of farce, mystery, and martial arts), the story is unfolded surrounding two central questions: what does a pair of red pants symbolizes and who is Red Pants. The inquiry essentially beings with a debate between Hu Duoduo 胡多多, a middle school chancellor and his newly met acquaintance Ms. Ma Erdong 馬二冬 about whether the *xiaoke* 俠客 (knight-errant) exists in the real life or is purely fictional.⁴⁶⁶ Hu Duoduo who despises knight-errant as nonsense soon finds himself teased in public without knowing who does it.⁴⁶⁷ When he brings a pair of red pants left behind by the puzzling teaser to his friend, it becomes clear that the red pants is a token of the mysterious “Red Pants” who disguises in a variety of personas such as middle-class woman, old lady, fortune teller, male beggar, old man, and has righted numerous wrongs for ordinary people, including illicit trading, sexual assault, swindling, forced prostitution, robbery, and so on. This mystery of Red Pant’s identity continues until halfway through the book and is revealed by Red Pants herself. The orally circulated chivalric reputation of Red Pants becomes publicized when Red Pants publishes a statement in the local newspaper condemning a gang of robbers who abuse her name when committing a robbery. She challenges the authority of local police by criticizing them for not being able to tell her righteous deeds. In the same statement Red Pants discloses

⁴⁶⁶ Xu Zhuodai, *Nüxia hongkuzi* 女俠紅褲子 [Female Knight-Errant Red Pants] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2014), 12-15.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 27-28.

that she is a nineteen-year old female student.⁴⁶⁸ She later issues a few more statements in the same newspaper either clarifying her chivalric deeds or correcting the misleading message released by the police department.⁴⁶⁹

Newspaper and other types of modern devices, such as telephone, serve not only an effective medium upon which Red Pants establishes and protect her chivalric persona, but also a stage where she confronts and questions the authoritarian state-patronized facility – namely, police station, for the latter instead of commending her blames her for disrupting the social order. The chivalric deeds conducted by Red Pants and its social impact, therefore, is transformed into a performance in front of the public who has been part of the force that circulates and hence produces the mystery of Red Pants. In this sense, the image of female knight-errant represented by Red Pants is no longer a free roaming and yet lonely outlaw. Instead, it becomes a publically celebrated hero. And, with the aid of newspaper and its publicity, the mystery of Red Pants is turned into a self-sustainable and self-referential narrative.

While this inclusion of newspaper and the element of theatricality in the novel may have well been influenced by Xu's personal involvement in modern publishing industry and performing arts aforementioned, it offers a valuable channel through which Red Pants, a young and provocative female chivalric figure, is able to establish and defend her image. In other words, replacing the inter-connected *jianghu* world with a semi-utopian single-dimensional modern society as the context of her heroic acts, the novel shifts the focus from how to position the chivalric hero within a network of obligations and responsibilities between masters, disciples, peers, friends, and enemy to how to appreciate and continue the deeds of chivalry in a much more open and accessible modern environment. The token that Red Pants leaves behind, i.e., a

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 117-118.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 120-121, 136-137.

pair of red pants, becomes a clue that remains consistent not only with her acts but also with the virtue of chivalry throughout the times from the mystic past to the modern present. The revelation of Red Pants' true identity is also marked by this seemingly contradictory yet convincing combination of change and continuity: she appears to be a college student, wears short hair and high heel, smokes cigarette, sings the popular song "Maomao yu" 毛毛雨 (Drizzle, 1927), and talks about her menstruation. But, after some investigation of her history, it is disclosed that her real name is Luo Shisi 駱十四. She was born with some unusual physical talent, which is later translated into superb martial arts skills. Even her transformation into a knight-errant echoes the traditional chivalric story: her father passes away due to some unjust treatment, so she is determined to take revenge and right the wrongs.⁴⁷⁰ In other words, under her modern look and education, Red Pants, is in essence identical to her predecessors who become and continue to be a fighter due to injustice and wrongdoings. Set in a modern era and equipped with all kinds of modern knowledge and facilities, Red Pants, however, unlike her precursors, is able to live out a double identity, i.e., a modern individual and an iconoclastic female knight-errant without having to rely on any other person, for instance, a male partner, or organization such as a martial arts clan. This treatment of the female chivalric figure as an individual entity marked with independence and autonomy was soon elaborated in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Individuality, Moral Obligations, and Emotional Struggles: the late 1930s and 1940s

The second half of the Republican era witnessed a series of chaos and trauma caused by war: in 1937, Japanese army crossed the Marco Polo bridge near Beijing and started the full-scale war with China. In the following years, major Chinese cities were lost to Japan one after

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, 180-189, 164-169.

another, including Beijing and Tianjin in the summer of 1937, soon Qingdao, and Shanghai and Nanjing later that year. Thousands of people were displaced and even more lost their jobs. Gong Baiyu and Wang Dulu were among them. Though in two different cities that were occupied by the Japanese troops – Gong in Tianjin and Wang in Qingdao –almost around the same time they started to write martial arts fiction for local newspapers, which turned out to be the (only) way that enabled them to not only survive, but also succeed. It is not clear whether they knew of each other or not, but interestingly enough after the first batch of chivalric writing that did not succeed, they began to draw readers’ attention by means of well-written female fighter characters and the issue of emotion involved in knight-errantry. This experience, I suspect, may have re-directed their writing strategies; they soon developed different approaches respectively and heaped fame and success in the following years. In the next paragraphs I begin with Gong’s creation of Liu Yanqing in the *Twelve Coin Darts* and analyze this character by contextualizing it in the lineage of female knight-errant figures. It is not a critical character in Republican-era martial arts fiction generally speaking, nor a central character in the novel. Her presence in the novel, in fact, has long been criticized as a structural flaw both by the writer himself and critics. Her strong sense of independence being a knight-errant and her free articulation of emotions being a female, however, distinguishes her from the precursors in previous tales. I then move on to the female warriors depicted in Wang Dulu’s the *Pentology*, in particular Lotus and Dragon, and elucidate how they are situated and identified in a nexus of obligation, sentiment, and responsibility. In other words, it is in the multifaceted and sophisticated relationships that their identities being a woman, a martial artist, a lover, and a daughter are defined. The gender significations of female knights-errant invented by these two writers, I argue, have gone far beyond the gender transgression implied in Xiang Kairan’s and Zhao Huanting’s works two decades ago and

exemplify paths to individuality and female subjectivity. It is precisely the sensible and yet autonomous self these female fighters symbolize that makes them appealing and popular till today.

