The Development of Chinese Martial Arts Fiction

Chen Pingyuan is one of the leading scholars of modern Chinese literature, known particularly for his work on *wuxia*, a popular and influential genre of historical martial arts fiction still celebrated around the world today. This work, presented here in English translation for the first time, is considered to be the seminal work on the evolution, aesthetics and politics of the modern Chinese *wuxia* novel in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tracing the resurgence of interest in classical chivalric tales in China.

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Translator's preface

It is not easy translating *wuxia* fiction into English. Chen Pingyuan talks about this in the book:

> I think that it would be harder to translate Jin Yong's novels than Lu Xun. Their difficulty lies in the concepts of "Jianghu" and "martial arts" which are both fictional and deeply rooted in historic culture. Take the totally fantastic "降龙十八掌" (eighteen moves to subdue the dragon) as an example, I really have no idea how this could be translated in a way that easily transmits the subliminal feeling that Chinese readers have.

The eighteen moves to subdue the dragon, a fictional set of fighting moves that comes from Jin Yong's *All of Creation* and *Condor Hero Trilogy*, is particularly hard to translate because each of the eighteen moves is described in metaphysical terms with quotes from the *Yijing* and other ancient texts. The moves sound impressive, but exactly what each of them involves is difficult to say, even in Chinese. They are after all so profound that even the world's greatest martial arts heroes are said to lack sufficient enlightenment to understand. Translating into English is even harder because we simply lack equivalent terms and concepts, which makes it difficult to translate accurately and at the same time trigger the right emotional response in the reader.

It is surprising how few *wuxia* related terms there are in English. We have the word "*wuxia*" (pronounced woo-SHAH), it is in dictionary.com as "a genre of Chinese fiction and film, concerning the adventures of sword-wielding chivalrous heroes" but we do not have words for the "sword-wielding chivalrous heroes" themselves. Search for "youxia" (pronounced yow-SHAH) and it helpfully suggests, "Did you mean yogi?" For "xiake" (SHAH-ker) it suggests, "Did you mean sake?"

Similar Japanese concepts have more words in English. Ninja: "a member of a feudal Japanese society of mercenary agents, highly trained in martial arts and stealth (ninjutsu) who were hired for covert purposes ranging from espionage to sabotage and assassination." Samurai: "1. a member of the hereditary warrior class in feudal Japan. 2. a retainer of a

daimyo." Even the slightly esoteric ronin is in there: "a samurai who no longer serves a daimyo, or feudal lord."

One reason why English has more terms for Japanese concepts than Chinese is due to the nature of the Chinese language. When Chinese takes words from English, the original English pronunciation is sometimes preserved, such as in the word "leida" (radar 雷达). However, there is a greater tendency to translate the concept into Chinese morphemes, such as in the word "shubiao" (mouse on a computer, literally a "mouse pointer" 鼠标) or part phonetically, part translated, as in the word "yintewang" (internet, literally "inter-net" 因特网). Some lucky words work both phonetically and conceptually such as "taitou" (title 抬头).

When the linguist Yuan Ren Chao brought the Chinese concept of "chao" 炒 into English, he used English morphemes to make the expression "stir fry". In similar ways, "doufu" 豆腐 became "bean curd" and "jiaozi" 饺子 "Chinese dumpling". Unfortunately this way of building vocabulary does not work as well in English as it does in Chinese. Traditional English words might not match the new concepts so well. For instance, "Chinese dumplings" actually look more like ravioli than dumplings. In addition, when another similar concept is brought across, there can be a problem giving it a distinctive name. Such is the case with tangyuan, which look more like dumplings than jiaozi do. What name should you give tangyuan? Should they become "Chinese dumplings" and jiaozi "Chinese ravioli"? Or should you call them "sweet Chinese dumplings" to distinguish them? English speakers do not like confusion with names. We hate uncertainty because without clear and permanent names for things it is difficult to talk about them and if you cannot talk about something it is as though it does not exist.

Japanese is more like English in this respect. Japanese borrows words from other languages and preserves the original pronunciation, which is why Japanese has go-on, kan-on and to-on readings, each reflecting the Chinese pronunciation of the word when it entered the language. Japanese tend to expect the same of English speakers and so in Japanese restaurants, those ravioli-dumpling things are usually called "gyoza" which suits English speaker much better. We don't want to eat bean curd. It sounds terrible, some sort of insipid frankenfood. We want to eat "tofu" or "doufu" if that name could have come to us first. If you look in supermarkets today, there is more "tofu" than "bean curd". "Tofu" is winning because it creates a clearer, stronger and nicer image of the product in our minds.

