

Jin Yong's Novels and Hong Kong's Popular Culture

Mr Cheng Ching-hang, Matthew

Jin Yong's martial arts novel, *The Book and the Sword*, was first serialised in the *New Evening Post* on 8 February 1955. His novels have been so well received since then that they have become a significant and deeply rooted part of Hong Kong's popular culture.

Jin Yong's novels are uniquely positioned, somewhere between part literature and part plebeian entertaining read. That is why they have a wide readership following. From serials published in newspapers to films and hit TV drama series, they are at the same time acknowledged by academics as home-grown literature of Hong Kong, and take pride of place in the genre of Chinese novel-writing.

The origins of the martial arts novel (also known as the "wuxia novel") can be traced back to the ancient *Shiji* (*The Records of the Grand Historian*), specifically to chapters such as the "Biographies of Knight-errants" and "Men with Swords". However, the genre draws inspiration from many parts of Chinese history and culture, including the Tang dynasty novels about chivalry, such as Pei Xing's *Nie Yinniang* and Du Guangting's *The Man with the Curly Beard; The Water Margin*, which was written between the Yuan and Ming dynasties; and the Qing dynasty novels about heroism, such as *The Seven Heroes and Five Gallants* and *Adventures of Emperor Qianlong*.

In 1915, Lin Shu (Lin Qinnan) wrote a classic Chinese novella, *Fumei Records*, and its publication in the third issue of the periodical *Xiao Shuo Da Guan* was accompanied by the earliest use of the term "martial arts novel". Its release marked the beginning of the spread of such novels throughout China. During the Republican period, fine works appeared in quick succession by novelists such as Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, Zhao Huanting, Huanzhu Louzhu, Bai Yu, Wang Dulu, and Zheng Zhengyin.¹

In the early decades of the 20th century, a group of writers of martial arts novels emerged in South China. They were either from Canton and later moved to Hong Kong, or local Hongkonger with connection to this group. Therefore, they came to be called the Guangdong-Hong Kong School. Their martial arts novels shared common characteristics. Tang U-kong, Chu Yu-chai, Ngo Si Shan Yan, and Nim Fat Shan Yan mostly wrote about Shaolin-trained martial artists, such as Wong Fei Hung and Fong Sai Yuk, who subsequently became the best-known martial arts figures among the Hong Kong people.² A real-life martial arts contest held in Macao in 1954 triggered a new wave of martial arts literature which contesting foci: the bout was between Chen Kefu,

a second-generation sect leader of the White Crane School, and Wu Kung-i, a Tai Chi master. Novels such as Leung Yu-sang's *Boxer Rebellion in the Capital City*, which was serialised in the *New Evening Post*, took the place of the fading Guangdong-Hong Kong School in Hong Kong.

Looking back at the second half of the 20th century, one can easily see that the serialised martial arts novels formed an important part of Hong Kong's popular culture. The images they created proliferated through many channels thanks to the growing influence of consumerism and the mass media. Among them, films and TV drama series attracted the widest audience, with the spin-off of theme songs becoming household tunes throughout Hong Kong.

First let us look at films. A highly versatile writer, Jin Yong is a novelist, journalist and screenwriter. The first film adaptation of one of Jin Yong's novels came in 1958 when *Story of the Vulture Conqueror* became the inaugural production of Emei Film Company. Lee Sun-fung, Lee Fa, Cheung Ying and Yeung Kung-leong all later directed films adapted from Jin Yong's novels, but audiences often found the action scenes unsatisfactory because of the lack of resources invested in them. None of the productions are regarded as quality films, although they did demonstrate a nationalism at the core of the novels.

From the 1960s to the 1970s, Cantonese martial arts films gradually declined in popularity until they all but disappeared. They were replaced by mainstream Mandarin productions, with Shaw Brothers Studio leading the market in wuxia films. In 1976, Commercial Television (CTV) aired two TV drama series, *The Eagle-shooting Heroes* and *The Giant Eagle and Its Companion*. Following their success, Shaw Brothers Studio produced the movie series *The Eagle-shooting Heroes* as a trilogy directed by Chang Cheh. Also, the Studio later adapted a number of Jin Yong's other novels into films with different directors, but all were characterised by a weak plot and low artistic value.