Gong Baiyu never wrote much of female characters; all the protagonists in his fictional works are male, but two female subjects that he created and wrote about played important roles in his career developments. As Gong recalled, it was his interview of Shi Jianqiao – a self-identified “*nüxia*” who planned for ten years and eventually assassinated the old warlord Sun Chuanfang who murdered her father when she was little – that gained him reputation among Tianjin journalists and facilitated his news reporter career.⁴⁷¹ It is not clear whether Shi, a real-life female knight-errant persona, inspired Gong Baiyu’s perception of woman fighter or not, but Liu Yanqing, the first female knight-errant character Gong invented saved his career as a popular writer. Gong started writing the *Twelve Coin Darts* with Zheng Zhengyin, because Zheng practiced martial arts and knew all kinds of forms while Gong was a layman. But soon Zheng found another job and left the project, so Gong had to continue writing on his own. It was under this circumstance that Gong switched the focus of writing from a to-be-begun fight scene to the story of Liu Yanqing, for Gong was not confident with writing the fight scene on his own.⁴⁷² Unexpectedly, the episode of Liu Yanqing was very well received and won Gong the reader that eventually led to his success.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷¹ Baiyu, *Hua Bin*, 117.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

Structurally speaking, Liu Yanqing episode is no center of the main storyline; in fact it leads the narrative astray and has caused critiques among critics.⁴⁷⁴ Spanning seven chapters only – a very limited space, indeed, Liu is established as a female knight-errant through expressions of feelings instead of heroic deeds – very different from the images of previous female knights-errant. Liu Yanqing is first introduced as an unidentified *nixia* in the middle of Qiao Mao's 喬茂 escape, aka, Jiugu yan 九股煙 – a clown character – from his enemy. Appearing to be well trained with swords play, Liu easily defeats Qiao's chasers and saves his life. Readers soon are struck by Liu's inexperience and poor judgment dealing with interpersonal relationship contrasting with her superb martial arts skills, when she is teased by a junior fellow from the same clan without even realizing it.⁴⁷⁵ It then becomes clear that Liu runs away from her family due to some romance-related issues. This theme of emotion underscored with individualistic expression and female agency threads through the Liu Yanqing episode.

The image of Liu Yanqing is consciously constructed through juxtaposition with an ordinary woman. Adopted by her uncle Liu Zhaohong 柳兆鴻, a renowned knight-errant in the *jianghu* world, since she is eight, Liu grows up instructed at an awkward location regarding her sexual identity: on the one hand, her femininity is highlighted when her uncle is overprotective of her from being hurt in matters such as martial arts training and traveling; on the other hand, her female identity is downplayed when it comes to questions including sewing, housework, and so on. While this somewhat double-standard treatment of her gender results from her double

⁴⁷⁴ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 481. Also, due to the same reason, in a recent reprint of *Twelve Coin Darts*, Gong Yiren 宮以仁(1930-2011), Gong Baiyu's son who was also the editor of the new edition, deleted all of the chapters related to Liu Yanqing and her partner Yang Hua and compiled them into a separate book.

⁴⁷⁵ Gong Baiyu, *Shi'er jinqian biao*, 234-236.

identity – namely, the female, and the knight-errant, it shapes Liu’s single-minded and self-centered personality, translating into a straightforward and uncompromising manner. In addition, although Liu knows and lives a knight-errant life, she is never confined by the doctrine of chivalry, in particular in the male-female relationship like the characters aforementioned, such as the female knight-errant from Huangjiang. This clear division between chivalric deeds and personal feelings, which her uncle calls “unseasoned” 不懂事 and “mindless” 傻氣 not only makes it challenging to find a spouse for her but also brings trouble in her relationship.⁴⁷⁶ As a result, her uncle concludes that a “suitable” 合適的 mate for her will need to excel in both martial arts training and interpersonal skills, which leads to three different measures, including *biwu zhaopin* 比武招親 (literally, competition in martial arts for marriage), a wide-range search, and asking acquaintances for recommendations.⁴⁷⁷ This is perhaps the first time in the history of chivalric literature when the question of a female knight-errant’s marriage takes a central spot of character development. It also signals a critical moment with regards to the female knight-errant image, i.e., a departure from the focus on morality to that of individuality.

Liu’s individualistic and somewhat spoiled manner makes it hard for her fiancé Yang Hua, also a knight-errant, to situate the relationship. On the one hand, as a knight-errant couple, Liu’s martial arts training far surpasses Yang’s and therefore never humors him on this aspect, which has caused some fights. On the other hand, in the male-female relationship that Liu prioritizes loyalty and monogamy over morality also put her in a very different light from the previous female fighters such as He Yufeng in *A Tale of Heroer and Lovers*. Chapter Eleven describes a dilemma that Yang Hua faces: after he runs away from Liu due to a fight, he saves a

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, 268-269.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, 243.

young woman Li Yinxia 李映霞 from a gang of bandits who murders Li's family. Orphaned and homeless, Li is unfortunately rejected by her distant uncle and has to stay in Yang's friend's house while Yang is helping his friend with some other matters. Yang's friend and Li herself assume that Yang will eventually marry her, especially because she has traveled alone with Yang and sojourned together – the conventional expectation based upon Confucian sexual ideology. This situation may well remind the reader of a similar moment designated in the He Yufeng story when He saves both An Ji and Zhang Jinfeng in a deserted temple and has them marry each other so as to protect Zhang Jinfeng's chastity and enable An Ji to escort Zhang back home. Yang Hua, being the one that saves the weak – Li Yinxia in this case – displays a very ambiguous attitude: people around him address Li as his wife but he does not seem to object it. When Liu and her uncle arrive and find out the circumstances, Liu is heartbroken and asserts that saving Li's life and marrying her as wife are two separate issues. Li, a conventional woman figure, finds no way but committing suicide in order to show her chastity.

