

Introduction: *wuxia* novels and me

I came to *wuxia* 武侠 novels rather late. A few years earlier when *wuxia* novels took off, you could see works by Jin Yong 金庸 and others on stalls everywhere, but I never did have a serious read. This is not to show how holy I was, disdaining to look down from on high; rather that I just had not hit upon the knack of how to read them. Knowing full well that *wuxia* novels were popular, that they were an important literary phenomenon in China in the 1980s and worthy of serious research, I was just unable to bring myself to do it. For my research into the history of novels, I had read a few *xiayi* 侠义 novels from Qing times and *wuxia* novels from the 1920s and '30s, but they did not overly interest me. Whenever some friend would discuss some brilliant *wuxia* novel with me, or some amazing *xiake* 侠客 whose martial arts skills were so out of the ordinary, their eyebrows writhing with excitement, I had that heart-full-of-confusion feel, unsure whether they were crazy or if it was just me unable to read the books right.

In late summer or early autumn last year I was in my village with nothing to do, so I flicked through quite a few works by people like Jin Yong; perhaps because my mind was in a different state, I actually slowly started to taste the flavour. Right up to now I still think that *wuxia* novels are a richly entertaining popular novel genre, and so there is no need to go out of my way to express some startling theory like saying that they are more elegant than elegant literature. It is just that for people who are concerned with contemporary Chinese culture, *wuxia* novels really are worthwhile reading, because “if you don’t read them you won’t know, *wuxia* novels are wonderful”.

Literatus of late Qing times, Sun Baojin 孙宝瑾, says in his work *Diary from Wangshanlu* (Wangshanlu riji 忘山庐日记), “Reading old books with new eyes, old books become new; using old eyes to read new books, new books become old.” I think that this is better than Lin Yutang’s 林语堂 self-proclaimed attempt to read both the best and worst type of book. Because in the latter case he already has the distinction between good and bad in his mind, it is less effective than the former in stressing an

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attitude of objective acceptance. That *wuxia* novels can become broadly popular in each cultural stratum of reader, apart from their attempt to fuse (or you could say pander to) every type of cultural mentality, thus having every possible form of interpretation, to the greatest possible extent is attributable to the *erwartungshorizont* or horizon of expectation of the reader. Some people read the glint of steel and shadow of sword, some read the organisation of the plot, some read the human nature, some read the philosophical content. Very probably everyone is like a blind person feeling an elephant, but each finds in it the reading material they need, enough to make them linger there, forgetting to ever go home. What right do critics have to mock a “misreading” that is not devoid of redeeming features? To university students, Jin Yong’s novels, Cui Jian’s 崔健 pop music and Sartre’s existentialism are all very probably expressions of ways to confront the state of human existence that exactly matches their lonely and haughty mental state. All the same, appreciation does not equate to an inability to distinguish between high and low value; here, the selection and reconstruction by readers is the crux. Dividing works into rank according to person and place is not as good as actually considering the textual research and explanation of the work by readers under specific circumstances.

There is an old saying in literary criticism, “To know people, discuss the world”; that is to say, it is only in discussing the world that we can know its people and its literature. An important principle of reception aesthetics is “*horizontverschmelzung*” or fusion of horizons, that only when the reader’s horizon of expectation and the literary text are in alignment with each other can we talk about acceptance of understanding; since the horizon of expectation of readers varies with time, a discussion of the acceptance of a work cannot but involve changing times. Not only the works of authors, but the readings of readers and the studies of scholars all come about as reflections of their reaction to their particular state of existence.