The trend only took a meaningful turn when two Jin Yong-inspired films, *The Romance of Book and Sword* and *Princess Fragrance*, both directed by Ann Hui in 1987, appeared on the scene. The notable thing about them was the tragic overtone, which was not present in the book versions. In the 1990s, King Hu, Tsui Hark, Tony Ching and Raymond Lee jointly directed *Swordsman*, which diverged significantly from the novel. Then *Swordsman II*, directed by Tony Ching, took even more liberties with the original story. And when Wong Kar-wai directed *Ashes of Time*, he scripted a plot that

was entirely different from that of the novel, retaining only the names of the characters “Eastern Heretic” and “Western Venom”. These films from the 1990s reflect the creativity of the directors and screenwriters in subverting classical literature into a postmodernist perspective.³

Next we move on to the television series. Both CTV and Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) produced several TV drama series using Jin Yong’s novels as their inspiration. The most successful of these were produced by TVB in the 1980s, including such shows from 1982 to 1985 as *The Demi-Gods & Semi-Devils* starring Bryan Leung, Kent Tong and Felix Wong; *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, starring Felix Wong and Barbara Yung; *The Return of The Condor Heroes*, starring Andy Lau and Idy Chan; *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, starring Chow Yun-fat; *The Duke of the Mount Deer*, starring Tony Leung and Andy Lau; and *The Flying Fox of the Snowy Mountain*, starring Ray Lui. All of these TV drama series have become part of the Hong Kong people’s collective memory.

The theme songs of the television dramas were heard every night right on the hour of show time, such as *Lovers by the Misty River*, *Over Mountains and Valleys*, *Iron Blood and Loyal Heart*, *A Meaningful Life*, *You're the Best on Earth*, *When Will We Meet Again*, *Swordsman*, *Luck Will Come After All* and *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*. Composed by Joseph Koo with lyrics by Tang Wai-hung or James Wong, they have been perennial favourites and there were numerous cover versions by Canton Pop singers.

Popular culture and social mindsets often go hand in hand, and Jin Yong’s novels are a perfect example of this. His first novels told stories about national heroes, but his subjects and themes evolved as society changed. The patriotism of the Han ethnic group presented in *The Book and the Sword* and *The Eagle-shooting Heroes* gave way to the tricks and antics of Wei Xiaobao, a smarty-pants who might well be the persona of the typical young “Hong Kong Guy”, in *The Deer and the Cauldron*.

Jin Yong’s novels have integrated seamlessly into youth culture since the end of the 20th century as they are given a new lease of life in numerous comic books, video games and online games, a testimony of the timeless appeal of what can be called a “Jin Yong cult”.

¹ For the historical development of martial arts novels, see Chen, Pingyuan *The Chinese Literati's Dream of Heroic Chivalry: Research on the Genre of Martial Arts Novels*, *Qian gu wen ren xia ke meng: wu xia xiao shuo lei xing yan jiu* (千古文人俠客夢—武俠小說類型研究), (People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing), 1992. Also see Yeh, Hung-sheng *Yeh Hung-Sheng on Swordsmen's Friendly Matches: The Art of Martial Arts Novels*, *Ye Hong Sheng lun jian: wu xia xiao shuo tan yi lu* (葉洪生論劍：武俠小說談藝錄), (Linking Publishing Company, Taipei), 1994.

² Wong, Chung-ming "Martial Arts as Our Pride and Strength - The Rise and Fall of Martial Arts Novels of the Guangdong-Hong Kong School", *Wo wu wei yang: Yue Gang pai ji ji xiao shuo de xing shuai*, (我武維揚：粵港派技擊小說的興衰), *Park Literary Magazine*, issue 19, (15 April 2012), 63-73.

³ For discussions on film adaptations of Jin Yong's novels, see Cheng, Ching-hang "The True Heroic Spirit Is To Serve the Country and the People: On the Novels of Jin Yong and Hong Kong Films", *Wei guo wei min, xia zhi da zhe: Jin Yong xiao shuo yu xiang gang dian ying* (為國為民，俠之大者：金庸小說與香港電影), from Cheng, Ching-hang ed., *Jin Yong: Hong Kong to the World*, (Joint Publishing H.K., 2016).