The story closes with a happy ending as Liu's uncle adopts Li as his daughter while Liu and Yang reunite and get married eventually. Although short, this episode of Liu and Yang's relationship has left a remarkable melodrama in modern martial arts fiction. Personal feelings and the autonomous self for the first time exceed the abstract concepts such as morality and virtue in the constructing of female knight-errant image. Moreover, Liu demonstrates a strong sense of female agency when handling issues related to her sentiment and romantic relationship. This emphasis on individuality and sensibility in contrast to other social and moral responsibilities opened up an important path in the genre development. In the following paragraphs we shall see more and increasingly complicated explorations of these issues in Wang Dulu's writing.

Wang Dulu's works were very popular in the late 1930s and 1940s Qingdao where he sojourned, but it is not clear how far they traveled due to the war and the isolated divisions within the country. It is said that someone in Chongqing – then the capital – pretended to be “Professor Wang Dulu” and gave speeches on the stories of the *Jiuhua qiren zhuan* 九華奇人傳 (Biographies of Marvelous Figures in Jiuhua).⁴⁷⁸ Only after the war was over and the nation-wide communication was resumed was the fraud revealed. This anecdote shows, even during the war period, Wang Dulu's martial arts fiction, in particular the *Pentalogy* was also known and widely read in the hinterland. But he did not rise to a national, let alone global, fame until the year of 2000 when Ang Lee – an award-winning Chinese American director – released his martial arts film, i.e., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that is based on Wang's same-title novel, the fourth part of the *Pentalogy*. While Wang's novel provides the foundation for Lee's film, there are differences that considerably change the storyline and character development in the film. Given the wide circulation of Lee's film, it is very possible that people may have seen the film but never read the novel. To avoid unnecessary confusion, I am listing below several fundamental differences between the novel and the film that are relevant to the theme of this chapter, before I start my analysis. This dissertation focuses on Wang Dulu's novels only.

First, in the film *Jade Fox* 碧眼狐狸, Dragon's female master, is one of the three female protagonists and remains active throughout the film. In the novel, nevertheless, she dies in the first few chapters and her story is only narrated later intermittently when Dragon recalls how she starts learning martial arts.

⁴⁷⁸ The master of Li Mubai, the male protagonist of Wang's *Pentalogy* is called “Jiuhua laoren” 九華老人 (the Old Guy of Jiuhua) and practices extraordinary martial arts skills. Xu Sinian, “Preface,” *Wohu canglong (Revised)* 臥虎藏龍修訂本 (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2006), 3.

Second, the film completely leaves out the character De Xiaofeng 德嘯峰, a Manchurian official working in the Internal Affairs Bureau, an important friend to both the male protagonist Li Mubai and Lotus. De is also a major character in the narrative development of the *Pentalogy* and a key character to understand the construct of the *jianghu* world in Wang Dulu's novels. It is through De that Li and Lotus get to know Tie Beile 鐵貝勒 (Duke Tie), who facilitates their establishments in the capital city. Duke Tie is known as Sirt Te 貝勒爺 in the film. The film essentially combines De and Duke Tie into one character, i.e., Sir Te.

Third, the film ends with Dragon jumping off the cliff after one night stay with her lover Luo Xiaohu 羅小虎 (hereafter Tiger). The novel, however, has numerous chapters describing Dragon's experiences after she escapes from the wedding and dedicates the fifth part of the *Pentalogy* to narrating her life journey and the aftermath since she leaves Tiger.

Chinese critics may have divergent opinions about how to interpret certain work of Wang's, but they all agree with encapsulating Wang's works in two key words: "chivalry" 俠 and "sentiment" 情. They also concur that the sentiment that threads through Wang's novels is frequently tragic 悲情. Fan Boqun, for instance, uses "tragedy of sentimental knight-errant" 情俠悲劇 to summarize Wang's martial arts fiction.⁴⁷⁹ Zhang Gansheng commends Wang for "creating the complete form of romantic martial arts fiction" and identifies him as "a grandmaster, and a pathfinder."⁴⁸⁰ The root of the tragedy depicted in Wang's *Pentalogy*, Zhang Gansheng states, lies in the "feudal viewpoints" 封建觀念 that was "universal within the society."

⁴⁷⁹ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxueshi*, 484.

⁴⁸⁰ Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, 301.

By so doing, Zhang asserts, Wang “intensifies his critique on the feudalist mentality.”⁴⁸¹ I, however, interpret Wang Dulu’s writing, particularly *The Pentology* as an effective yet affecting way to explore the dynamics between social norms, sentiment, and knight-errantry as an idealistic literary construct. Often situating his protagonists in a deadlock between social and/or cultural ideology and personal pursuit, Wang sees chivalry no longer singularly defined by martial arts skills, or, devotion to friendship, or, a sense of justice. Rather, it is scrutinized at the juncture of conflicts and collisions of different values and code of ethics, and the female knight-errant character symbolizes the contested site, with Lotus and Dragon being two salient examples.