Said like this it can sound a little pedantic, but I have personal experience of this issue. Several years ago at a discussion of 1940s literature, there was quite strong veiled criticism of the fatalism in works such as Qian Zhongshu’s 钱锺书 *Weicheng* 围城, Yang Yi’s 杨绛 *Fluff in the Wind* (Feng xu 风絮) and Shi Tuo’s 师陀 *Head of the Hall at Hopeless Village* (Wuwangcun guanzhu 无望村馆主), calling them “both naïve ultraromantic dreaming and unable to devote themselves to the actual struggles, they realise that they have no importance and no ability in this great era, turning a confused psychological philosophy into helpless fatalism” (*In the Clash Between Eastern and Western Culture* [Zai dong-xi fang wenhua pengzhuang zhong 在东西方文化碰撞中], p. 226). Although

afterwards it was felt that the conclusion was excessively harsh, it was thought that it was just a matter of the degree of criticism. Eventually there came a day when I too realised that I have “no importance and no ability in this great era”, and my youthful “defiance of fate” led to a loss of bravery from which uncontrollably sprouted a sense of “helpless fatalism” – perhaps it was only self-mockery and self-consolation; however, no matter what, I would be unwilling to ever again make any crazy theories that would “throttle fate by the throat”.

Respecting fate and doing all that you can to change things might appear on the surface of things to be a contradiction, but it is not actually the case. Some degree of understanding of and respect for “fate” can suppress an excessively swollen “ego”; reducing blind conflict and helping the individual conform to the natural course of life’s development. There is perhaps a shadow of Ah Q¹ here, but it is a natural part of life to have things not go according to our wishes. If we were to struggle against fate all the time, it would eventually bend or break us. Each person only has a bit of room in which they can control their fate; maxims such as “Man conquers nature” and “Nothing is difficult in the world for a person who sets their mind to it” can be quite damaging. Admitting that there are things we cannot do and then “doing all we can” in the area that we are able to change is perhaps wiser. Looking at things this way, we could feel that the situation for humanity is not overly optimistic.

It is precisely because humanity is unable to do as it wishes that we must submit to the restraints of fate, recognising our frailty and weakness, producing some sort of hope for salvation. Spirits, Buddha, Heaven and God are all the objectification of humanity’s hope for salvation. The idea of an all-powerful deity need not be so illusory and can be close to the world of people. It personifies itself in the *xiake* who battles injustice. According to Sima Qian’s 司马迁 idea, disaster befalls even saintly people, so “how could people of middling talent avoid being caught up in troubled times?” Thus “danger is something that people will sometimes encounter” (*Historian’s Record, Biographies of the Youxia* [Shiji, Youxia liezhuan 史记, 游侠列传]) could be the most important basic psychological reason why *wuxia* novels are so popular. In real life, “there are many injustices under heaven, it is rare to meet a good hearted person”; but in most *wuxia* novels (plays, poetry), “drawing a sword would be immoral, however guarding gold is goodness itself” (Tang Xianzu 汤显祖 *Purple Hairpin Chronicle* [Zichai ji 紫钗记]). Criticism of this attitude in these works of being “willing to let this impossible illusion comfort one’s psychology of futile resistance” (Zheng Zhenfeng 郑振铎 *Discussing*

¹ The eponymous lead character in Lu Xun, *The True Story of Ah Q*, 1923.

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Wuxia Novels [Lun wuxia xiaoshuo 论武侠小说] seems to be built on a sort of optimistic proposition that “where there is resistance there is hope”. I, on the other hand, think that any form of “victory” would be unable to change the fact that “danger is something that people will sometimes encounter”, thus the need for fantasy and “comforting” is endless. Waiting for salvation from a great *xiake* is of course not such a glorious thing; if we believe that we really do hold fate in our own hands, isn’t that too absurd, then? Zhang Henshui 张恨水 called his forebears “natural *xiake*”; when it came to his turn, instead, “My heroic spirit had disappeared, my strength was not enough to truss up a chicken”. He had “a strong feeling that this is going against the passionate morals of my forebears” such that he could only write *wuxia* novels to relieve the boredom (Preface to *Sword Gall, Lyre Heart* [Jiandan qinxin 剑胆琴心]). This creative work has the strong feeling of an allegory directed at the pitiful state of the Chinese intelligentsia. Going from being a *xiake* and nobly taking justice into one’s hands to banging a piece of iron and singing in a loud voice about the passion of the sword was already a big step backwards but at least it still had some heroism; to then live off writing stories about *youxia* 游侠 really was unworthy of the brave spirit of his ancestors. As for satisfying oneself by reading *wuxia* novels to relieve the boredom, that was just too pathetic to even bother mentioning. The last group of literati, who not only “ran around with a peck of wine, clapping their hands to the tales of *youxia*” (Tan Sitong 谭嗣同 *Presenting Liu Songfu’s Calligraphy* [Zhi Liu Songfu shu 致刘淞芙书]) but also actually “drew their swords to sing in a loud voice, their little bit of *xiake* spirit able to withstand the torments” (Tan Sitong 谭嗣同, *Watching the Tide* [Wang haichao 望海潮]) probably stirred the noble patriots of the late Qing–early Republic period (of which Tan Sitong was one). After this there were still, naturally, people with staunch moral integrity, but they were no longer admired for their *xiake* deeds.