That is why we like the word "ninja". As soon as we have that word, understand what's happening. On the other hand, "sword-wielding chivalrous heroes" means nothing to us. We need the word "xiake". Once we

have that word, a picture of what xiake are starts to build up as we learn more about them. We see immediately that they are different from ninja. In our minds, ninja = stealth. They are silent. Xiake can be loudmouth braggers. We also see that although they have a code of moral behavior, it is very different from a chivalrous hero. Chivalry has an element of "considerate and courteous to women; gallant"[1], it does not mesh with the xiake in the brothel of Tang times or the self-castration of Dongfang Bubai in *The Smiling Proud Xiake*. To say that xiake are chivalrous is to create confusion. To say that they are "out of line with the law", "enforce justice on behalf of heaven", "clutch a sword and walk alone" and live by "yiqi" starts to make sense. We crave to flesh out the concept of yiqi so that we can start forming a complete picture of what a xiake is and what we might expect to happen if we were to encounter one in a novel.

The words "xiake" (SHAH-ker) and "youxia" (yow-SHAH) are near synonyms. Both include the word "xia" which means "a person who upholds justice through force" as well as the principle of upholding justice through force. "Youxia" literally means "wandering xia", while "xiake" means a person who lives by the xiayi moral and social code. Both words are used in the translation in order to preserve the author's original use of the terms. In the book, "youxia" is more commonly used to describe the actual historic people, starting some 2500 years ago, who upheld justice through force, while "xiake" is used more frequently to describe the characters in later works. This coincides with a literary development from gritty realism, when youxia were real people recorded in historical texts, rough fighters who upheld yiqi but not necessarily great wushu experts, to modern xiake with superhuman abilities and a complex mystical, quasi-religious side to their character.

"Xiayi" (shah-EE) is the moral code of the xiake, the sense of justice that xiake have. Yiqi is part of it. Yiqi (pronounced EE-chee) translates into English as "personal loyalty; code of brotherhood"[2] but it is slightly different from these concepts in English. Yiqi derives from the word yi ("righteousness" or "justice"), however as the book points out, yiqi may at times mean the opposite of righteousness and justice. Yi is about doing the right thing from an objective viewpoint, it is selfless. Yiqi is about doing the right thing for your group. This entails selfishness and places the welfare of your own group above objective justice. Yet an element of yi remains in yiqi. The concept of yi is strongly associated with Confucianism and in particular the philosophy of Mencius

[1] Dictionary.com
[2] Zdic.net

and for this reason, when talking about yi as being "doing the right thing", it means doing the right thing from a Confucian perspective. This includes maintaining the Confucian hierarchy such as respect for parents and teachers.

We see this clearly in the Bruce Lee movie *Fist of Fury*[3]. In the movie, the Japanese judo club insults the Chinese wushu club at the funeral of their master by presenting them with a banner saying "Sick man of Asia". It is an insult to China, to the master and to the club rather than a personal insult to Bruce Lee's character, since before he starts unleashing the said "fist of fury", the Japanese do not even know who he is. His revenge springs from yiqi since, despite the other club members not agreeing with his actions, it is in their interest. At the same time there are also strong Confucian elements in his gratitude to country, master and club for raising and training him and in his urge to restore the natural order of society, even though it requires breaking the law and becoming an outcast to do it. If he were carrying out revenge for others, his actions may be considered to be simply yi, but since it is for a group that he belongs to, it is also clearly following the unwritten code of yiqi.

The terms that are discussed here are included in the glossary along with other Chinese expressions that are used in the book.

Victor Petersen

[3] I mention this movie not because it is indisputably a *wuxia* movie rather than a wushu movie but because it has clear morality and is reasonably well known by Western audiences.