Lotus’s metamorphosis from a young lady to a well-respected female knight-errant leader in the *jianghu* is marked with an intricate combination of corrections of external bias towards her and repetitive internal reinforcements of self-reliance. In other words, the construction of Lotus as an increasingly empowered female protagonist is unfolded from two correlated perspectives: in male characters’ eye, and Lotus’s self-awareness as a female, and the two are connected by the issue of sentiment. In the following I focus on Lotus’s romance – the central theme of the novel *Precious Sword, Golden Pin* while supplement it with the changing perceptions of her image in the group of male characters. I argue, the growing sophistication of Lotus’s character and the female subjectivity she demonstrates make her an unprecedented female knight-errant character that not only won Wang Dulu crucial success in the late Republican China, but also speaks to contemporary audience.

First introduced to the reader as the only daughter of Yu Xiongyuan’s 俞雄遠, who is known in the *jianghu* as the “Iron-winged Eagle” 鐵翅雕 due to his strong martial arts skills and

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, 290, 298.

personality, Lotus is a most desirable and yet unapproachable woman in her town: young, good-looking, virtuous, but with an intimidating father. In spite of the mutual fondness between Lotus and Li Mubai, the male protagonist, a young martial artist, and also the descendent of a famous chivalric figure, they cannot get married due to her long arranged marriage. Their second encounter takes place when Lotus's family is in the middle of escape from a gang of revenge-pursuers. Lotus is afterwards positioned in an ethical deadlock when she finally arrives in her fiancé, Meng Sizhao's 孟思昭 house: her father – the patriarchal figure who arranged her marriage – dies on the way, her mother is dying due to exhaustion, Meng who she never meets is missing, Meng's father is an impotent figure, and Li who escorts her and her mother to Meng's house, also the only person that might help her, is an outsider to all her affairs. Even with matchless martial arts skills, Lotus is stuck, physically and ethically. Wang Dulu depicts a moment in the evening right before Li's departure to the capital city when Lotus comes in quietly and asks him to help with looking for Meng – the only hope she sees that might change the impasse she faces.

Silenced for a while, Lotus sobbed and said: “the second son (i.e., Meng) has been gone for over a year. No one knows his whereabouts. Does Brother Li know about this?” Li Mubai said, “I have already heard.” Lotus said again, “I heard it is not just so simple. The eldest son is said to be an utterly bad and evil person. He wanted to seize all the family wealth, so he kicked his brother out!” She choked up and wept.

...

For a while, Lotus said, “I now have no one reliable. All (I beg for) is Brother Li's attention!” Li Mubai said: “Why are you so polite? I regard you as my sister. I will for

sure do my best to find Brother Meng.” Lotus, as she heard this, felt even sadder, and almost lost it. For some time, (Li heard) Lotus said: “I am going back (to my room). Brother Li, please rest!” As she said this, (she) gently opened the door, and walked out of the room, without making a peep. (Li heard) Lotus walked toward the inner court.⁴⁸²

While Lotus displays certain degrees of female agency by reaching out to Li for help, she is not yet sure about where she can go and what else she can do at this point in her life. Finding the missing fiancé seems to become the only hope to her. Li Mubai, who can travel freely as a man and knows her background, naturally becomes a “savior” to her. This underscored somewhat uncertainty about herself as a female dependent upon the other – a male in this case – soon changes when her mother passes away and she has fulfilled the duty of filial piety. Refusing to be abused by Meng’s elder brother, Lotus decides to leave Meng’s family and embarks on a journey of searching for Meng by herself. Unfortunately, Wang Dulu sets up another obstacle for her: before Lotus even meets Meng, Meng has met and befriended Li using a fake name. Admiring Li’s superb martial skills and manner, Meng dies for Li in a fight against Li’s enemy. Witnessing Meng’s death and knowing the pre-existing marriage arrangement between Meng and Lotus, Li decides never to see Lotus any more – he loves her, but feels guilty at Meng’s death – another dilemma Wang Dulu creates for his protagonists. Involved in the relationship with Lotus, both male knights-errant, i.e., Meng and Li, prioritize their values such as brotherhood and loyalty to friends over Lotus’s (and theirs, too, indeed) feelings. Knowing nothing about all these happenings, Lotus wonders why Li avoids meeting her and resolves to

⁴⁸² Wang Dulu, *Baojian jinchai*, 100.

chase after Li for answers to all her puzzlements. Wang Dulu portrays a scene when Lotus rides a horse after Li in a blizzard:

The horse was fairly strong, but the road was icy and slippery. For several times, the horse stumbled. Lotus was frustrated but had to rein in her horse and slowed down. She felt very irritable and sad. While weeping, she was aggrieved at Meng: “Meng Sizhao, it is really not easy to look for you! When I find you one day, I will see what you are going to say!” (She) thought about it again: “Li Mubai, I know you are not an emotionless person. You were willing to help us when my parents were alive. Now I am alone, so pitiful, but you do not want to meet me even once. What is all this about? Can it be that you think I am some lascivious *jianghu* woman?”

More sorrowful, (she heard) the wind was blowing. It was freezing cold and the snow was pounding. She couldn't help breaking down and boohooing while drawing rein, lowering her head, and letting her horse slowly walks along.⁴⁸³

After she finally catches up with Li, however, Lotus is too agitated to have a conversation with him and ends up riding away:

... Too embarrassed to return and chase him again, (Lotus) shifted to a mocking smile and said to herself: “Do I have to rely on others? Do I have to find Meng so as to live my life? When my parents were alive, they prevented me from doing anything, except for being a virtuous woman. Now I am alone. I have gone through quite a lot by myself and

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 507-508.

killed several people with my hands. Is there anything else I can't do on my own? Can't I roam in the *jianghu* with my pair of swords?" Lotus thereupon changed her mind. She decided to go to Yushu county where her father's tomb was located and paid respect to him before she returned to her hometown. She wanted to find Sun Zhengli and other friends, collect some money, and escort her parents' coffins back home.⁴⁸⁴

Lotus's emerging sense of self-reliance and self-respect is reignited and reinforced once again when she eventually learns the truth from Li's friend:

... So this is the reason! Meng and Li are both truly reliable people. Sir De is really their good friend, too. However (they) all tricked me, only! No wonder the woman is easy to trick! ... I, I applaud for them! ...