It was just at this time, when “*youxia*” and “swords” had basically become antiques, that *wuxia* novels started to become popular right across the country, and their popularity has not waned. It is not difficult to see in their popularity the dissatisfaction and bewilderment of people of the modern world with their situation. Clearly knowing that the stories are all as unreal as a spring dream on a summer’s day, I still love their brilliant colours and auras. Perhaps with increased worldly experience I have come to have more understanding of the popularity of *wuxia* novels.

From not really reading *wuxia* novels to making them the subject of my research was a huge step. It is not in the least rare for literati and scholars to love reading *wuxia* novels, but only as entertainment to pass the time.

Occasionally inserting a line or two into an article would be elegantly vulgar, but seriously making them into an academic research topic, at least in the present academic world of the mainland, is still far from fashionable. So much so that upon hearing that I am writing articles about my research into *wuxia* novels my teachers and friends all express their surprise. The older generation gives me a few words of heartfelt advice not to go and throw it all away; people of my generation admire how brave I am just mucking around instead of doing serious work. Actually, I am not researching *wuxia* novels just to get something off my chest or to shock people. I have to do that eventually, it is just that due to pressure from the outside environment, I will be doing it earlier than I planned.

These past few years I have been researching the history of Chinese novels. First it was the changing narrative methods in novels; later it was historic consciousness in the novel and historic stylistic rules in novels; following on, it was developments in novel genre. I used a typological angle to understand and describe the development of the Chinese novel from ancient times until today – a recent research topic. The reason that, out of all the genres, I chose *wuxia* novels as my research subject, apart from the fact that the trajectory of their development is relatively easy to come to grips with, was, more importantly, that I was interested in researching popular fiction. To me, the confrontation between the refined and the vulgar has formed one of the most important driving forces in the development of Chinese literature in the twentieth century. Thus the fact that *wuxia* novels are a novel genre and also a form of popular fiction greatly interested me. In the past year this work has occupied most of my research time.

At the start, there were actual elements in my life that piqued my interest in *wuxia* novels, but once I began my formal research, I tried to get rid of the interference of subjective emotions. I prefer to put what I consider exciting emotions into essays and maintain a relatively serious academic train of thought in my thesis. After all, using an academic work as a platform to complain is not a praiseworthy practice. In addition, as an academic researcher, I could not help but put more consideration into how to design a suitable academic framework and operating principles than how to narrate a lively appreciation of the elegant and vulgar. That is to say, the research was good fun but the results may not be that entertaining. They will probably disappoint a lot of fans of *wuxia* novels. Excessively serious, not classy, rarely inspired, academic in tone and so on – I am already expecting criticism such as this. Fortunately, this is not an encyclopaedia about *wuxia* novels and I hold no extravagant hopes that it will get on a bestseller list.

I cannot be counted as a “qualified” *wuxia* novel fan (perhaps this will always be the case); it does not matter that I have read a considerable