Introduction to the English edition

In the early months of 1995, when I was spending time at Peking University to do library research for my postdoctoral project on modern Chinese literary societies, I was persuaded by a Chinese friend of mine to attend a graduate seminar in the field of modern Chinese literature, taught by Professor Chen Pingyuan. My friend was a student at Peking University himself, but not in the Chinese language and literature department. Nevertheless, he assured me, there would be no problem with us attending the seminar and he thought I would enjoy it. When I arrived at the classroom where the seminar was to be held, I was surprised that it was in fact a big lecture hall, with dozens of students, maybe even a hundred, waiting to be instructed. Later it was explained to me that only a handful of those students were Professor Chen's graduate students. The rest had come from all over campus just to hear him speak. I even heard a rumour that one member of the audience was from outside Beijing and had rented a room near the campus for the sole purpose of attending Professor Chen's lectures.

For the remainder of that term, the two hours spent in Professor Chen's classroom became the most inspiring times of the week for me. I still have the notebook that I scribbled full of notes as I was trying to keep up with all the wonderful ideas he was sharing with us. Drawing on large amounts of historical material from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which he often read out in the original and then, for our convenience, paraphrased in modern colloquial Chinese, he introduced us to the lifestyle and the culture of late imperial and Republican literati and intellectuals. He made each individual stand out and he imparted upon us a vivid impression of the rich variety of ways in which cultural figures of that era were responding to the many changes taking place in their society. His main emphasis was on the connections between cultural and educational transformations, focusing especially on the traditions that had shaped Peking University.

Hidden in his richly detailed account of intellectual, cultural, and literary life in the period from roughly the 1890s to the 1930s there was a subtle critique of long-held paradigms that we as his students could not fail to notice. Whereas conventional cultural histories of the period would dwell at length on the success of the iconoclastic, left-wing "New Culture" in its heroic "struggles" with "feudal" Confucian culture and "capitalist" popular culture, Professor Chen's lectures showed us the concerns and biases of all those different cultural communities, as well as the different epistemologies and scholarly perspectives that emerged from them, without favouring one over the other. His lectures wove a rich historical tapestry of a complexity that I had not previously encountered in my readings in modern Chinese literary studies, and that would come to inform and shape my own later writings on the subject.

The next year, in 1996, I was successful in inviting Professor Chen Pingyuan to come to a workshop at Leiden University in The Netherlands, where I was based at the time. He presented a fascinating paper focused on the difficulty of re-establishing popular fiction, most especially martial arts fiction, as an academic subject in China. The direct catalyst for his decision to write that paper had been the commotion and criticism when Peking University awarded an honorary doctorate to the hugely popular martial arts fiction writer Jin Yong in 1994. Jin Yong's fiction is loved by Chinese readers the world over but his preferred genre of writing had never been seen as "refined" enough to be taken seriously by academia. The pervasive mainstream academic discourse in China that used to value left-wing, socially and politically committed New Literature over all other alternatives, and that was scathingly critical of any kind of literature that was commercially successful and enjoyed popular appeal, made it extremely difficult for popular fiction to be considered "serious" and worthy of treatment as *literature*, rather than as a mere commodity designed to please those lacking in taste and sophistication. It was exactly this intricate conflation of literature, education, taste, class and politics that Professor Chen analysed so incisively during the lectures I attended and that continued to affect Chinese academic discourse as late as the mid-1990s.

In the light of all this, it is especially impressive that the Chinese-language original of *The Development of Chinese Martial Arts Fiction* was published as early as 1992, at a time when it was highly unusual for any respectable Chinese literature scholar to take a serious interest in popular culture. In many ways, the publication of this book was the culmination of an intellectual trajectory that Chen had followed throughout the 1980s, when he studied first at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou,

and later at Peking University for his doctorate. In this period, libraries in China were once again opening their doors and the print culture from the decades immediately preceding the Communist victory in 1949 was being avidly consulted and, in some cases, reprinted. Even if scholarly publications on literature in China in the 1980s were, by and large, still following the established Marxist model of focusing on the "progressive thought" of certain canonical authors, and on the way in which literature "reflected" certain social situations, especially class conflict, the actual reading and research that was being done in the 1980s was laying the foundation for a fundamental revision of the existing paradigms.

In 1985, Chen Pingyuan, together with two older colleagues, Professors Qian Liqun and Huang Ziping, published a highly influential article under the seemingly innocuous title "On 'Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature.'" I remember reading that article when I was a PhD student at Leiden University in the early 1990s and immediately carrying it off to show to my supervisor, because it seemed so different from everything else I had been reading in Chinese-language academic journals. By now, the article has canonical status.