As she said, Lotus couldn't help crying, louder and sadder, so loud that all the people in the inn all stopped talking and came to the courtyard inquiring about it. The inn owner also used the excuse of sending the tea and came in her room to take a look. ...

(Later after the friend left and she calmed down) ... when her hands touched that pair of swords, she changed her mind and said: when father raised me, (he) treated me like a boy. Later I've also beaten a good deal of strong men in the *jianghu*. Can't I survive on my own without the man? She became resolute, wiped her tear, stopped weeping, closed the door, turned off the light, and went to bed.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, 515.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, 529, 532.

As this paragraph portrays, although the reality hurts Lotus's feelings it also pushes the long existing while concealed sense of self-independence to the front of her consciousness. The shift from expecting a future with the man, be it Meng or Li, to counting on herself – physically and emotionally – crystalizes the birth of Lotus being not simply a capable female knight-errant, but most importantly an autonomous monad and a modern self.

This metamorphosis of Lotus's character is also mirrored in male characters' eye. Upon her debut in the novel, even her father sees her a vulnerable young girl, although he trains her martial arts skills since she was little. That she stands up in public, fights against her father's revengers, and saves him revises her father's perception of her, not just as a daughter, but also as a capable female fighter. To the male knight-errant characters active in the capital city, most of whom are Li Mubai's friends or acquaintances, Lotus is known as the woman involved in the "triangle romantic relationship" with Li and Meng. In other words, before the male players of the *jianghu* meet her, she is a subject of gossip and an object of sympathy in the marriage deadlock – a privately consumed topic. When she finally arrives in the capital city, however, she immediately saves a vulnerable prostitute as well as her mother, kills Miao Zhenshan 苗振山, an absolute villain that everybody wants to eradicate but has not done so due to this or that reason, and protects De Xiaofeng – a well-connected and reputable figure in the *jianghu* – and his family by injuring his revenger, another evil character. Her decisiveness and capability soon wins unconditional acclaims and respect among male knights-errant.⁴⁸⁶ Lotus, up to this point, has become a leading figure in the *jianghu* world. Her growth from a domesticated young woman to an independent and yet well respected female knight-errant leader unquestionably reveals the sophistication of female knight-errant character: on the one hand, it indicates the compatibility of

⁴⁸⁶ For instance, Yang Jiantang 楊健堂, a highly-regarded figure in the *jianghu* praises her for what she has done. Wang Dulu, *Baojian jinchai*, 450-451.

conventional virtues such as filial piety and the unconventional acts like roaming and killing in the *jianghu* world; on the other hand, it seems to connote the impossible co-existence of happy romance and female warrior identity, even though it is never due to female character's lack of efforts. Instead, the male protagonists' emphases on brotherly bond over romantic relationship put Lotus in a fairly passive position on this regard.

Unlike Lotus who does not seem to be able to do much to charge her own life before she fulfills all sorts of moral and ethical duties, Dragon depicted in the last two novels of the *Pentology*, i.e. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Iron Cavalry, Silver Vase* represents the "other" side of the female knight-errant image: born prestigious, thinks ambitiously, and acts aggressively. Her character development offers an alternative path of female *bildung*. In the following I focus on a few key moments and several crucial aspects of Dragon's growth and discuss how she is created at the juncture of multiple identities and the conflicts between passions and obligations, limits and breakthroughs.

Inaugurated both in and outside of the novel as the projection of the male's gender imagination, Dragon's character delineates the challenges and struggles that a woman experiences attempting to break away from a planned life path – most of time planned by the male – and search for an autonomous self.⁴⁸⁷ That she gives up staying with her lover Tiger after tremendous efforts symbolizes an ironic and yet most powerful moment of self-liberation: the relationship with Tiger initiates and eventually completes her breakaway from her family. Leaving Tiger, in this light, announces a departure from the past and the re-birth of a new self that is driven and shaped by rationality instead of desire. And her newly added identity – namely, mother – in the last sequel of the *Pentology* reads even more symbolic. Contextualizing Dragon's

⁴⁸⁷ In the novel, Dragon starts to learn martial arts skills due to her teacher Gao Yunyan's guidance who intends to train her based on his gender ideals. Wang Dulu, *Wohu canglong*, 58.

character in the early 1940s northern China where national crisis due to Japanese invasion presided over the society, I argue, Wang Dulu's construction of Dragon as a female knight-errant and a woman has gone far beyond the realm framed by notions such as nationalism, patriotism, and morality, and spells out an in-depth exploration of female subjectivity and independence through a dialogue between desire and rationality.

Born in a high-level Manchu official family, Dragon's life is marked with numerous contradictions and double-sidedness: rigorous family education on woman's virtues and yet unbounded physical environment in Xinjiang where her father is assigned to before she reaches her puberty. Her private teacher, Gao Yunyan 高雲雁, is a talented scholar who assists her father's command in the battlefield and also a skilled martial artist in secret possessing some superb martial arts manuals 武功秘笈. Dragon studies with Gao on Chinese classics during the day and martial arts at night. While being arranged by her father to marry a nerdy and clumsy scholar from a prestigious family, she falls in love with an orphaned outlaw. All these experiences shape her complicated and yet fascinating identities, including her daytime persona – a delicate and unapproachable lady, and the nighttime identity of woman warrior; a most beautiful and calm looking face in public and a rebellious and passionate heart in private. Seemingly possessing the best in both worlds – the capital city where her father is the governor, and the unconventional *jianghu* within which her swords play defeats numerous enemies, she is, however, for a long time unsure of her real identity: she loves her outlaw lover Tiger, but cannot completely abandon her family and runs away with him; she longs for the freedom of the *jianghu* but could not give up the life her family offers. She is full of contradictions, and yet very real. Her growth to some degree signifies the path towards a modern self that is composed of stages of self-awareness, self-awakening, and self-reliance.