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number of *wuxia* novels. Firstly, although I have become so involved in reading *wuxia* books that I have skipped sleep and forgotten to eat, I have never mistaken them for reality, basically regarding them as fables. I have never thought of jumping into a book and becoming one of the characters, nor do I believe that *xiake* can really save China. With this sort of clear-headed attitude to reading, I find it difficult to enter into the intoxicated reading state of the average *wuxia* fan; at least, when I close a book and reminisce I often have the feeling of not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Secondly, the joy of reading *wuxia* novels is undoubtedly their greatest attraction, but when I read them it is not purely for pleasure. In order to understand the course of development of *wuxia* novels I read the highly readable *All of Creation* (Tianlong ba bu 天龙八部) and *Shadow of a Wandering Xiake* (Ping zong xia ying 萍踪侠影), as well as works that are less appealing to modern readers' tastes such as *Three Xiake, Five Heroes* (San xia wu yi 三侠五义) and *Endless Celebration of Peace* (Yong qing sheng ping 永庆升平). As a popular art form, *wuxia* novels naturally tend towards stylisation; reading them en masse can make you feel quite sick of them. Maintaining scientific objectivity in academic research and at the same time keeping a degree of reading pleasure is not an easy thing to do.

Lastly, real fans of *wuxia* novels often have specific reading tastes; firmly believing in one or two writers, with some books being essential reading; talking about them every time they open their mouths; even conveying a sense that they would defend those works no matter what. There were even people who said that if anyone dared to attack Gu Long 古龙, they would be willing to fight them to the death. If I were to meet this sort of “*xiake* fighter” I would definitely keep them at arm's length: I don't have such a sense of honour, and, besides, not having such good fighting skills, I also lack the bravery of a warrior to be able to sacrifice myself in battle.

It is said that if you read too many *wuxia* novels not only do you start talking in *wushu* 武术 moves, your forehead also starts to emit heroic energy. If this is really the case, then I have probably not read enough, because, at the beginning of this year at Guangzhou railway station, a fearless thief stole my bag from right under my nose. If I really had a bit of the *xiake* spirit I would have been able to hold him down. What was more annoying was that in the bag were all the materials that I was using to write about *wuxia* novels and part of my draft. If the thief had cared to read through it, he would probably have laughed so hard a tooth would have fallen out. However, *wuxia* novelists like Jin Yong cannot do *wushu* either, so you can't blame me for not being able to deal with a thief – who, perhaps, was able to do *wushu*? The truth be known, the

thief came by taxi, and when I asked the taxi driver beside me to chase him his answer was “That is a death wish!” so I went and reported it to the police, but when they heard that the bag did not contain thousands of US dollars but just some books and a draft, the police also lost interest. I had heard that in the past when thieves took money, they would throw the bag away in some public place or would post any documents back to the person. Since I had written my name and address on the folder that held the draft, I hoped that perhaps it would do a “departed soul returns”. Unfortunately, I have been back in Beijing for over half a year now and not the slightest trace of it has been seen. It really does seem that the professional ethics of Guangzhou thieves have gone downhill; obviously “the goodness of the people is no match for ancient times”.

If the thief was angry that there was too little money in the bag and ripped up the draft to get even, that would be just too cruel, a case of “great talent put to small use”, but if the gentleman was actually interested in *wuxia* novels and willing to learn the opinions of a scholar, then he would be the first person to know the outline of my humble work. If such were the case, then all my work would not have been in vain; at least it would have had one reader.

Since I had no way of knowing whether this “gentleman above the lintel”² was interested in becoming a reader, I had no choice but to finish my research. From my experience with this disaster, I have also come to realise just how valuable *xiake* who can right wrongs would be. After returning from Guangzhou, a friend who knew about this issue wrote out a *duilian* 对联 (couplet) for me, the first part of which was, “Encountering a thief, the Lord of the Plains regrets that he did not become a knight earlier”, but no matter how he thought about it, he couldn’t get a second part that matched. According to Sima Qian, the Lord of the Plains, Zhao Sheng from the Warring States era, was a “ministerial *xiake*” who “led the world by his virtue” and was a “famous prince” (*Historian’s Record, Biography of the Youxia* [Shiji, Youxia liezhuan]). It is a pity that this “Lord of the Plains” is not that “Lord of the Plains”; not only do I lack the financial resources to become a knight, I lack the *wushu* skills to resist invasion. All I can do is go home and read a couple more *wuxia* novels.

It sounds easy, but gathering up the materials once again was a lot of work. If there was something I could say to comfort myself, it would be “losses cancel out”. Besides, it gave me a much more practical understanding of how Chinese people’s admiration of *xiake* has formed.

² Burglar.