In order to understand the reason for this, it is worth bearing in mind that in the conventional Marxist-inspired periodisation of modern Chinese culture, there is a clear distinction between the period from the Opium War to the end of the Empire (1840–1911, known as *jindai* or "early modern"), the period from the founding of the Republic to the founding of the People's Republic (1911–49, known as *xiandai* or "modern"), and the period after the founding of the People's Republic (1949–present, known as *dangdai* or "contemporary"). This tripartite organisation not only permeated the teaching of modern Chinese history and culture, but also informed the structure of all the relevant university departments to the extent that scholars designated as working on *jindai* would barely have anything to do with scholars working on *xiandai* or on *dangdai*. For Qian, Huang and Chen to suggest in the space of one short article that the time had come to question this entire structure in favour of a comprehensive approach to twentieth-century Chinese literature, focusing on continuities rather than differences and encouraging research reaching across the political boundaries of 1911 and 1949, was nothing short of revolutionary.

Chen Pingyuan's own early research, as recorded in his first monograph from 1988, entitled *The Transformation of the Narrative Modes of Chinese Fiction*, epitomised this new approach. In that monograph he focuses on the way in which modern Chinese fiction gradually changed during the first two decades of the twentieth century, moving

across the 1911 divide to look in detail at a process of narrative transformation that began in the 1890s and ended around the time of the so-called "literary revolution" of 1917. Whereas it is by now generally accepted that much of what came out of the 1917 movement for a New Literature had been gestating since the late Qing dynasty and throughout the early Republic (and was therefore not as "revolutionary" as previously held), this view was distinctly new in 1988 and would have been impossible to put forward had it not been for the reopening of library collections of late-Qing material and, perhaps even more importantly, the advent of a younger generation of scholars who were open-minded enough to recognise the significance of that material for the study of Chinese cultural modernity.

Even in that context, the decision to develop a serious scholarly focus on martial arts fiction must have been a courageous one, especially as early as the late 1980s, when Chen must have been doing the research that led to the publication of the Chinese original of this book in 1992. It was one thing to revive the significance of elite fiction from the period before the Literary Revolution, but quite another to insist on the cultural significance of non-elite, commercially successful novels. However, as will become evident from the pages that follow, Chen was keenly aware of the fact that martial arts fiction in fact represents a very rich cultural tradition that continues from the premodern period into the modern and that would enable him to carry out a consistent genre analysis, taking him not only across the 1911 and 1949 divides, but backwards across the supposed 1842 divide between premodern and modern China.

In its first three main chapters, *The Development of Chinese Martial Arts Fiction* sets out the historical development of martial arts fiction from the Tang dynasty up to the Qing, embedding the genre firmly in literati traditions. In the remaining chapters he carries out a detailed study of a wide range of modern martial arts novels, reaching across the twentieth century, emphasising the recurring themes that characterise the works, and culminating in the final chapter entitled "*Wuxia* novels as a literary genre". It is worth bearing in mind that, in China in 1992, this was not a simple phrase but a very provocative statement.

I think readers of this book will certainly agree with him that martial arts fiction is a uniquely Chinese genre that is worth serious scholarly attention, both in terms of its underlying aesthetics, which he analyses in detail, but also in terms of its historical context in different periods, which he describes with his usual rich attention to detail and without any temptation to read literature merely as a "reflection" of historical or social reality.

Readers will also not fail to be impressed, I think, by the regular references in this book to contemporary literary theory, especially structuralism and reader response theory, at a time when these were rarely used to discuss non-western literatures and had indeed only very recently been introduced, through translation, to Chinese readers. Professor Chen is certainly not a scholar who relies solely on western theory, but he reads widely and selects what he needs for his purposes, complementing it with theoretical perspectives derived from reading the works of Chinese critics and scholars.

Having had the pleasure of translating Professor Chen's work myself on more than one occasion, including a book-length publication of his seminal study on the May Fourth Movement entitled *Touches of History*, published in 2011, I am delighted to have had the opportunity to provide a Preface for this new translation of one of his earliest and most remarkable works. I am sure that *The Development of Chinese Martial Arts Fiction* will enable Anglophone readers with an interest in this fascinating Chinese genre of writing to gain a better understanding of its art and its purpose.

Finally, I congratulate the translator on a difficult job well done. The many cultural references and genre-specific terms in the Chinese original were extremely difficult to translate into fluent and appropriate academic English, but this has been done with great confidence and to excellent effect.

Michel Hockx