Different from Lotus who has a knight-errant father and learns martial arts since little, Dragon is born to be a prestigious and conventional woman. Projecting his gender ideals on her, Master Gao teaches her secret martial arts skills for the purpose of training her into a “miracle in the world,” i.e., a woman with combined talents: intelligent as female historian Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 45-116), fearless like female general Qin Liangyu, and chivalric such as female knight-errant Red Thread.⁴⁸⁸ It is however, a frightening moment when Dragon realizes her capability of excelling at martial arts – she can easily surpass her teacher and reaches an untouchable level of power when she is only a teenager. In other words, as early as her teenage years she has recognized the strength hidden in her, that is, her potential to develop and explore an unlimited space far beyond the paths designates to her either by her father or her Master. No similar description ever before in martial arts fiction, this moment of self-realization and the frightening feeling coming along marks a critical point of Dragon’s emergence as an intelligent and self-aware individual.

The martial arts skills that Dragon acquires enable her to chase after Tiger who leads the group of bandits and robs her family while they travel in the desert. In spite of Tiger’s vocation, outlook, and life trajectory, all of which Dragon detests, Dragon falls in love with him, but cannot stop urging him to submit himself to the orthodox system and buy an official position so as to marry her. Some critic applies Freudian theory to the tragedy of Dragon and Tiger and argues for Wang Dulu’s psychological depth in his creation of these two characters.⁴⁸⁹ I read the relationship between Dragon and Tiger as the confrontation and negotiation between desire and rationality. To some degree, Tiger represents the “other” side of Dragon’s life: outlaw, parents

⁴⁸⁸ Wang Dulu, *Wohu canglong*, 60.

⁴⁸⁹ Xu Sinian, *Xia de zongji*, 142-143.

murdered and siblings missing, freedom of roaming in the endless desert, and an air of raw, vibrant masculinity. That she falls in love with him signifies the victory of her long hidden desire for freedom and self-realization. There is a scene when Tiger stays in a local inn in the capital city and misses the desert while getting ready to “kidnap” Dragon at her wedding and elope with her. While Tiger is stranded in the small room of a small inn, Dragon is stuck by all sorts of invisible forces: the notion of filial piety, the fear of family humiliation, the patriarchal order, the orthodox sexual ideology, and so on. As much as she tries to obey her father and protect her family, Dragon could not resist the calling of her desire. After her mother’s wake, she eventually leaves behind the capital city and all that is related to the conventional prestige.

Dragon, however, is not captivated by her desire. Rather, she leaves Tiger after one night reunion, moves on and finds a new path far away from the capital, her lover Tiger, and even the *jianghu* that she once longs for. An important change of her identity also takes place in this new stage of character development: Dragon becomes a mother. Although she knows her baby boy is switched by some passerby right after the birth, she raises the baby girl who is not her biological child out of a mother’s affection and transforms herself from a rebellious young woman into a responsible single mother. That is, in the far away northwestern ethnic region, under a new name, Dragon creates an alternative life and identity for herself. All the struggles, conflicts, and confrontations she experiences in the previous novel, i.e. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, turn out to only foreshadow this ultimate development. It is in this sense Dragon completes a journey of female bildung from a to-be-domesticated young girl to a rebellious female knight-errant and to a most skilled fighter and yet responsible mother.

Chinese critics hold different opinions explaining the ending of the *Pentalogy*, i.e., Dragon leaves Tiger and stays alone. Xu Sinian, for instance, attributes this “tragic ending” to

the contrasting backgrounds of two protagonists and a combining force of “social system, feudal ideology, conflicts of the *jianghu*, and the divergent personalities.”⁴⁹⁰ Fan Boqun states that it is “the unknown force of the fate” that controls the two protagonists.⁴⁹¹ On Dragon’s character development, there lies another perspective that may shed insight on the question, i.e., the author’s intention. Wang Dulu once responded to his readers regarding why he “killed” the female protagonist Lu Hai’e 魯海娥 in his martial arts novel *Caifeng yinshe zhuan* 彩鳳銀蛇傳 that was serialized in the *Jingbao* 京報 in Nanjing approaching the end of the WWII:

After this character (i.e., Lu Hai’e) is constructed, I feel hesitant, because it is impossible to make this kind of woman to live a conventional life of “lovely flowers, round moon” 花好月圓. It is especially impractical to press her to please the man together with another woman, as Shisan mei does. In addition, how can I enable her to win over the feminine and pretty Lady Mei 梅姑娘 in Ye Yunxiong’s (i.e., the male protagonist) mind? And, how shall I increase the excitement in the second half of the book so that my readers will not feel more and more boring? Therefore, I have to “kill” her.⁴⁹²

Lu Hai’e appears to be a straightforward, active, and strong female knight-errant – quite similar to Dragon. Lu loves the male protagonist Ye Yunxiong but dies without being able to be with him. Wang’s comments indicate that he thought over how to construct his fictional figures, in

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, 142.

⁴⁹¹ Fan Boqun, *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxueshi*, 489.

⁴⁹² Wang Dulu, *Wang Dulu sanwen ji* 王度盧散文集 [Collection of Wang Dulu’s Essays] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2014), 419.

particular the female knight-errant, by not only pondering the storyline in order to narrate the story in a logic way, but also taking into account readers' reception and the appeal of his works. After all, being a popular writer that struggled in the commercialized modern publishing industry, Wang Dulu had to be concerned about both the quality and the reception of his works. His constructions of Lotus and Dragon as two female knights-errant are truly successful both artistically and commercially.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary socio-political issues had been ingrained in the construction of female knight-errant image. Sha Xuemei, portrayed in the *Tale of the Boudoir and Chivalry* that Chapter One examines, for example, engages with the gendered politics hotly debated in the late imperial period through a forceful woman knight-errant character that disavows obligations generated by institutions such as marriage, so as to pursuit freedom of being a woman and a human being. This powerful avant-garde cry for feminist right, however, was replaced by a setback image of Red Lady in Xiang Kairan's *Marvelous Knights-Errant* published in the 1920s. This detour of female knight-errant imaging, intriguingly, paralleled the trajectory of literary autonomy and pointed to a complicated picture of how Chinese society transformed towards a modern one.

Focusing on the writers and their martial arts fiction published and circulated during the Republican era, this chapter delineates a genealogy of female knight-errant characters created from the 1920s till mid-1940s and investigates how they are portrayed, what defines their identity, and their gender significations in a highly politicized period. Rather than a linear developmental contour, the characters discussed in this chapter demonstrate a regression of

female subjectivity in characters such as Lan Yuanhua and Fang Yuqin during the 1920s and a continuously growing emphasis on individuality and independence in figures such as Liu Yanqing and Dragon. Moreover, as the issue of sentiment, in particular the romantic relationship between the male and female knights-errant, is woven into the construction of female fighters, the female knight-errant is defined by not simply her combat skills, but also how she confronts and prioritizes a variety of moral, ethical, and personal issues. It is at the juncture of contested values, ideologies, and notions that female knight-errant “grows out of” the long-dominated shadow of male characters and takes the stage of the *jianghu* being not simply the partner of the male, but most importantly, a capable, independent, and respected individual. This construction of female knight-errant as self-reliant and autonomous monad spells out the modern nature of the genre written in the late 1920s to the 1940s. It also parallels the increasing presence of the literary during the period in question. While the growth of the literary generated space and enabled the birth and development of female knights-errant, the imaging of female knight-errant in turn contributes to and reinforces the notion of the literary.

The female knight-errant characters invented in the mid- and late Republican-era continue to be consumed in the contemporary time. When Ang Lee released his *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000, he probably did not anticipate the film would bring him so much success: it grossed \$213.5 million on a \$17 million budget, including \$128 million in the US, becoming the highest-grossing foreign-language film in American history. It has won over 40 awards, including one of the most prestigious, i.e., the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Critics hailed for this film, commenting on its “distinctly feminine core.”⁴⁹³ Academics wrote papers and tried to decipher its appeal among not just Chinese-speaking

⁴⁹³ Review by Bob Smithouser on *Plugged In*, accessed on Feb. 5, 2016: <http://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/crouchingtigerhiddendragon/>

community but also those have no knowledge about Chinese culture.⁴⁹⁴ Even Ang Lee himself acknowledged he invented the fight scene in bamboo forest to pay tribute to a predecessor martial arts film, i.e., *A Touch of Zen* 俠女 (1971) directed by Hong Kong director King Hu 胡金銓 (1932-1997) whose works, including *Come Drink with Me* 大醉俠 (1966), *Dragon Gate Inn* 龍門客棧 (1967), all starring or co-starring female knights-errant, and re-started a wave of martial arts films in the 1960s worldwide.

Both Ang Lee's and King Hu's successful films were created upon a rich tradition of woman warrior imaging in particular and martial arts fiction in general. Their successes also shed light on the ever-lasting appeal of the works and images this chapter has examined, for they still speak to the audience nearly a century later and cross the boundaries of culture, language, and media.

⁴⁹⁴ For instance, Cai Rong, "Gender Imaginations in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the Wuxia World," *Position: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol. 13 (Nov. 2005), 441-471. Karen Ross and Carolyn Byely, "The Woman Warrior: A Feminist Political Economic Analysis of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," *Women and Media: International Perspectives* (2008), 81-103, to name a few.

Conclusion

Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice. Inhabited by the uncanniness that it seeks, history imposes its law upon the faraway places that it conquers when it fosters the illusion that it is bringing them back to life.

-- Michel De Certeau

Like reading a novel till the end, I begin the conclusion with the ends of the writers I have analyzed in this dissertation. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, as the Communist Party of China gradually took over the Mainland China and began to rule the country, martial arts writers who used to be popular during the Republican era stopped writing one after another. Xiang Kairan in Hunan was given classics of socialist realism to read, including the Soviet novel *Gangtie shi zenyang liancheng de* 鋼鐵是怎樣煉成的 (How the Steel was Tempered, 1936) written by Soviet writer Nikolai Ostrosky (1904-1936) and collection of journals *Jiaosuo taozai bozi shang de baogao* 絞索套在脖子上的報告 (Reportáže z buržoazní republiky, 1943) written by Czechoslovak journalist Julius Fučík (1903-1943). He was commissioned to write a novel of the peasant uprising organized by Chen Sheng 陳勝 (?-208BCE) and Wu Guang 吳廣 (? – 208BCE) in the Qin dynasty. He, however, was unable to materialize it.⁴⁹⁵ He attended the first provincial Forum on Literature and Culture 文藝座談會 and admitted that his mind could not catch up with

⁴⁹⁵ Cheng Yize, “Yi kairan xiansheng” 憶愷然先生 [Remembering Mr. Kairan], in Pingjiang Buxiao sheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 616.

the time, feeling restrained and uneasy like “bound feet of an old lady.”⁴⁹⁶ Wang Dulu, stopped writing in the late 1940s, became a teacher and relocated in the northeastern China. He never mentioned what he wrote; no one in his school knew either his literary works or how popular he used to be, except for his wife.⁴⁹⁷ Gong Baiyu gave up writing martial arts fiction voluntarily in the late 1940s and turned to study inscriptions on oracle bones and ancient bronze. All his notes and studies accumulated for nearly two decades, unable to be published, were taken away and eventually lost during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁹⁸ Despite his resentment at having to write martial arts fiction during the war, he was commissioned by the government in the mid-1950s to write a vernacular novel, which was published in a Hong Kong newspaper.⁴⁹⁹ Entitled *Lülin haojie zhuan* 綠林豪傑傳 (Biographies of Knights-Errant in the Lülin, 1956), the novel tells a story of peasant rebellion and includes elements of martial arts fiction. Gong grumbled about the challenge of writing the novel, “it is too difficult to write a martial arts novel with correct meaning and class struggle!”⁵⁰⁰ Compare to the dozens of book he had written at will before, Gong found it especially hard to write a novel like this under instructions.⁵⁰¹

Gong was not the first that voiced this kind of confusion. Zhang Henshui, for instance, in 1949 pondered over how to position and integrate martial arts fiction into the literary field reigned by doctrines of literary realism, first advocated during the May Fourth period and later

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Xu Sinian, *Wang Dulu pingzhuan*, 298-303.

⁴⁹⁸ Feng Yunan, *Leisa jinqian biao*, 246, 256.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid, 238-240.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid, 240.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid, 240.

the socialist era. Zhang pointed out two criteria that martial arts fiction needs to meet: first, it shall be a social novel that does not surpass reality; second, it shall convey edifying messages which, however, should not be the “chivalric spirit,” because it is “backward.”⁵⁰² On the surface, Zhang’s comments point to the content and function of martial arts fiction, that is, whatever the fiction is about, it shall never go beyond the domain that “reality” marks out, and the “reality” evidently refers to “social reality” as the subgenre is categorized as “social novel.” Its social content and correct message are to be transmitted and enlighten the reader. If we take into account the emergence and development of modern martial arts fiction this dissertation has examined thus far, it becomes clear that the two criteria Zhang proposed corresponded exactly to the critiques that left-wing intellectuals expressed against martial arts fiction back in the 1930s – namely, “untruthful” content, misleading ideological message, and negative influence. In other words, what the criteria spell out is the restrained imagination and limited literary autonomy. If achieved, the criteria may ideologically facilitate the subgenre to be integrated into the mainstream literary field; aesthetically, however, it would mark another round of regression of literary autonomy and diminishing of space for imaginary creation. That Zhang could not write a martial arts novel met his self-proposed criteria and Gong was not pleased with *Lilin haojie zhuan* he wrote under commission underscores the incompatibility of martial arts fiction as a literary subgenre and the doctrine of Chinese literary realism. It also manifests a strong sense of writing fictional works as autonomous imaginary expression that had been firmly ingrained in popular writers of modern martial arts fiction.

This dissertation by centering on four different themes has examined how modern Chinese martial arts fiction emerged and developed in the first half of the twentieth century.

⁵⁰² Zhang Henshui, “Wuxia xiaoshuo de wojian,” 55-60.

Chapter One brings into focus the last decade of the Qing reign and captures the moment when state-sponsored questions of “justice” and morality were replaced by a variety of socio-political issues closely related to contemporary society. It marked the incipient modern stage of the genre and the possibilities that were opened up for literary imagination. Chapter Two introduces a critical chronology of the key concept of *jianghu* since ancient Chinese thought till the late imperial period as the background to understand the transformations and significance of the *jianghu* world created in the period in question. It argues that a stateless terrain portrayed in martial arts fiction as the setting for chivalric acts was seen and instituted in the beginning of the twentieth century. It marked the establishment of modern martial arts fiction and distinguished it from its traditional precursor. Xiang Kairan’s *jianghu* construct essentially continued this creation by mimicking the reality – namely, a stateless China ruled by warlords in the 1920s. It was the unprecedented popularity of his novels that facilitated the *jianghu* to become a landmark trope of the genre. As writers continued to invest in the concept in the following decades, ironically, it remained an autonomous realm in the fiction but turned more regulated – in other words, less space for literary imagination – as it reached what critics think of maturity. Chapter Three investigates the changing conception of modern “literature” in the late imperial and Republican era by scrutinizing the shifting dynamics between the notions of historicity and fictionality. Martial arts fiction, due to its close ties with indigenous narrative tradition and cross-media popularity, serves an optimal site to unfold the inquiry. Chapter Four uses gender as a critical category and elucidates a trajectory of literary autonomy through a metamorphosis of female knight-errant images depicted in the martial arts fiction.

Written and successfully popularized in the first half of the twentieth century, martial arts fiction this dissertation explores offers a platform that could negotiate both the lofty ideas of the

nationalist New Culture and May Fourth movement, as well as the general reading market crying for sensational pleasure. It embraces many late imperial and May Fourth ideas such as women's liberation and "strengthening the nation," while also, as a business and commercial operation, catering to and cashing on popular beliefs in Daoism and retribution. With its multifarious offerings, such as fantasy and physicality, it became a pleasurable and effective representative for modern life, including many competing ideas and new challenges. More importantly, emerging as a modern subgenre at a time when all sensory and intellectual resources were undergoing radical changes, martial arts fiction became a familiar and productive carrier for rehearsing and practicing various gender roles and modern sociopolitical subjectivities.

In the January 2014 *Amazing Chinese* 出彩中国人 television show, popular action actor Jet Li 李連杰, one of the three "judges" in the show, shared his feelings of being an action actor. Li said, as he grew old, he started to reflect upon his "martial arts acting career" 武林之路: although his first movie, *Shaolin Temple* 少林寺(1982) meant a lot to him, he has been blaming himself for shooting the film. Because, Li lamented, numerous young audiences have *been misled by it* (emphasis added) and gone to the Shaolin temple studying martial arts before they even understood what martial arts really are. Li confessed he felt tremendously ashamed of what he has influenced young audience.⁵⁰³ Li's comments undoubtedly points to the incomparable popularity of martial arts movies. What is stunning about his reflection, however, is that martial arts genre – film in this case, is still troubled by a similar impasse that writers and critics had pondered over in late Qing and Republican period. Those contemplations and efforts to comprehend modern "literature" and its autonomy a century ago still hear their echo in contemporary China.

⁵⁰³ Accessed on Nov. 15, 2015. <http://ent.163.com/14/0102/09/9HIRVQJR00031H2L.html>

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